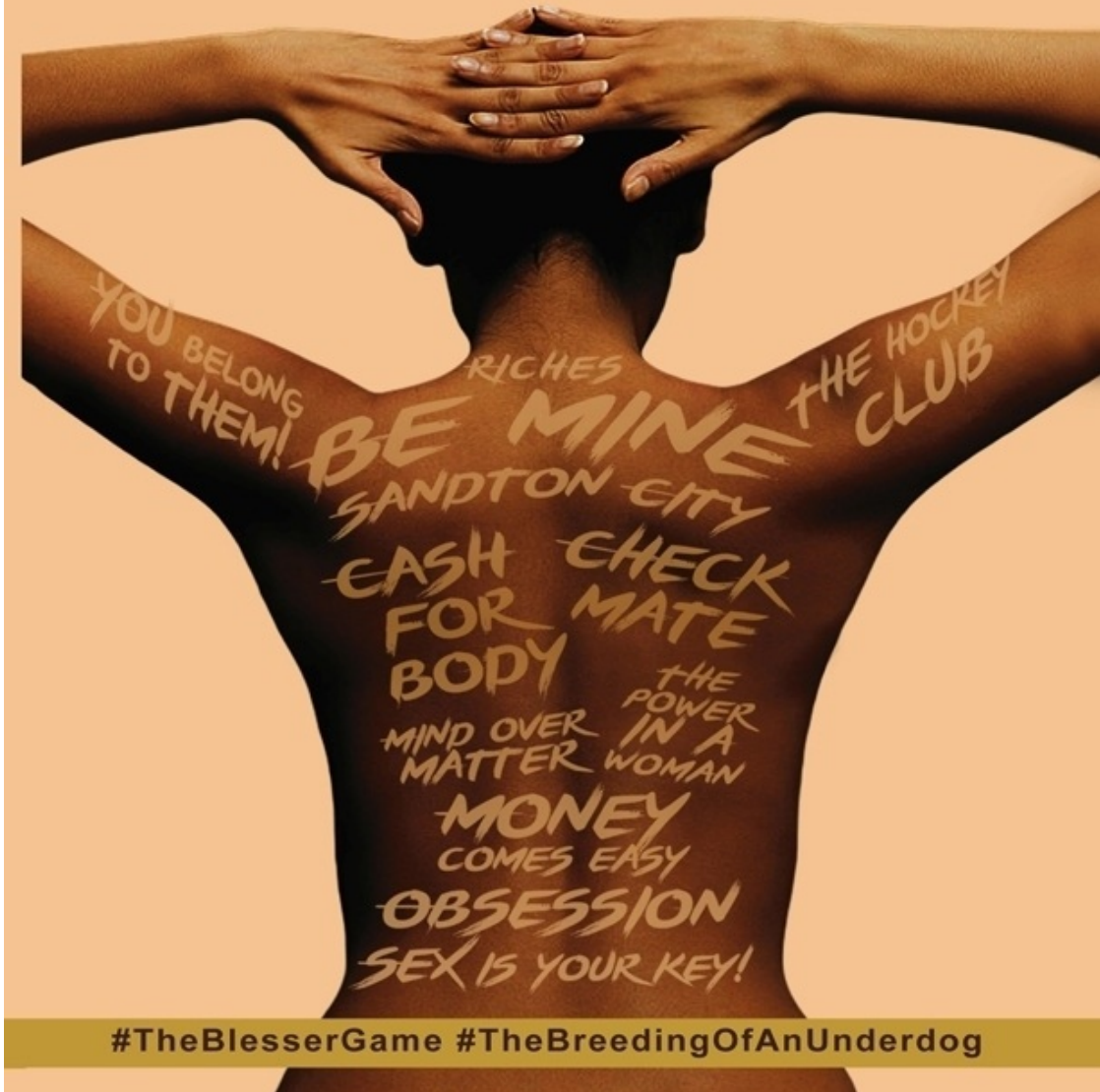


**BARE :THE
BLESSER'S
GAME**

Jackie Phamotse

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BARE



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The Blesser's Game: The Breeding of an Underdog

By Jackie Phamotse


PORCUPINE PRESS

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This book is inspired by Siphwe L. Shongwe. Thank you for helping me

find my voice and power.

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Special thanks to my family for supporting my vision of becoming a writer, a visionary and a leader. Because of you all, I am able to continue with my passion.

To the love of my life, my mother Makatleho Calextina Phamotse: Life was always filled with love with you around. RIP my soldier!

To my Daddy, Thabo Edwick Phamotse: You will find peace and we will love you until the end of time. Time is the best healer of all things.

To my Mofaya Beverage Company family: I thank you very much for your leadership and innovation.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Dear reader,

Thank you for your curiosity. You have helped make my dream come true. I hope that in return, I can help you see the greater vision of your own dreams.

I wrote this book to help others but also to restore my own faith. Each event in this book has taught me so much about life, whether it happened to me or to someone else. Life is indeed a treasure hunt; find your own truth and path.

I was taught to live with faith in God, but I was given nothing except life as a guide.

I hope this book is impactful and memorable for you. Despite the sadness, it will show you the power of self-belief and trust. I've recovered from some crazy events. It has been a thorny journey. Each day is a struggle.

I still make mistakes. But now, I have small day-to-day goals to work towards my big dreams.

My story is not that different to yours. Everything happens for a reason, so don't condemn yourself. We all have a role in other people's lives. Be patient but not lazy.

Remember, home is where your spirit finds peace and comfort. It could be anywhere in the world.

DEFINITIONS

Black Diamonds: A term coined to describe South Africa's black middle class, a newly emerged and rapidly growing market in the economy. They are well-educated, aspirational, confident in the future, credit-worthy with above average income, in white-collar occupations, and they own or are acquiring homes, cars and household goods. After apartheid ended, they finally gained better job opportunities, greater income, constitutional freedom, improved access to education and knowledge, enhanced mobility, and more spending power. Their tourism, sport and leisure behaviour and consumption patterns have changed; they go to the gym, dine out, attend festivals and music shows, and visit beaches, national parks and urban shopping malls. They participate in a variety of sports such as cricket, rugby, athletics, hockey, swimming and canoeing. Their musical tastes have shifted from traditional, folk and jazz music to more Western and mainstream music.

Adapted from source:

<http://www.actacommerci.co.za/index.php/acta/article/view/222/335>

Blesser/sugar daddy: He's filthy rich and can set you up with clothing accounts, overseas holidays and sometimes even a car or apartment. So when you date one, your life has been financially #blessed. Your blesser will bless you with Sandton City shopping sprees, hair and beauty treatments, and more. Apparently the 'blessed' compete with each other and compare lifestyles. On Instagram, they show off their designer clothes and exotic holiday backgrounds. If you want to hook a blesser, then Jozi's northern suburbs are the places to hang out: this is where the blessers work and play. It sounds like a straightforward business arrangement – with fantasies fulfilled on both sides. The blesser gets to enjoy the company of a young, hot woman, while the blessee gets to buy all the bags and shoes she wants ... as long as she's prepared to sacrifice body – and soul – for the rewards.

Adapted from source: <http://movemag.co.za/blesser-is-the-new-buzzword-here's-what-itmeans/>

Pre-eclampsia, eclampsia and HELLP syndrome:

Pre-eclampsia is a pregnancy complication that causes high blood pressure,

abdominal pain, severe headaches, vomiting and nausea, kidney damage, vision issues and other problems. Causes may include poor nutrition, high body fat, diabetes, kidney disease, smoking, relative young or old age, insufficient blood flow to the uterus, previous pregnancies, eclampsia in the family, and other conditions. Experts believe that pre-eclampsia is caused when the placenta fails to implant properly in the uterus lining, meaning that less blood reaches the placenta. This can cause problems for a baby, such as poor growth, too little amniotic fluid, and placental abruption (separation from the uterus wall before delivery). The placenta may in turn release certain proteins in the mother's bloodstream, setting off a complex chain reaction.

Proteins released by the placenta cause blood vessels to tighten, reducing blood flow, preventing blood clotting and increasing blood pressure. This can affect organs including the liver, kidneys and brain. Blood vessel walls may be damaged and leak fluid into tissues, resulting in swelling (oedema). In the kidneys, protein can leak from the bloodstream and spill into urine. It most commonly develops during the last trimester of pregnancy, but can also happen after delivery. Left untreated, it can lead to dangerous health problems, such as HELLP syndrome (see below). The main treatment for these conditions is to deliver the baby. If not yet 34

weeks along, corticosteroids help the baby's lungs mature more quickly. Preferably, pregnancy should reach at least 37 weeks before labour is induced; the other option is a c-section. After birth, pre-eclampsia increases likelihood of high blood pressure (hypertension), heart attacks and strokes.

Adapted from source:

http://www.babycenter.com/0_preeclampsia_257.bc

and <http://patient.info/health/pre-eclampsia-leaflet>

Eclampsia is a type of fit (a seizure or convulsion) which is a life-threatening complication of pregnancy. Most women with pre-eclampsia do not go on to have eclampsia.

HELLP syndrome is a severe version of pre-eclampsia, named after its main features: haemolysis (damaged blood cells), elevated liver enzyme levels, and low blood platelet levels (a condition like haemophilia where blood clots don't form easily, so a person can quickly bleed to death).

PROLOGUE

The darkness

WHEN AFRICA SPEAKS of heritage, visions of majestic watery lands and fertile soil growing boundless vegetation come to mind. The motherland has a rich history and is pregnant with diamonds and gold. When clouds shield the heavens with grey and thunder strikes beyond where the naked eye can see, then the mountains rise and shelter each village like a lioness protecting her offspring. The rustling trees reveal a fresh breeze that promises new beginnings to Africa's lands. Cold and silent now is darkness that has no bearing; it is a form of emptiness that speaks louder than the beat of African drums.

Treasure Mohapi sits curled up in the heavy armchair near her front door, under attack from all sides. She had always dreamt of becoming prominent somehow, unsure of what would give her that status. Now, she supposedly had it. And yet – she is starving, nauseous, and out of wine since ... well, since last she had wine ... and she can't get herself together to do anything about any of it. She is trying to ignore the pit of churning nuclear turmoil in her stomach, but failing phenomenally as it moves another notch up towards a Chernobylstyle meltdown. And her mind is playing games. Her persecution complex blames her for her many failures (Is it true that I let everyone down?)

Is Lintle right? Does she hate me? Why don't I have any real friends? Why am I always so anxious? Am I going crazy?) and bombarding her with randomly chosen images of her demons, which flare up like haphazard frames from a controlled demolition: silence (waiting for Tim); no; sirens (her parents fighting).

Boom! (the gunshots); the falling debris (down the stairs at Whispers). No wait; it's still intact, an embryo removed, but where did it go? Backwards and forwards, she can replay each scene, but she attains no peace. This must be what going insane feels like, watching a screw slowly turning, but getting nowhere, nowhere. After hours and then days of this, she's lost all track of what is supposedly important. Her life is imploding around her, inside her, in slow motion; she squeezes her eyes shut as the tears well up. It is not fair that she should have come so far, climbed so high, gained so much, only to find it all running like sand through her fingers. What am I living for in this stupid

'Tuscan' townhouse, wearing 'designer' clothes, eating fancy finger food, in the so-called capital of Commerce. What else is there to aspire to? I made it to Sandton, for God's sake. This is the wealthy, ostentatious northern region of South Africa's cosmopolitan commercial capital, Johannesburg.

(Technically at least, it is part of greater Jo'burg, but it's about as far from that grimy city's centre as an ivory tower can get from its ghettos of aspiring peasants. In this prosperous area of the metropolis (just a few blocks from Alexandra township), gleaming office blocks, soaring skyscrapers, a modern megamall and various lavish 'neo-classical' hotels dominate the skyline. Men gape shamelessly at impossibly perfect model-esque women – disguised by layers of skin-replicating make-up, sporting long imported Brazilian weaves, and radiating the latest fragrances – stalk past them on soaring stilettos talking into shiny new iPhones. At night, laughing people spill out of glamorous glass houses and pour into extravagant cars to zoom over bright highways against a nightscape of blinking lights, their roaring engines leaving crowds dazed in admiration as they ricochet between pulsing clubs and raucous restaurants.

She had had it all: the lavish lifestyle she used to tell her Mom about, like a dream that came true, a modern rags-to-riches fairy tale. But her daily life is far removed from that shiny, shallow picture. These Sandtonites are full of a surreal joie de vivre; she's

not even sure she wants to live anymore. Let me paint you a picture of how crazy a single night can become.

Girls' night out

When you are in Rome, do as Romans do. – St. Ambrose JUST BEFORE DAWN, before the twinkling stars kiss the sky goodbye; a girl can find herself awake, rushing to answer the call of nature.

As she tries hard to open her heavy eyes and fight back her pounding head, she realizes that she had been sleeping on a strange bed, much bigger than her single bed but comfortable and slowly it dawned on her that she is in a hotel room.

She turns slowly and switches on her bedside lamp to confirm her worst nightmare.

She was indeed in a hotel room, a fancy one, and her clothes are all over the floor and there is a man's designer pair of jeans and a golf shirt as well as sneakers scattered on the gold and velvet floor.

As she quickly turns on her back, there is a man, old enough to be her father, sleeping peaceful next to her. She doesn't know who he is, nor remember his name.

She peeps through the soft and good smelling bed sheets, the man is naked and so was she. Normally she sleeps with pyjamas and her panties on.

Slowly and shamefully, she reaches down to her groin to confirm the obvious.

Of course, she could tell that she did have sex a few hours ago.

“Oh God, not again,” she whispered.

She knew, without any reasonable doubt, that the sex had been unprotected, something she had promised herself would never happen again.

She looked at the strange man in consternation. On his bedside, there was an expensive watch. She could tell it was a Breitling. Next to the watch lay car keys for a Bentley, an empty can of MoFaya premium energy drink, a pack of Viagra and a cell phone. She asked herself a thousand questions, but without any answers. Who was this elderly man, where was she, where did they meet

and how did she end up in bed with him.

Carefully she got out of the bed and tiptoed to the bathroom naked where she sat on the toilet seat and buried her head in shame.

Her head was still heavy from a night of drinking expensive wines and cognacs. All she could remember was what had started as a girls' night out with her friends at Rivers Club, one of the most affluent joints in the heart of Sandton. They were having fun and enjoying the music. She remembered she was dressed in her Polo jeans (the most expensive item in her entire closet) a white Guess sleeveless T-shirt and her favourite high heels. But, of course, all her clothes including her Victoria's Secret lingerie were now scattered on the floor; but she couldn't recall whether she had taken them off herself, or whether the strange man had.

Another thing she could remember, while she was busy sipping a glass of her favourite wine on the dance floor, some man came and tapped her curvaceous African buttocks before he whispered: "Nice arse, babe."

Normally, she would have curtly rebuffed him. But something had taken hold of her. With a fake smile, she replied: "You can have it if you want it, darling."

Perhaps, she decided as she sat in the luxurious bathroom, her recklessness had been stimulated simply by being in Sandton, Johannesburg's den of sin, where young girls could either make it onto the front pages of tabloid newspapers or laugh all the way to the bank after being of service to some rich sugar daddy with a fat wallet. She felt compelled to do as Romans did since she was in Rome.

But she began to feel cold, so she walked back to the bedroom and slipped back between the sheets, still trapped in the jungle of her vague selfdisgust.

She soon dozed, only to be woken a few hours later by a heavy hand caressing her soft breasts. The man had finally roused himself and he was breathing heavily behind her right ear and he pressed his hairy chested body against her. She could feel him trying to penetrate her from behind as fondled her.

"Morning, gorgeous," he said softly in a sexy baritone voice.

She didn't know what to say, she didn't even react to his attempt to have a morning glory with her and before she knew it he was having sex with her again and within minutes he moaned loudly as he ejaculated inside her.

"Babe," he said later, as he emerged stylishly dressed from the bathroom.

“I must rush for a meeting.” From his Louis Vuitton man-bag he drew out a wad of cash and placed it on her bedside table. “Get something nice to wear and pay your rent. Now I must get to that meeting.” He bent down to kiss her forehead.

Finally she found her voice. “Sorry sir, what is your name and where did we meet?”

The man laughed. “I’m Robert Silinda. We met at Rivers. Don’t you remember? I’ve been in-boxing you on Twitter for months and you’ve been ignoring me.”

He walked a few steps and then turned back to her. “I’ll tell you all about it when we meet tonight. The hotel has been paid for but you must check out before eleven,” he added as he closed the door after him, leaving her alone.

We all know someone who has had one of these nights, which tend to creep up on young women and take them unawares. But they can have terrible outcomes. So let me re-introduce you to the girl named Treasure Mohapi and allow me to tell you her story.

CHAPTER 1

If you see a girl dressed to say...

No one tells me what to do!

You know someone once told her what to do.

– Jennifer Michael Hecht

The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord.

– Acts 17:26

The hand dealt

It was a chaotic time in South Africa when Treasure was born to Thabo and Thato Mohapi at Soweto’s notorious Baragwanath hospital in April 1990.

Officially, those were the last days of apartheid, but there were still violent protests and uprisings in the country.

The Mohapis already had an older daughter, Lebo, born in July of 1983, and after Treasure they would have another three daughters (Mary, Disebo and Grace) and lastly, a son.

The family didn’t have it easy in the 1990s, but it was usually a happy struggle. They seemed like a large cheerful family to many, with beautiful parents, and lively obedient children.

Thabo was a well-spoken man with great presence and stature. Even in his karate attire, he looked handsome and poised. For Thabo, he was her proverbial tall dark prince, like the ones Treasure read about in the love novels she would steal from Lebo. Treasure could see the love between her parents. Mrs Mohapi would gloat about her husband in his absence, saying he was fit as a lion, a tall and dark-skinned Prince Charming with an obscure sense of humour.

Thabo herself was a beautiful, dignified lady – tall, sweet, and loud. She brought life and joy into the home, from the gospel music she played early on Sunday mornings to the smell of her freshly baked cookies permeating the house. She enjoyed the art of being a seamstress, making curtains and designing dresses for many of her friends and clients. Even though she had no formal education, she was highly recommended around their neighbourhood.

But Treasure's childhood was also dark at some points. Besides their lack of finances, the family was always moving, running away from the fights in and around Soweto, and sometimes her parents would argue, creating a cloud of tension that expanded the longer it was contained in the house.

Thabo had worked hard to get the family out of the Mofolo Township in Soweto years ago. He moved them to Libanon, a small mining town near

Westonaria on the far West Rand of Gauteng. Having worked at the Westonaria Goldfields mine for many years, he was well-respected in the small community of mineworkers. He left the house at four each morning to return thirteen long hours later. The wages were not good. He was always looking for a better salary, as well as a better home, hopping from one house to another in his endless search.

Love, money and school

From a young age Treasure found her father intimidating and stubborn.

Thabo didn't spend money on gifts. He always said they couldn't 'waste money on celebrations' because schools would reopen soon. It was a frequent excuse for everything they could not afford. At Christmas, she would gaze longingly at magazines filled with toys and clothes, and look at him with her large sad eyes close to tears. He would say grimly, "You and your sisters have your family; you can play at the gaming centre on the swings and merry-gorounds, and you have lots of different sweets to eat. That's more than enough

for Christmas. So don't ask me for expensive gifts that will just break in a couple of weeks.”

As Treasure got older she began to see how his priorities were mapped out.

He simply couldn't be bothered with luxuries. The things at her friend Chrissy's house blew her mind, like large TV sets and CD players and sound systems; all the kids she knew seemed to have them. Perhaps Thabo knew what he was doing with this strategy: there was nothing for other kids to 'do'

at the Mohapi house, so they tended to hang out elsewhere.

Despite all of this, the Mohapi kids did feel loved. Their parents' tight grip on their finances kept them grounded; they appreciated anything they got, and they definitely valued education. (Lebo would joke that it was the only way to escape their situation.)

Treasure's primary school days were full of fun. She was one of the first black girls at a predominantly 'white' primary school, Laerskool Glenharvie in Kloof, about ten kilometres away from Libanon. Being part of the first black generation at newly multiracial schools was bittersweet. Sometimes kids stared at Treasure or mocked her, but her parents rarely spoke about racism at home so she didn't even realise the mockery was related to her skin colour.

As she got older, her popularity grew with her circle of friends. In Grade 5

she met Megan Brown, Robyn King, and Thandiwe and Musa Khumalo.

They usually played soccer or *skop die bal* at Alex Modimo's house, number

22 Plain Street, where all the local kids would gather to laugh and tease and show off. Boys didn't seem to see her romantically as an *inamorata* (Italian for 'girlfriend') yet, but it didn't bother her much. She got on well with all the guys, and her social skills with them gave her bonus points when she hung out with girls.

Treasure was always active at school, playing sports and singing and dancing.

She was appointed a prefect for the Grade Seven year. She didn't know it then, but she would come to value that period as the time before everything got so complicated.

HELLP, round 1

The Mohapis all had a huge scare when Thato nearly died (for the first time) while pregnant with baby Grace. Everything went well until late in the third trimester, when Thato developed many disturbing but vague symptoms, including blurred vision, nosebleeds, swollen hands and legs, nausea, heartburn, and abdominal pain that spread up to her shoulders.

The doctors at Bara insisted most of this was ‘normal’ when pregnant, and they told her not to worry, even though Thato insisted that something must be wrong, and that after having 4 kids she should know. She felt worse as her pregnancy progressed to 32 weeks, with ringing in her ears, severe migraines, and blood in her urine. She sat at Bara’s emergency care units, seeing various doctors, trying to convince them something was wrong. They sent her to get blood tests and x-rays for things like lupus, gastritis, kidney disease and hepatitis, all of which came back negative.

At 35 weeks, while she was sitting in a doctor’s office at Bara’s emergency unit, being told that she likely had gallstones or hiatus hernia, Thato blacked out and had a severe seizure. Finally, the doctor took her seriously. On the trolley on the way to the operating room, she kept having seizures until she lapsed into a coma. She was bleeding profusely from her birth canal, so the doctors opted for an emergency C-section, and she ended up needing at least four blood transfusions during and after the delivery.

Grace was taken straight to the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) where she stayed for 3 weeks. Luckily she had well-developed lungs at birth, even though she was premature.

It was incredible that they both survived. Thato felt grateful and lucky but her blood pressure remained high, and she kept having migraines, chest pains and nausea. She felt exhausted and depressed much of the time. For the first time in her life, she felt fragile, unhappy and insecure.

On top of this, Grace was a vulnerable and volatile little baby, getting flustered easily and refusing to eat, and Thato found it difficult to bond with her through her own fatigue and nervous tension.

If the doctor knew what Thato’s ailment was, either he didn’t get a chance to tell her amidst all the chaos of keeping her alive during delivery, or she couldn’t remember. She wasn’t able to track down her hospital file, so she simply became determined not to have another baby.

She was blindsided when all of this caused major marital issues with Thabo, whose support she really needed. On top of the extra hospital fees he had to pay for Grace's neonatal care, he blamed Thabo for not being more educated about her symptoms and for not getting help earlier. Now that she was deathly afraid of pregnancy, Thabo insisted on using protection during what little sex she felt up to having, so neither of them enjoyed it like they used to.

Pretty soon, the cracks began to show.

There were nights when Thabo would cry silently, after her efforts to please Thabo went unnoticed. Treasure would see the pain in her Mom's eyes.

Yet Thabo always put on a brave face and resigned herself to her fate.

Growing pains

Despite their lingering charm, Treasure found her parents increasingly cold and self-absorbed. They were not her friends—she knew that because they told her. “You can't expect *us* to respect *you*, child. Respect is earned. It only comes with age and maturity.”

She didn't have the privilege of simply pouring her heart out to them whenever she felt like it. Even worse, they were frequent disciplinarians, not hesitating to hand out corporal punishments as if they were principals. Their moods switched from mellow to harsh without warning. Hardly a week went by without beatings for coming home late after school.

Thabo often said he had left Lesotho to become someone important, which he *was* in Treasure's eyes. But she'd never seen a man treat his family the way he did. Her respect for him was diminishing. She couldn't understand what made him so angry sometimes.

All this tension and drama was taking a toll on the family, especially on Treasure. She already didn't feel very confident growing up. She saw herself as tomboyish, loud, plump and too dark. Every so often, she would open up to her school friends, who would reassure her and give her a boost of confidence. But as her innate sense of trust was eroded she began to withdraw and hide her feelings.

The situation at home kept deteriorating, so she was looking forward to going away to boarding school in the Free State, 425 kilometres away from Libanon.

Little did she know how much her life was about to change.

HELLP: You have to die to be reborn Three years after Grace, Thato fell pregnant again—despite all her precautions—and she even considered having an abortion. But then she discovered that, after 5 girls, this baby was a boy: the boy she had never had.

It seemed like a message from God; he wanted her to have this baby. He would protect her. She would need to be strong and careful and alert; it would be scary, but she had faith.

She got the pharmacy to keep testing her blood pressure, and found that it was slowly getting higher during her third trimester. She also had worsening migraines. She couldn't afford too many expensive tests, so she spoke to as many nurses, pharmacists and clinic staff as she could find in the area about her high blood pressure, headaches, nausea, gastric pain and bleeding gums.

Eventually a doctor decided to test her blood for liver enzymes, which were elevated, along with her blood pressure. This led to a check of her blood platelet count and finally she was diagnosed with HELLP Syndrome, a severe version of pre-eclampsia.

At least this time Thato had a diagnosis, but there was no real cure for her condition. When she began having seizures at 33 weeks, the doctors immediately began a C-section, and Tebello was born weighing 2.2 kg. He spent 26 days in NICU, and stayed in hospital with Thato who was there for another four months. She lost a lot of blood, been in a coma twice, and her liver had ruptured.

Once again, she was lucky to be alive.

CHAPTER 2

It's more than the beginning... it's the face in the mirror

Part one

From the outside, the four-bedroom white house at the corner of Oak Street was nondescript. It drew no attention to itself, nor did it betray those who lived there. They may as well have been transient strangers, passing through with no intention of being seen.

Inside, the house was spotless and clean, yet it felt empty. There were no fancy family portraits or school pictures on the walls. It was well into summer in October, but Treasure always found the house intensely cold.

She arrived home from school on a Thursday afternoon to find her mother in bed in her nightgown, damp with perspiration. She was staring into space, with tiny Tebello asleep in his cot next to her bed.

“Day sweats again Ma?” Treasure asked.

Her mother nodded numbly.

“Can I get you something to eat?” She didn’t know how else to help her mother. At 13 years old, what else could she do?

“I’m ok; thanks my child,” Thabo whispered. She was far from ok.

It had been three months since her release from hospital, and Thabo had barely improved. The family was used to her being sick since Grace’s birth, but this time it was worse. She kept losing weight. She hardly left the house.

She tried to do her sewing work, but it took a long time for her to complete anything.

It was as if her soul was dying, which depressed and angered Thabo.

Treasure wished he would take her Mom to see a different doctor or they could lose her. But she was too scared to say anything. He was anxious and moody most of the time. The medical bills were mounting up; he no longer opened them, and they spilled out of a drawer in the kitchen.

The night before, she had heard her parents fighting. It was awful. Thabo tried so hard to silence her screams and moans that her suppressed screeches were more piercing than Thabo’s shouting.

Her mother never spoke to anyone about those nights, and lately there were more of them. Before Tebello was born, she would wear layers of jackets to hide the bruises, acting as if life was just a bundle of joy. *She really knows how to hide pain.*

Treasure didn’t know what else to say. “You look better today Ma,” she offered, although that was a lie. “Everything’s going to be fine ok, so don’t worry.”

She leaned over to kiss her Mom’s cheek, but Thabo had fallen asleep.

AFTER CHECKING ON Tebello, Treasure went into the bedroom that she shared with her younger sister Disebo. A twin bed stood on each side facing away from the window. The built-in cupboards were almost as old as the house itself.

She sat at the window, as she usually did after school, eating the sandwich left over in her lunchbox and gazing out at the street with her eyes glazed over. Day-dreaming was one way to escape reality. She could see the Libanon community swimming pool in the distance, but she may as well have been staring into space.

With her father so busy and her mother so sick (but still intent on working), life was actually getting worse. She couldn't wait to leave and go to boarding school. This constant stress was too much. She felt a bit selfish for leaving her Mom to deal with everything, especially as Lebo had just had her third baby with her Zulu boyfriend, so tension in the house was at an all-time high.

What does she see in that guy? He's made her pregnant three times. Then their kids just live with his parents and cause them problems. That's not how family is supposed to work. One day they will break up and then what? What a waste of time. I don't see the point of love, except to fool people into having babies. We see the good in everyone when we think we love them but everything goes sour eventually...

VERY EARLY THE next morning before school, Treasure joined her mother as she cleaned the vegetable garden in the back yard.

“Morning Ma. What are you doing here so early?”

“Ugh, these weeds keep coming back! Just look at them—they will cover the

entire house soon.”

“But isn't this Dad's job? He should be cleaning the garden.”

“The rain hasn't helped much either...” her mother replied, ignoring her question.

Treasure studied Thato's face for some sign of emotion but there was none at all; her expression was as frosted as winter grass. Her neediness though—her vulnerability—was a palpable force. It pulsed in the air between them as she slowly, deliberately pulled out each weed and smacked it down on a growing pile.

“Hey Mom, you seem so quiet today,” Treasure observed.

Thato just sighed. “Okay, time to make you food for school,” she said eventually. She reached out to Treasure. “I can't even stand, help me up...

you know if I was a scarecrow somebody would have to hold me up all day...”

Okay, she's ignoring me, and making lame jokes; is she hiding something?

“Mom, scarecrows are meant to scare birds, not weeds.” Treasure took her Mom's hand; she could feel her quivering through her palm.

“I know that child!” Thato retorted. “Does that matter?”

Treasure was lost. “Sorry Ma, I...” She shook her head. “Never mind.”

Whenever Treasure plucked up the courage to ask Thato personal questions she got snapped at. *I’ll stay quiet.*

They walked slowly towards the house. “You know that most of my organs still work,” Thato joked. “You can put them up for auction when I’m not useful any more, okay?”

Treasure gave in and mustered a smile. “Are you really okay though, Mom?” she ventured as they entered the house.

True to form, Thato retorted, “You’re making a big deal out of nothing again Treasure. Relax!”

“Okay, I just wanted to make sure that you weren’t...”

“I. Am. Fine,” Thato insisted dramatically, and went into the kitchen.

Treasure sighed and shrugged and went to get ready for school.

BY LUNCHTIME, THE YARD was immaculate, and Thato was exhausted.

She realised she hadn’t eaten anything for breakfast, and went to the kitchen, regretting the way she had spoken to Treasure earlier. She was just tired of being asked how she was. It didn’t make anything better. What she really needed was some help and support, and she wasn’t getting any, least of all from Thabo. *Speak of the devil.*

Through the kitchen window, she could hear him speaking to someone on the porch. *What is he doing at home? He hadn’t bothered to come in and greet her. Did he take the day off? Why doesn’t he tell me anything anymore?*

She looked out of the window carefully. Her husband was sitting on an old chair, looking dapper yet mischievous with his feet propped up on the railing.

On the floor by his side was 20-year-old Lebo. Since her eldest daughter first got pregnant at 16, these two hardly ever had a decent conversation. But now she could hear him laughing with her. What had she missed? Could Granddad’s recent death have brought them closer somehow?

It turned out they weren’t speaking at all. Thabo glanced up at his wife as she stepped out onto the porch, and spoke quietly into his

phone. "Got to go," he said. "I will try to call you later." With that he hung up and quickly slipped it into his pocket.

Thato felt intrusive as she sat down in the other chair. There was an awkward silence for a while. Who did Thabo speak to like that? And why was Lebo allowed to hear him?

"Can I get you something to drink?" she ventured. "It's so hot today." She picked her words carefully, remembering that any harsh words could set off an argument.

Mr Mohapi sighed. "What I would really like is for you to get cooking.

I hate eating bread all day long, and you should know that by now," he said rudely. "A wife's place is in the kitchen, not pottering about for hours in my yard!"

Abruptly he stood up and walked out of the yard, leaving Lebo shocked and embarrassed.

Mrs Mohapi felt as though a deep tide had just hit her, but as usual, she kept it all in and did as she was told with the little strength she had left.

"Sure!" she said cheerfully and went inside to put on some jazz. It was meant to distract her and to keep the house lively, but she was still trying to hold her tears back. She came back outside.

"Ma, would you mind if I smoked?" Lebo asked shyly.

Thato nodded automatically, her mind elsewhere. Lebo reached into her pocket and pulled out a pack of Marlboros and a box of matches.

"Wait, what? When did this happen?" Thato asked in shock. "Since when are you smoking? Are you pregnant AGAIN? You can't smoke if you're pregnant!"

Lebo rolled her eyes. "I just TOLD you, Ma. No, I'm not pregnant, I know better than that! It's just, a lot has happened, and this is my coping mechanism. Now you know, so don't judge me." Using one hand to block the breeze, she lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply. "I guess I'll quit when I'm happy... right now, my life is no better than a drug mule's."

"A drug mule's?" Thato laughed bitterly and shook her head. "You have no idea, my child... look, happiness is a strange thing. You can choose to have it any time, but many of us don't."

Lebo shook her head. “Choose? How?”

“Yes, you choose a better life. You see, happiness can be instant, if you let go of the pain inside you, and take a leap of faith.”

“Okay, I have no idea what any of that means Ma.”

“You need to take some risks and make changes in your life. No one else can do that for you. Look at you; you are beautiful; stop ashing up your body and your face with that cancer stuff!” Thato coughed; she had to lower her raspy voice to keep talking. “You can get a job and support yourself and have a real

family with those kids of yours. It’s not all hopeless. We all have happiness in us; we need to just activate our energy. Change your thoughts and you can move mountains,” she whispered. She spoke with such hope, as if it was her own dream to live a new life. The longing in her voice was sincere and pure.

A tiny smile even crossed her face.

“But Mom, the same goes for you,” Lebo protested. “Dad is so mean to you sometimes. Why don’t you just divorce him?”

Her mother looked up; her dreamlike expression changed in an instant.

“Listen missy, I’m your mother; remember that! It takes more than a divorce to change my life. I have kids to feed, and nothing to my name.”

“But Dad will have to give you money, you know – maintenance money.

It’s the law; he must pay for each child.”

“Bah, you still don’t know your father! He won’t pay a cent if we leave him.

How must I feed this family when we all end up in the streets? Or do you want me to sleep in a coffin? My children’s wellbeing is my priority. This is all I can do in my current state. I don’t need any more drama! Now, stop smoking and come help me chop the peppers, before I start another fight with your father.”

Lebo’s face was red with fury. “But Ma! You know I can make a plan for us.

You have to leave him for good! You are still beautiful; you could even meet someone else.”

Thato shook her head. “Don’t say things like that. Maybe you’re right, but this is all I know, my baby. I don’t just GIVE UP on the people I love.

Anyway, where would we go? The big city life is for your generation. I got what I asked for when I married your father years ago. Marriage is for life, and I knew that.”

Deep inside, she doubted her own words. *How did I end up in this bitter union?*

AFTER SCHOOL, TREASURE sat in her room, excited about her report.

She was getting an award for good grades. Louw Wepener High would

definitely accept her; she just hoped her parents hadn’t changed their minds about sending her there. *You never know with those two. They will send me to that shack where Lebo went.*

Mr Mohapi came back late that evening with lots of groceries and sweets from Westonaria. He called all the kids to come and help. “Girls, come take these in; start packing everything where it belongs so that your Mom can see what I got her.” He seemed happy, as if nothing unusual was going on.

Treasure ran as fast as she could to welcome him home. “Dad! I got my report and I’m getting an award for my good grades. I’m going to mail my report to Louw Wepener tomorrow! Do you think they’ll take me?” There was a long pause as he seemed to be either processing or ignoring what she was saying. Through her smile she felt the dread of potentially dashed hopes.

To her relief, her father gave her one of his dashing broad smiles. “My child, I always knew you could do it. Of course they will take you. They already accepted your application. The report is just a formality.”

He was suddenly so proud of his daughter that during dinner that evening, he decided to enlighten the family about Wepener’s history and their famous high school. Treasure was somewhat embarrassed, but at least Mary seemed vaguely interested and asked questions. Lebo stayed ominously quiet. Her frown deepened as Mr Mohapi spoke for hours about how the Afrikaners had taken over Ladybrand and many parts of the Free State, but the Lesotho armies had fought the Afrikaans people to get their land back and they were victorious.

But Wepener is in South Africa, not Lesotho... Treasure was already opening her mouth, when Lebo kicked her lightly under the table and coughed. After that, Treasure clamped her mouth shut and just nodded and smiled, especially when her Dad said that she was going to one of the best schools in the country.

She had already started thinking about what an adventure it would be, and how she would be so much more independent, not living at home where it was so uncomfortable. She would make new friends—not that she wouldn't miss the friends she already had—but most of her current friends were going to other schools.

Her mother spoke up, trying to sound enthusiastic. “Love, we’re going to Lesotho to see family after we settle you in.” She looked at her husband for confirmation, but he said nothing. There was a pause during which Thato looked down at the table and swallowed her tears.

Treasure felt helpless. She didn't understand this strange dynamic where her Mom, desperate to be appreciated, was crushed every time her Dad chose to disregard her. She wished her Mom would stop relying on her Dad for approval.

Thato spoke up again, her voice hoarse. “We’ll let them know to look out for you, so you can go see them on weekends. They haven’t seen you in years; I think you were eight when they last visited.”

Thabo nodded coldly. “Yes, it is also time for you to see where you come from.”

Treasure could see that her Mom loved her Dad very much, but leaving her mother behind to fend for herself with this harsh man made her anxious, despite her enthusiasm for high school. On the other hand, the prospect of freedom and beginning adult life was enthralling. It meant that she would finally get a passport and visit the rest of her family in Lesotho. She could see herself as the ambassador of this historical town Wepener, which bordered Lesotho so closely.

She started reading up on it in old History textbooks and telling her friends about it. Going to a boarding school was already a luxury. Now, a boarding school with royal kids from Lesotho made all her friends green with envy.

Part two: New Year’s Eve

Looking for love in all the wrong places; looking for love in too many faces.

– Johnny Lee

It is just after Christmas, but as usual, the front of the house lacks any Christmas decorations or other signs of life.

Inside this house that serves as a battered family home, a dreadful story is unfolding. The lingering scent of Lace perfume oozes from room to room.

In the corner of the dining room stands an old off-white Christmas tree that Thato has decorated with white lights and coloured glass balls. Christmas has come and gone with no gifts under that tree—no new CDs or fancy jeans.

Not even Treasure's beloved grandfather was there to tell his favourite old stories about great heroes of the Lesotho Kingdom.

In the hallway, Thabo is on his knees, seemingly preoccupied with large boxes with lots of books and papers. To avoid eye contact with him, Treasure quickly walks past into the kitchen, where her mother looks as if she is going mad.

Treasure's gaze is caught by her younger brother crying on her mother's shoulder. Tebello is small for his eight months, with huge black eyes.

Treasure smiles at him as her mother leans over and hands her the plates.

"Please my child, help me plate up. Your brother's a little restless today,"

murmurs Mrs Mohapi in her mellow way.

"Maybe let Tebello play on the floor with Grace," Treasure says, wishing for her mother to be less protective over him. But Thato isn't listening.

"Come along, we don't have the whole day; I want you kids out of the way so I can rest."

As Treasure dishes up, her mother calls through the kitchen window.

"Lebo, Disebo, Mary! Come, it's time to eat." She turns to Treasure. "I'm going to put the babies to bed. Will you dish up for me?"

Treasure nods.

Disebo and Mary rush in to choose from plates filled with chicken, mashed potatoes and beans. Lebo takes her time, extinguishing her cigarette and sighing to expel some of the smoke in her lungs before entering. She adds extra mash to her plate and sits down at the table, facing the door and Disebo, who starts picking at her food. “Hey, wait for your mother,” Lebo admonishes.

Only Treasure notices that her Mom returns with a look of shock on her face.

But Mrs Mohapi composes herself as she picks up her plate and sits down to eat. She says grace as they all hold hands around the kitchen table. It begins to rain outside. It is a soothing, peaceful sound.

This is a cosy family dinner, Treasure thinks, sitting opposite her Mom.

She is glad her Dad isn't there to ruin things with his tense demeanour. But something still doesn't feel right. Her mother is very carefully and deliberately chewing her food, rigid as a robot, afraid of her own movements.

Treasure thinks back to the events of the day. Nothing comes to mind to explain why her mother is so jumpy.

Mary accidentally drops a knife onto the floor and Thato half-leaps out of her chair. “Oh god, child, eat properly now!”

At the sight of a shadow near the kitchen door, Thato loses her composure completely. She begins to shake uncontrollably under the table. The quivering woman can't even handle her cutlery anymore. Her fork falls to the floor with a clatter. Mary stares at her in confusion. Treasure is frozen with her back to the door, afraid to turn around, her spoonful of beans suspended in the air.

Suddenly Lebo draws in a sharp breath.

As her sisters all stand up and look at their Mom in fear, Lebo hisses at them,

“Just sit down and eat!”

By the time Treasure sneaks a look behind her, the only sound clouding the sudden silence in the room is the beating of the rain on the windows.

The kitchen door is open. A man stands there, his presence filling every inch

of the room. He seems to be in a rush.

His large green coat is sopping wet, his dark skin plastered with water, and his eyes are staring intently at her mother. With his shivering hands, he holds a gun, pointing it straight ahead.

No one dares to speak or move a muscle. At first Treasure doesn't recognise the man but she realises the truth in the split second that Lebo speaks.

"Dad! What's going on?"

Treasure's heart falls straight down into her stomach.

"Please Dad, don't do this," Lebo pleads, bewildered, as she stands up and makes a slow move towards him.

"Thabo, please calm down," whispers Thato. She seems to know something about his motives, a mystery to everyone else.

Lebo keeps moving closer. "Dad, what's happening? Please, whatever it is, let it go." She makes her way slowly towards him and looks up into his eyes.

Everyone else stays dead silent.

Treasure can't believe her sister's bravery. She wants to make her stop moving or talking, but it is too late.

"Sit with us and let's talk about it," Lebo continues. "We can fix it."

Mr Mohapi seems angry and scared at the same time.

"Whore!" he lashes out horribly, keeping his eyes on his wife.

His arms are still stretched out in front of him, holding the wobbling gun.

Suddenly, Treasure's mother stands up to push Lebo out of his way and looks at her husband defiantly, but her eyes are filled with terror. She stretches her arms out to her sides to protect her kids, like a hen covering her chicks.

"Please, put the gun down, not in front of our kids; please Thabo! It's Christmas please!"

Thabo seems deaf with rage. He doesn't register or respond. He is angry, and

nothing is calming him down. "Thabo?" Thato tries again.

"Bitch!" he spits. "YOU BITCH!"

He raises the gun higher. He's aiming wildly at her face, then lower again, squeezing his eyes as if to see better. He looks around as if

realising where he is, and starts to lower the gun.

Thank god—

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

Three gunshots.

No warning.

The sound breaks all silence.

Mrs Mohapi falls backwards, shaking from pain and shock.

Confusion and disbelief reigns. Everybody is on the floor. The kids shout and cry. Treasure's eyes are glued to her mother. There is a bullet hole in her mother's upper arm.

Her father drops to his knees; the gun is still smoking hot, oozing with steam on the wet floor. He looks weary and weak, alive but lifeless. He seems mortified at what is transpiring.

“What have you done?” Treasure demands, unable to say ‘Dad’.

He tries to speak, but the shock mutes him. He sobs with his face in his hands.

Lebo holds Mary and Disebo close, as if to shield them from the turmoil.

Treasure runs to her mother in terror and tries to hold her up. “Ma! Ma, are you ok?”

“I'm fine; help your father,” her mother whispers vacantly.

Treasure can't fathom these words. How can she be worried about him?!

There is blood seeping out onto the floor around her shoulder. Her mother's eyes close as she passes out.

“Mother, please don't leave us!” Treasure is frantic and scared. She turns towards her father, who is still on his knees, crumpled up on the cold and bloody floor. She is terrified of him, but her rage takes over.

“Look at her! She loves you and you try to kill her? What have you done?”

“You won't ever see us again!” she growls at him angrily. He doesn't say a word.

Lebo decides to get his gun while he's still in shock. She picks it up carefully off the floor. It is hot and heavy. She stares down at her

father, then quickly leaves the room, returning without the gun. She has towels to soak up the blood from Thato's wound. With Treasure, she lifts their Mom's head off the floor and onto her lap. "She needs to go to hospital," Lebo murmurs.

None of them know what to do next. *Are we supposed to do CPR?* She doesn't know any first aid.

Their younger sisters were wary, but gradually came closer to see if their mother was okay. Treasure tried her best to calm them down but tears ran from her eyes and theirs.

"Is she alive?" Mary asked.

"Of course she's alive!" Lebo barked in frustration. "Just go sit in the TV

room and wait." But none of them moved. Lebo kept stroking her mother's hair. The kids kept sniffing. Treasure watched the clock and checked on her Mom's weak pulse. Eventually, after about 20 minutes, a small, weak voice issued from Thato.

"Kids. I'm very sorry. Please. Forgive him. He loves us very much. I'm not going to hospital. Come, help me sit up."

They helped her onto a kitchen chair while her wreck of a husband huddled in the corner, weeping silently.

"My children," she said hoarsely, "I'm very sorry that you experienced such a thing in your own home." She kept on talking like she was the villain.

"Listen, please. Okay. Get me the first aid kit, and get your Dad some warm water and sugar. We can fix this. Everything's going to be just fine. Trust me."

Lebo fetched the first aid kit and then herded the younger kids into the TV

room. She tried to calm their anxiety, but they saw through her pretence.

The prospect of losing their mother was traumatic, and they wept in fear.

Treasure mixed sugar water in the kitchen, hoping that no one had notified the police. She didn't want that kind of attention at their house and she still couldn't explain what had happened. It was so strange how moments ago her father was busy with boxes in the hallway; where did he come from, looking the way he did?

She flinched as he stood up slowly and approached the table where her Mom was crumpled up in her chair. He took the first aid kit and grimly started to clean his wife's wound. Treasure watched every move. What was in that head of his?

As he worked, he decided to make excuses. First he shook his head for effect.

"You know how to push my buttons, and how that gets to me," he stated matter-of-factly. Then he grimaced in disgust as though his pride was mortally wounded. "Don't *EVER* go over my head the way you just did."

Treasure stared at him in disbelief. But he wasn't finished.

"You are mine, and mine alone; I don't want anyone else doing anything for *MY WIFE*. I will kill any man if this happens again! Do you hear me, Thato?"

he growled.

Thato decided it was too risky to disrespect Thabo just then and nodded.

He kept his eyes on the job at hand, and she kept still. He continued dressing the wound.

"Treasure, put on the oven," he commanded. "And get me my pocket knife from the bedroom."

Treasure was not exactly ready to obey anything he said, but she had no choice: her mother needed help. She rushed to the main bedroom, which was filled with a heady odour wafting up from a wet puddle on the floor. Around the sticky liquid lay pieces of a large broken perfume bottle. Avoiding the shards of glass, she found the pocket knife on a bedside table.

With some trepidation, she heated it in the oven, and then handed it over

gingerly to her cold-hearted father as soon as it was thoroughly hot.

He placed the point of the hot knife at the entry wound in her mother's shoulder. Thato closed her eyes and took a deep breath. A sense of calm came over her.

Thabo pushed the knife's hot point through his wife's tender skin. She stifled a gasp. With a blank look he worked the bloody bullet out of her flesh and dropped it in a cup. He seared the wound with the hot knife to seal it; it sizzled and smoked. The pain must have been unbearable but Thato didn't show any signs of weakness.

“It’s done,” murmured Thabo. He sat down heavily on a chair, cleaning the knife slowly and impassively.

Thato desperately needed to get to bed, but she was too weak to move.

Treasure glared at Thabo in vain, getting angrier as she watched him.

Don't you care about anything? Where is your gun? How is your wife?

Can't you at least apologise? Or are you too pleased with yourself?!

She opened her mouth to protest, but her father gave her one look, and she knew to shut it and leave.

Lebo helped her move their mother from the kitchen to bed. They lifted her from her chair, ignoring their father, and manoeuvred her carefully through the passage, their sisters following. They tucked her in, wiped her face with a warm cloth and kissed her forehead. Thato barely made a sound as she succumbed to fatigue.

“Now what?” whispered Treasure. “We can’t go back.”

The kitchen was off-limits while their father was still in it. He’d always been an angry man. Now he was dangerous and unpredictable too. And he had a knife.

Lebo nodded. “Hang on.” She checked on Grace and Tebello, and then the sisters all huddled together in Lebo and Mary’s room.

“Kids, I know you’re upset, but Ma’s going to be okay,” Lebo reassured them. “It’s getting late. I think we should all sleep here tonight.”

“Why?” moaned Disebo.

“Because Dad is upset, and you don’t want to get in his way, okay, babes.

You sleep with me, and Treasure will sleep with Mary.”

Treasure nodded in agreement and got up to lock the door.

In the distance, the first firecrackers were going off to celebrate the New Year.

CHAPTER 3

Though you deny me, my seeds will grow far beyond my call.

– Makatleho Calextina Phamotse

January: New beginnings in the Free State The Christmas holidays had had way too much drama. Treasure couldn't wait to leave home and start afresh at a new school with new friends. But there was one person she would miss more than most.

Alex was the catch of the town, a charming flirt with rich dark hair.

They weren't as close as she wanted them to be, but he was a good friend. He had taught her how to swim by drowning her repeatedly, and how to ride a bicycle with no brakes. She wanted to tell him in person that she was going away and see his reaction so she could gauge his feelings.

That Saturday afternoon, after swimming with their friends at the Libanon public swimming pool, she sat with Alex at the gate, waiting for the others to get dressed. Treasure had butterflies in her tummy. She launched clumsily into her speech.

"Alex, I'm leaving for the Free State on Sunday."

"Yeah?" He didn't even look surprised.

"Yeah, um, my Mom and Dad are taking me to Wepener. I'll only be back during holidays like Easter and Christmas."

"Okay. You looking forward to it?"

"Yeah, yeah, I am. I'm going to miss you guys, though."

"You'll be fine," he smiled.

"Yeah, I guess."

"Wepener is really far out but I bet you'll enjoy it. Have you got yourself a phone yet?"

"Um, no..."

Is that all he's going to say? Boys can be so dumb sometimes. He can't even kiss me on the cheek?

"Dude, you need to get a phone, seriously. You'll never get a boyfriend

without a phone. How do you think I talk to Chrissy?"

Treasure felt awful. Was he back with Chrissy? She hadn't even realised.

No wonder they'd been fooling around so much in the pool. Well, that was the end of the blissful love story that she had created in her head. She felt embarrassed.

“Listen, I’m gonna go. I need to like pack and stuff.”

Alex looked a bit puzzled. “You don’t want to wait? Did you say bye to the others already?”

“Um, yeah, sort of, I mean... maybe just tell them I say bye, again.”

“Okay.” Alex nodded, frowning. He stood up as he saw the others exiting the bathrooms and waved to Chrissy. His face transformed; he couldn’t look happier.

Treasure took off, as casually as she could, but tears were blinding her as she rounded the corner of the block.

She half-hoped they would call out to her, wanting to hug her goodbye, but all she heard was Chrissy’s stupid pretty laughter. She wiped her eyes fiercely and ran.

AS SHE WALKED into her house, gasping for air, her father stood up. He didn’t look happy. “Just a second, little lady. Did I not tell you not to leave the house until everything you own is packed?” he demanded.

Treasure froze, her lips pressed tight as she studied him silently. The room went quiet. Even the small black and white TV seemed dead. *Say something!*

screamed a voice in her head. But she knew better than to argue or try to explain. She stayed as still as she could, like a scared animal, hoping he would see something else to distract him.

No such luck.

Time seemed to slow down; step by step, he started walking closer towards her, taking off his belt. She knew what was coming. She was aware of her bare feet on the floor, of the water in her ears from the pool, of her heart beating so fast that she wanted to stifle it with both hands, but she was

carrying her shoes and old towel in a plastic bag that would rustle if she dropped it. She closed her eyes.

Seconds later, a painful lash landed on her hot dry body; she tried to turn away, but lashes kept coming, harder and harder. There was a sharp stab of pain in her left ear. She heard herself crying for help, but no one heard her, or wanted to risk any of what she was getting. Not after New Year’s.

Eventually the beating stopped. Treasure lay in a heap. Her father grabbed her shoulders with force, lifted her and pushed her back up against the wall.

His sneering face rapidly approached hers.

“When I tell you to do something, you DO IT, otherwise you GET OUT of my house. Do you hear me? I will show you who I am!” He let her go roughly.

She sank down to her knees against the wall and cried. “Sorry Dad, I won’t do it again!”

He gazed down at her with arrogance as if he would beat her again in a heartbeat. Then he sauntered away, as though nothing had happened.

Treasure closed her eyes wearily; she hadn’t prayed in weeks. “Jesus, deliver me from this,” she murmured. *Can this day get any worse? Both the men she had once adored didn’t value her at all. Am I really so worthless?*

What is wrong with me?

The clock on the wall said 4:23... *That’s not even late!* She had plenty of time left to pack. She would show them. *Maybe I won’t come back at all.*

They’ll miss me when I’m gone.

IT WAS RAINING by the time she finished packing, and her Mom was calling everyone for dinner. Treasure got up and opened the door, leaning heavily against the frame, with her body and heart in pain. *I’d be a fool to go and sit in the dining room for everybody to stare at; besides, Dad is the LAST*

person I want to see right now.

She stayed alone in the bedroom, hearing the clinking of cutlery against crockery. Nobody came to call her. Despair alternated with anger. Her emotions were so hard to control lately.

Late at night, her mother snuck in quietly. She woke Treasure gently and gave her something wrapped in a pillowcase, whispering, “Don’t take it out until you get to school.” Then she was gone.

Treasure was so curious she couldn’t sleep for a while. She desperately wanted to look at her Mom’s gift, but if her father came in and found her lights on in the middle of the night she would be up for Round Two and a possible knockout. She got out of bed, pushed the pillowcase deep inside her travel bag and closed it, ensuring she wouldn’t leave it behind.

The next day she woke up early, bathed, and ate breakfast while everybody was still sleeping. She didn’t want to be her father’s

gratuitous entertainment again. After brushing her teeth and inspecting her bags for the last time, she went outside, only to see him standing in the garden. Her heart sank. He seemed oblivious to the icy morning air, although it carried with it his own stench of disenchantment. She hurried back into the house and quietly closed her bedroom door.

Her heart was still sore because Alex hadn't bothered to call the house to say goodbye. She wanted to phone him but her pride wouldn't let her. *What would I be doing? Mom told me to stay away from boys... But Alex is more like a brother, so that's an exception right?* She had never felt like this about anyone before. She didn't really even care if he dated Chrissy or anyone else.

Girlfriends came and went, but she would always be his friend.

Just as she was working up the courage to go and call him, she heard her mother talking to someone on the phone in her loud but calm voice. "Don't worry sir. We'll make the payment when we return from Treasure's school.

We're travelling to the Free State shortly and the banks are still closed. I will inform my husband that you called... Yes, thank you sir... Thank you for your understanding. Goodbye."

Treasure felt a knot in her stomach. *Why is she lying?* Her parents were going to Lesotho after dropping her off. They wouldn't be back for a few days. She walked out to use the phone, but her Dad was already back inside.

Treasure didn't want to cause another argument, so she went to fetch her bags and moved them to the living room.

"Are you all ready to go dear?" Mrs Mohapi asked.

Treasure hesitated. "Your mother is speaking to you, Treasure," her father chided.

"Oh yes, I'm excited to go. I think I've packed everything I need. I also have my passport in case the school needs it." She spoke graciously for her father's benefit, but Mr Mohapi always had a neat way of blowing things off.

"Well then, I'm glad you're prepared. We're leaving in five minutes."

Treasure nodded. "I have my bags here already." She stood by the phone, waiting for a chance to call Alex without anybody snooping.

Her Dad looked at her suspiciously. “Bring your things,” he announced. “It’s time to go.”

CHAPTER 4

But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

– *Romans 8:25*

THEY WALKED TO the bus station. Thabo took Treasure’s bags out of her hands and practically marched all the way there. Luckily, the bus was already open and waiting. Their seats were in the back row. Treasure was hoping it would be a short trip, but the five hours seemed like a lifetime. Her father kept mumbling in his sleep, sagging deeper into his seat. He snored loudly, drooling from the corner of his mouth. *Wow, that’s kind of gross.* She had never seen him like that. She busied herself daydreaming about her new school: it would have fancy buildings with high walls, security guards at each gate, a gymnastics hall, a large swimming pool, and huge tennis and netball courts. Why else would royals go there? The school didn’t have a website, so she hadn’t been able to see much online.

The bus arrived in Wepener well after four in the evening. It was getting dark. All that Treasure could see was a mediocre town of broken dreams, built with big old stones. The dull streets were full of wild school kids and taxis and private cars playing loud music as if they were part of a festival.

Her young heart sank; this lonely pretentious outpost was not what she had envisioned.

The bus dropped them off at the school on its way towards Van Rooyen’s Gate. Treasure looked at the kids dancing and screaming as their old friends were dropped off by their parents. She had hoped she was going to have fun here, but something in her didn’t sit right. She wasn’t used to this kind of noisy, exuberant showing off.

For once, her parents didn’t make things more awkward. Mrs Mohapi pretended that everything was fine and Mr Mohapi played right along as if they could read each other’s minds. Suddenly they were the happiest couple there. Thabo took Thabo’s hand on one side and pulled Treasure’s big red bag on the other. He smiled and said, “Let’s get her in; we don’t want to wait in a

long registration queue.”

As they walked into the school offices, they met up with Ausi Mathapelo Lebeko, who was assisting with registration and uniform sales. Ausi Mathapelo seemed friendly and very helpful, and she

connected instantly with Treasure's mother. They even exchanged numbers. Thato bought Treasure some school gear while Mr Mohapi paid some fees and made boarding arrangements.

Everything was going smoothly. Treasure would stay in 'The Zoo' where all of the Grade Eights were located. They dropped her bags there and then she walked her parents out towards the hostel gate. Her Dad gave her a R20

Telkom phone card to call home should she need something.

Okay, so he doesn't HATE me. Dunno why he acts that way sometimes.

But nothing was free; next came the obligatory lecture.

"Be good and grateful at all times; this is a good school. We're putting our faith in you," her Dad said. "You'll be the first one to have a proper education in the family. Do you understand what that means? Don't let us down."

"Um, thank you; I will," Treasure assured him. "Please greet everyone for me in Lesotho. Travel safe and let me know when you get back home."

Her mother was nodding in agreement. "Make good friends, and phone us regularly," Thato added, winking twice at Treasure, which baffled her a bit.

Her parents hugged her goodbye and walked off hand in hand like they had just come from their first date, joyful and full of giggles. She stared after them, perplexed. *Weirdness. Are they like, that happy to get rid of me?*

Then she shrugged and turned around. Facing her was the colossal boarding house, three stories high, face brick wall, with many windows but only one door, directly opposite the school's main gate.

Suddenly she felt very alone. On the sides of the hostel door, benches were filled with girls gossiping and gazing at her as she walked towards them.

She felt very timid but didn't want to show it, so she yawned and walked quickly past them into the Zoo. Her bed was on the far right of the huge hall.

No one else was in bed yet. She found her way through and lay down, staring up at the ceiling with her stomach rumbling.

TREASURE WAS A dreamer and she was shy. She floated around her new school for several days, hiding her face. Making new

friends was harder than she thought. Most of the girls seemed to know each other already. She felt like an outcast.

There were kids from all over the Free State and Lesotho, and even some from Soweto. There were some mean Xhosa girls from Sterkspruit with loads of pocket money. Everyone seemed to have more money than she did.

Her parents had given her R300 to cover her textbooks and stationery. She also had to use it for lunch breaks. In the evenings, Matilda's mother would sell her delicious fat cakes for 50 cents each, but Treasure couldn't afford any. She tried not to let it worry her too much. *Well at least I don't have any friends to impress yet...*

The class work was pretty easy, but learning to live with other girls in the Zoo was a challenge. Between the two-hour study sessions in the evening and bedtime, the girls were allowed to make phone calls. Some of them made countless, endless phone calls to the boys' hostel, which was just 200 metres away... close enough to walk. *Guys, there are only TWO public phones here, and some of us need to call home... yoh, the selfishness.*

The first few weeks passed very slowly, but it was almost time for her first weekend out, when she could go home. She missed her siblings so much.

And even though she was angry with her father, she even missed him too.

She was looking forward to her mother's cooking the most. She had lost nearly 5 kilograms; her Mom would freak out.

She was so preoccupied that she completely forgot about the gift from her Mom. She found it in her travel bag three weeks after arriving. *Oh no, she'll think I didn't like it!*

It was a cell phone, a Nokia 5110. The joy and excitement was enough to clear her worries about how she would get home. She called home first thing, hoping some of those selfish girls in the dorm could see her. "Hello, is Mom there?"

"Treasure, is that you, baby?"

"Yes, Mom, it's me, I love the phone! Thank you so much. I hope Dad won't be angry that you gave it to me."

"No my dear, I told him when he was in a good mood."

"Oh, Mom, I miss your cooking; I'm coming home tomorrow. Could you please cook oxtail curry with your famous dumplings?"

“Of course, my angel! Listen; did we explain how you should travel?”

Take a local taxi and say you’re going to the border gate. When you get there you’ll see a stream of buses. Ask for a bus to Carletonville. Once you get it, write your name in the bus bookings register and find a seat. Oh – get some snacks before it leaves; it’s a long ride. Have your phone with you and we’ll call you on the way. Your father will be waiting for you when you arrive. We love you baby. See you soon.” Even before Treasure could reply, the call was cut short. She had run out of airtime.

To her surprise, a light-skinned girl was watching her. “Hello,” she said.

“My name’s Lintle Kente. I sleep right next to you and you’ve never said a word to me. Is that your phone?”

In the middle of their small talk, a group of five girls walked up and joined the conversation. “This is Mary, Molly, Edith, Tumi Khori, Linda Kambi...”

And just like that, moments later, she had a circle of friends.

They got along like a house on fire as they spoke and joked about Treasure’s

‘big life in the big city’. She didn’t really have a big life but she was proud of where she came from and how close it was to Jo’burg.

THURSDAY AFTERNOON WAS abuzz as the school bell went off at 2

p.m.; everybody seemed to be busy calling family and friends about their travel plans for the next day.

In the evening, they all went to study together and then packed before going to bed. Treasure felt happy. Things were looking up. She had a group of friends and now she was going home.

CHAPTER 5

She walks in beauty like the night of cloudless climes and starry skies; and all that’s best of dark and bright meets in her aspect and her eyes.

– Lord Byron

MR MOHAPI MET Treasure as promised and they walked home. “My trip was amazing Dad, Mom gave me this amazing phone and

I've been chatting to my friends all the way. It's so good to see you!" she looked at him with excitement. Their conversation was cheerful.

As they came closer to their gate, they found Mrs Mohapi unloading crates of vegetables from the back of a taxi that had just dropped her off.

She was looking healthy and vibrant, dressed in red and white for Valentine's Day. All the men in the taxi gazed at her in amazement. Mr Mohapi quickly rushed into the house to drop off Treasure's bags and ran back to help his beautiful wife.

For a few seconds, Treasure saw a love affair unfolding right before her eyes.

Her father's gaze never left her mother, and his smile was soft and effortless.

He saw something amazing in her graceful movements. He ran with his arms held out ready to help her. His heartbeat sped up as he came near her. He willed her to stop and look at him but the job at hand was hefty.

Love was something Treasure didn't know much about but she saw something magical between them come alive. "Hurry Mrs Mohapi, I have more deliveries to make," the taxi driver said with haste. Out of nowhere, one of the passengers observed, "She's something, isn't she?"

Her Dad said nothing as they all walked towards the kitchen door. He knew how special his wife was to the family, but admitting to himself that this woman had stolen his heart years ago was still tough. He pulled the door handle open and let her through first. He was scared of loving openly or expressing any kind of emotion except anger.

The house was warm and rowdy, just the way Treasure remembered and

missed so much. She showered and put on her favourite Adidas tracksuit. Her room was clean for the first time in months. The window to her daydreams was still as she had left it, with the blinds open just enough for light to come in at night. Her view of the community swimming pool far across the road was ideal. She could hear Tebello's giggles echoing in the other room, as he lost himself.

"Treasure, are you done? Supper's ready." Her mother peeked through the door. "Yes, Mom, just a minute." She checked her appearance in the mirror and adjusted the tracksuit self-consciously.

By the time she hurried in, everybody was already seated at the six-seater table with one spot left open.

Treasure sat down and said grace.

“This smells amazing Mom,” she remarked. The meal was lovely, just how she had imagined.

“You know your mother’s cooking is magnificent,” Mr Mohapi countered proudly.

Treasure talked happily about her newly formed friends and teachers.

“It’s so good to have you home, Treasure. You know, I realised that we didn’t prepare certain items for you when you left for school. You and I need to catch up and see how you’ve grown,” her mother said sympathetically. She stood up to clear the table; Treasure helped her with the dishes as the other kids rushed to watch the Friday night movies on TV. As she stood drying the dishes, she remembered something she had been nervous about admitting.

“Ma, something happened at school, and um, I’m a woman now... well, that’s what my teacher said,” she muttered shyly without looking at her mother’s face.

“Ah,” said her Mom smiling calmly. “Well in that case, we’ll have to go shopping tomorrow. There’s a lot that a young woman like you needs.”

They quickly washed up and stood in the kitchen, catching up on local gossip. “Ladies, I hear you two are catching up, but it’s time I have my wife back,” Mr Mohapi stood at the door smiling at them like naughty little girls.

“Of course my love, I’m on my way,” Mrs Mohapi said affectionately.

Treasure excused herself and went to her room.

As everyone was falling asleep, Treasure had a chance to make a call to Alex’s house, but her mind was messing with her. She didn’t know if it was appropriate to call at this hour, but her anxiety refused to abate. She had to do it to know how he would react. Gripping the receiver with a clenched fist, she felt like her heartbeat would break the handle. The first two rings went unanswered. Then suddenly a deep voice spoke on the other side of the line.

“Hello!”

“Alex, is that you?”

“Oh! Hey you! I was waiting for your call.” His voice had matured and he seemed much calmer. “Your sister Lebo told me you would be home tonight.”

He sounded as excited as she was.

Treasure smiled happily. “Yes I’m home, but I have a shopping date with my Mom tomorrow morning.”

“Damn, and I have a soccer game at the sports complex in Westonaria.

If you can make it, that would be great!”

“Well I’ll have to speak to my Mom and see what she says. I have to go; I think someone’s coming. Bye!” she hung up and ran for her bedroom, feeling like jumping up and down with joy. Hearing Alex’s voice was breathtaking for her. She couldn’t wait to see him, but there was so much going on. She spent the night dreaming about being close to him.

MRS MOHAPI WOKE up early to make breakfast for everyone before they left for Westonaria. The house was peaceful and Mr Mohapi wasn’t working that weekend, so everybody was home.

“Hurry up, missy; we have a long day planned,” her mother shouted in the hallway. Treasure got dressed and played some music as she ate.

They left right after breakfast and Mrs Mohapi seemed extra nice somehow.

It was the first time she could remember spending a day out with her mother

alone. It felt strange at first because Treasure didn’t know what to say to her, but her mom was calm and Treasure felt relaxed. They made their way to the taxi rank and got into an old meter taxi.

Their first stop was a Jet clothing store to get proper underwear now that she was a ‘young woman’, as Thato put it. Then they bought cosmetics and toiletries, like facewash and tampons. Treasure found the idea of using tampons pretty scary (*Won’t they get lost inside me?*), but Thato reassured her that there was nothing to worry about. “My child, millions of women use them, and they were all scared like you at first. Don’t worry, I’ll explain the whole process to you at home.”

As they walked about in town eating ice cream, they spoke about Grace and how quickly she was growing up, the things she liked and

how she sweetly she would push Tebello around in his pram.

Time passed quickly. While they were looking at getting Treasure shoes as a special treat, her Dad called and spoke to her Mom.

Thato's whole face changed in an instant. Her words were hasty.

"Treasure, Dad wants us back home. It's almost supper time; you know he doesn't like anyone else cooking.

I'm sorry, but we have to get going. We'll get your shoes next time, okay?

You must be hungry too; all we had was an icecream."

They waited a while for a taxi, which made her Mom jumpy and agitated.

Treasure decided not to probe; her Dad, the monster, was obviously back.

Her stomach churned with worry, but she tried to think about other things to avoid dealing with her anxiety.

As the taxi passed the sports complex, Treasure remembered Alex's soccer match. Oh no! He'll probably never want to speak to me again. She didn't even try to ask her mother if she could see him play. It was too late.

The moment they got home, Thato went straight into the kitchen.

Treasure sat in the TV room showing her sisters her new things.

They all heard Mr Mohapi walking into the kitchen and exchanging a few abrupt words with their mother. The mood in the house soured. Like a

policeman, Thabo walked behind his wife to their bedroom, edging and pushing her forward with his fast pace.

All the kids waited in pulsating silence. Treasure began trembling in fear.

There was a bump and a stifled cry. She stood up and ran outside; she didn't want to hear or witness anything more.

Sunday came and she spent the day reading, staying out of everyone's way.

She found herself looking forward to school, although she would have to figure out the tampons herself. Her Mom didn't appear until late in the afternoon to make dinner. She was mute, pale and dejected. Treasure hugged her, but her Mom barely mustered a smile. The weekend had been bittersweet.

CHAPTER 6

A clear vision to a better life is found within the pages of education.

Back at school

Treasure was very happy with her new group of friends. They enjoyed doing everything together, from simply walking around the school and talking to playing games and sports. They studied and gossiped together in the evenings and sent each other SMSs surreptitiously during class.

The group slowly became a force to be reckoned with. Aside from being top students, they were notorious for playing silly pranks on people.

School gradually became Treasure's new normal. It was more peaceful and stable than home, and she was making more new friends. One was a girl called Tumi Jones, with a funky personality inspired by hip-hop. She had everyone fascinated by her dance moves; she was very entertaining and they quickly became close.

Life was full of homework, studying, music and late night chats and the rest of the year passed quickly. Treasure's grades were high and as a reward she got a new, better phone for Christmas.

Grade 9

Yet another year arrived like a gentle breeze on a summer's day, and Treasure passed easily to the next grade.

She had worked her magic on the school's teachers, and most of the staff and students knew her by name; they would greet her and she couldn't be more delighted. She had her eye on one or two guys, but they were all dating her friends.

She started a school newspaper, writing articles that helped the paper thrive.

She sang in the school choir and played netball.

Mr Mohapi began trusting Alex to fetch Treasure from the bus stop because he knew him and his family. Alex was often the main reason that Treasure came home. The bus would often run late or even break down, so she would catch a taxi and ask to be dropped off at Alex's house. They had time to catch up with no parents hovering over them.

They would sit in the television room for most of the night. Music videos were their favourite entertainment. They danced and ate, and he made the best coffee.

The nights would always end too quickly as they had so much to talk about.

They would fall asleep cuddling, but Alex never made any romantic moves beyond kissing her goodnight on the forehead.

Mxit launched that year, and it made chatting so much cheaper and more fun.

She started chatting to Alex on Mxit while she was at school.

Towards the end of that year, Romeo Kgomo asked her out, and she accepted. She had actually been attracted to him for a while, when one of her friends was dating him. He was cute and stylish and popular. He also came from a wealthy family, which didn't hurt. Everyone loved and respected him.

He may have asked her out on impulse, but she played along. Her patience had paid off.

Grade 10

On a whim, Treasure decided she wanted to impress her boyfriend with something extra special. She decided to sing for Romeo at the senior's Valentine's Day Ball, for Grades 10 to 12. One of her teachers, Mrs Ross, helped her with her surprise. She would be on top of her game when the day arrived.

The ball was impressive. Treasure had prepared well, but now she was terrified. Could she match this? Over sixty glamorous couples were seated at elegant dinner tables placed around the hall. There were pink and red roses strewn all over the dance floor. Romeo sat near the music booth with a group of his friends. He had no idea what was about to go down.

"Treasure, this is it," said Mrs Ross, beaming. Her eagerness made Treasure feel even more jumpy. "I've asked them to play your song. As soon as it starts you can sing your way to his heart."

"Thank you so much!" Treasure smiled nervously. "I hope my voice sounds okay on this mic."

"I'm sure it will dear."

Treasure peeked through the stage curtains and she could hear everyone chattering. People were enjoying themselves, and she hoped that her act would be the cherry on top. The lights dimmed and the music started. It was

'Butterflies', a well-known Jamali song.

Treasure pushed herself through the gap onto the stage. All eyes were on her as she began singing.

Tumi Jones was on the far left with her friend Sibusiso. She winked at Treasure, who smiled and descended the stairs onto the dance floor. She was relieved that everybody was smiling.

Romeo stood up and walked slowly towards her; the twinkle in his eye brighter than a disco ball.

“You amaze me all the time; what are you doing?” he whispered, blushing.

He took her left hand. She kept singing and looked deep into his eyes.

Cheers came from every corner and Treasure blushed with joy and success.

Her little performance was the talk of the town the following day.

She adored the attention she received, and she was proud for overcoming her self-doubt. She had also learnt something new about herself: *It's so much fun entertaining people...*

CHAPTER 7

Let anyone among you who is without sin, be the first to throw a stone at her.

– John 8:7

FOR A WHILE after that, Romeo would invite her to stay over in the cottage his parents owned in Wepener. They were both 15 and their hormones were raging. They would kiss and touch most of the night, but they never went past heavy petting. He brought out the mischievous part of her. He fed her desires and made her forget about her reality at home.

No one knew about them, not even their close friends. They enjoyed their intimate relationship with no judgment. Treasure's school friends often spoke about their issues with their boyfriends and bragged about their sex lives.

Treasure kept herself busy so that she wouldn't be pulled into their conversations.

She was confident with Romeo because he never pressured her to go further than what she was comfortable with. She sometimes worried that she was still a virgin, but she felt like Romeo didn't mind. She would be his when she was ready: maybe on her 16th birthday?

One cold night in July, Treasure walked to Romeo's, hoping for some warm cuddle time. They hadn't seen each other for a couple of weeks, apparently because he had loads of school work. As she rounded the last corner, she was shocked to see him kissing another girl who was just leaving.

She backed into an alley out of instinct. *What did I just see? Maybe it wasn't him?* But her gut said otherwise. She stuck her head out just as the girl passed her and realised with a jolt that she knew her. Tumi Jones, her favourite friend?

"Tumi!" she called.

Tumi jumped. She frowned as soon as she saw it was Treasure and stayed stuck in one spot. "Hey."

"Did you just come from Romeo's?"

"Yeah, um." Tumi's eyes darted around. "He was helping me with some Maths homework..." She sighed. She couldn't lie anymore. "Look. We never intended for anything to happen. It just kind of did." She seemed very embarrassed.

Treasure felt numb. "But when? How long?"

"Umm, maybe a month now? I'm really sorry Treasure, I wish, I don't know what to say. I uh, I think you should go talk to him." She nodded towards Romeo's house. "And I understand if-if you don't want to be friends anymore."

Treasure gaped at her. "What? How could I?" she said. "How could you?"

"Did you really just do this?" Her voice choked up.

Tumi looked away, humiliated. Having seen the drama, Romeo *the hero* arrived to suss out the situation.

"Treasure," he started.

"Just don't," she whispered.

"Treasure, I'm really sorry. I know it doesn't make sense, but please, try to understand. We never wanted to hurt you. I was about to tell you..."

"Just forget it." Treasure's eyes flashed. "Go back to your little love shack. I don't want to see either of you at school. Traitors! You DESERVE each other."

She turned on her heel and took off, trying to stay strong, but her thoughts overwhelmed her.

Have they been...having sex? Couldn't he just wait for me?

The tears poured down her cheeks and onto her phone screen as she walked slowly back to school, typing. Lintle was waiting for her with hot chocolate and hugs.

FOR THE REST of the year Treasure ignored her two ex-friends and they took care to stay out of her way. She had been wronged, and she carried

herself proudly with her head up. Word spread about the 'love triangle', probably through Lintle, but it was soon forgotten in the melee of school gossip.

Treasure's thoughts shifted back to Alex, but she didn't get to see him very often, and sometimes she would just stay at school when everyone else left. It was lonely, but she was okay with being alone.

When the December holidays arrived, she arranged for Alex to pick her up like he used to, before she had hooked up with Romeo.

They had so much fun. It was like they had always been best friends. She forgot about all her relationship woes at school.

The only problem was that Alex wasn't available. He was still dating Chrissy on and off. He also had another on-off girlfriend at his school. He told Treasure everything so that she didn't get any surprises, and he managed to make exclusive plans with her most of those holidays.

Things at home were tense, but she was strangely happy because of Alex.

He seemed to really care about her and that made her want him even more.

Grade 11

Treasure thought about Alex nonstop when she got back to school. They were still technically friends, but their relationship had slowly become complex, enigmatic and contagiously flirty. He kept her on her toes with long, hilariously suggestive texts, and made her feel like a smart, sexy supermodel.

It seemed to Treasure that they both wanted each other, but reality was keeping them apart. At first, the loose attachment seemed perfect. She didn't want to be heartbroken by another Romeo. But, despite herself, she had painted a picture of a loving paradise in her head.

Then disappointment struck hard.

The extra-long Valentines weekend was coming up, and she hoped and expected to spend it with Alex. But when she texted him about it a week earlier, he only replied two days later.

<Treasure, I need to use this time to break things off with Chrissy. She's invited me to go to the Kruger Park with her family, and I don't want to refuse and dump her at the same time. It wouldn't be fair. I'll bore her, and then break up with her. I hope you understand? Please let me know.> *Goddammit, Chrissy, with your beauty and your money and your family and their stupid holidays at the Kruger Park! Why do you get special treatment?*

Rich kids... Ugh. He has to go away with you for five whole days, on Valentines', just to break up? How awkward will that be?

She decided not to reply until she had calmed down a bit, and then she did what she thought her Mom might do to show support.

<Hi, Alex. Do what you need to do.>

CHAPTER 8

Go and wash in the Jordan seven times and you shall be clean.

– 2 Kings 5:10

TREASURE DIDN'T WANT to go home anymore, so she told her Dad she didn't have enough money for the bus. Mr Mohapi arranged with Ausi Mathapelo for Treasure to go to her house instead.

Ausi Mathapelo had a handsome son a year older than Treasure, named Mpho. He was like an older brother to Treasure. He called her Tré. He had thick black hair braided in cornrows, and he had a Brooklyn look. His top three interests were music, hip hop culture and girls, and his charming ways could get him anything.

That Valentines' weekend turned out to be so much fun. Treasure was blown away by Mpho's collection of thousands of mp3s, from American rap artists like JayZ, 2PAC, and Notorious BIG to local jazz and house music. The two teens were spellbound by booming beats, harmonious vocals and witty lyrics making their feet and hips move without permission. Music opened up whole new levels of emotion and sensation for them. Just by listening, they could escape into a timeless, trancelike place. Together, they created an endless playlist in WinAmp, with all of their favourite songs.

"I wish this song would never end," Treasure said about fifty times as she smiled and leaned against Mpho's shoulder.

“Don’t worry, Dr Tré,” he laughed, “I have loads more that I know you’ll love.”

AFTER VALENTINES’, GOING to Mpho’s house became a regular weekend arrangement. It was easy because he lived so close to the school, and he always greeted her on sight and asked her to come over, which made her feel welcome. On weekends they danced happily while doing their laundry and other chores around the house.

One cold Saturday in March, even the tree stems were shielded in fog.

Treasure and Mpho spent the day indoors listening to music. Mpho’s mother had some errands to do in Bloemfontein, so they had the entire house to themselves.

Evening arrived, and they watched a stream of movies on a two-seater couch feeling cozy and peaceful under their blankets. After a while, Treasure became aware of waves of testosterone coming from Mpho. The vibe between them had changed. Her glossy brown eyes flashed with shy curiosity in the dark room.

He had been admiring her all day, and she couldn’t have made it easier.

Her body was clearly outlined in a pink satin wrap gown. His eyes flowed around her curvaceous body like a famished puppy barking for a bone. He tried in vain not to look below her waist. She stood up to go make some tea.

His eyes were glued to her legs.

Mpho took a silent deep breath to calm his body. His yearning was so intense that it would make a nun faint. *How is she doing this to me?* He wondered.

Treasure came back with her tea and he realised what it was that made her desirable. She was friendly, sweet and open-minded, but with an innocent yet somehow flirty look that had caught him in her web.

Treasure leaned against the door as Mpho’s gaze ate her alive. She smiled coyly. She knew what was on his mind. It scared her, but also animated parts of her body. The only person that had come close to her before was Romeo.

He had made her feel things that she wasn’t ready to fully respond to.

Mischief sparked naughty thoughts in her mind, and the words came out of her mouth before she could stop them.

“What’s your pleasure?” Her lips twitched slightly; she couldn’t believe what she had just said.

He looked at her and grinned. “What I want is right here; could you bring it closer...?”

She came over slowly and sat on the other end of the couch. He immediately

moved next to her and gazed at her as though he wanted to look deep into her trembling heart.

“I guess this isn’t a good time for this movie,” he whispered. He took her tea and put it down on the coffee table.

The warm air from his mouth touched her lips as he pulled her towards him.

He broke the ice with a kiss that left her lips wet. His hand was on her knee and the other around her waist, moving slowly, but out of control. He kissed her neck smoothly, moving down towards her breasts. He knew what to do without her saying a word. She felt awkward as he carried on.

She hadn’t done anything this blatant before. She had learned a couple of seductive moves from the nights she spent with Romeo, but he was really gentle. He would stop when he saw that she was getting uncomfortable. She missed him. Mpho was older and seemed more experienced. She couldn’t keep up with where his hands were. He stopped to move her cold hands towards his belt, as if to say she was in charge of unbuckling it. But the buckle was tricky and she felt too self-conscious to keep fiddling.

“I don’t know why I still have these pants on,” Mpho hinted, undressing her, but Treasure had lost her voice.

Mpho took off her pyjama pants, and then pulled her down to rest on his thighs. Her legs were around his waist when suddenly his own pants also disappeared.

I’m naked! What’s happening now? She tried to keep her cool. She couldn’t explain what she felt; she was hot and cold; her mind was toying with her.

Her mother’s words rang in her ears. *Stay away from boys!*

She tried to pull away slowly but saw hunger and deprivation in his eyes, which made her feel sorry for snubbing him. *Maybe we can*

have a little fun, just don't go too far.

He caressed her softly.

“Relax, I won't hurt you. You do want me, right?” His voice slid over her ear.

She wasn't sure what he really meant so she just nodded. He kissed her

passionately and for a while she forgot all about her surroundings as he worked her up, filling her body with tempting sensations. She was annoyed with herself but oddly pleased with her body, despite all the sweat coming off her. He placed her hand at the top of her thighs and encouraged her to touch herself, while he nuzzled her breasts. It was intoxicating. She felt her head rolling back and her body inviting more sensual play.

All of a sudden, in one swift movement, he moved her around and down, onto her back, and sat on top of her. He looked almost drugged; it was a bit scary.

He moved his hand up between her thighs, directing his middle finger until it was deep inside her. She squirmed uncomfortably.

“Relax; this will ease the path,” he murmured.

“Hang on...” Treasure tried to rebuff him. *I'm not so sure about this.*

“Let it happen,” he encouraged, holding her close and firm, kissing her to make her focus on his lips. Treasure felt herself succumbing. The voices in her head had conflicting ideas.

In a way, it's like payment for staying here for free. Maybe I owe him...

Rubbish! How often does he do this? Is he always seducing virgins?

Hey, do yourself a favour. Don't be lame about this. Everyone else is doing it; it can't be that bad.

How would you know? You've never done it before! You could get pregnant!

Exactly, you've never done it before. How will you ever know? What will you do when you finally get with Alex? What if he laughs at you?

They were so close they could be sharing the same heartbeat. She closed her eyes and tried to relax her body as she felt Mpho's penis enter her. It went in, up to a point. He started sighing and moaning as he slowly moved inside her.

She wasn't sure how to respond and tried to move along with its rhythm, which Mpho seemed to appreciate.

Her body was really indulging this foreign object. She was preoccupied with its invasion; she could feel nothing else. It had seized her by the core and it

had all her attention, but she was uncertain about what she was supposed to be feeling, beyond a vague need to pee. Mpho's body was veiled in sweat; he kept moaning and saying things under his breath, like "Oh, yeah baby."

"Let me free you; let me have you!" Okay, Mpho was clearly enjoying this way more than she was.

Treasure grimaced and almost yawned. She was no longer enjoying this, but she didn't say a word.

Then a stab of pain hit.

"Ow," she exclaimed.

He must have been doing something very wrong because her friends didn't say it would be this painful. She realised that she hardly knew anything about what was happening inside her.

"Hey, it's okay, it's normal. It will start to feel good, I promise," Mpho whispered, breathing slowly to lengthen each moment, trying to push further into her.

The room was stuffy with precipitation.

How could she ask him to get off her?

He kept pushing and pushing, until it felt to her like he broke through something. The pain was shockingly unkind. *Is there a bone in there? Did he break it?* It became harder for her to bear the agony. Every movement hurt.

She felt her body soaring as she dissociated from the pain.

If only we had money, this would never have happened. I would be at home talking to Alex.

All she wanted was for this thing to be over, to be alone, but Mpho went on like a greedy fox until he was satisfied. His loud sigh as he came sickened her. He slowly pulled out and started cleaning himself.

Treasure hid her face with trembling hands and felt tears rolling down her cheeks. She didn't cry very often but this was too much for her.

“Are you okay?” he whispered eventually. She shook her head.

He quickly went to fetch a warm wet towel for her. He switched on the light and watched her as she wiped her face.

Idiot, what the hell is he doing looking at me?

“Excuse me, I need to clean myself,” she said sharply. “Can you keep the lights off?”

“I just thought you would see better if-”

“No man-”

“Why didn’t you tell me you’re a virgin? *WAS* – I mean – *WERE* – shit, sorry... this is all coming out wrong...”

Treasure shook her head.

He must have known, with all the things he said? He knew exactly what to say, how to seduce me...

She walked away from him to the spare bedroom, where she should have been all along.

Without warning, little streams of blood and water ran out of her and down her legs. *It can’t be my period again; how is that possible? The last one ended four days ago.* She went back to the bathroom and cleaned herself as thoroughly as she could. On the way back to the bedroom, she passed Mpho heading to the lounge. With a stab of guilt and anger, she ignored him, and the door to her room.

A Mxit message was flickering on her phone. It was from Alex.
<Hey baby, how’s your weekend? I miss you so much. Please come back home. I saw your Dad today and he told me you should’ve come home this weekend but you chose to stay there. Is everything okay?>

Could he be sensing what she had done?

<Hi honey, I’m okay, I think I’m coming down with a flu. I didn’t want to travel sick. I miss you. I’ll be home before you know it. I wish I could come now!>

She meant it. She sank deeper under her blankets and hot tears burned their way down her cheeks. She had wanted to give Alex her virginity, but now it was too late.

Did I just make the biggest mistake of my life? I’m not in love with this guy!

How could I be so stupid? He's dating at least two other girls, probably all having sex... Oh my God... What if I get pregnant? What have I done?

She was so inconsolable that she couldn't forgive herself. She had sold her soul to the devil. The familiar anxiety clutched at her stomach and made it hard to sleep.

Mpho stayed in the TV room and buried the rest of his night in bad action movies and beer.

CHAPTER 9

Live light

- Molemo G. Kalaka

EARLY SUNDAY MORNING, Treasure hopped out of bed and packed her things to go back to the hostel. Mpho didn't speak to her or ask her how she was. He hadn't really done anything wrong, since she had agreed to it, but she felt that he had stolen a part of her.

Something in her had changed. She felt as if she had broken the girl code.

Although some of her friends were having sex, she felt like she was meant to keep her honour for someone she loved. All that hype about how wonderful sex was and how addictive it could be seemed nonsensical to her.

She felt confused and guilty.

Now that it's done, what's next? I hate this feeling.

One thing was certain, she didn't want to experience it again, nor did she want to answer questions about it. It was best that no one knew. It was bad enough that she had had a crappy experience, never mind having all of her friends gossiping about it.

Treasure picked herself up, kept her mouth shut and carried on with life.

Although she tried to act like nothing was wrong, her loud naughty side died for a while. She focused harder on her work and her writing at the school newspaper. She didn't speak about sex with her friends at all.

At the same time she missed her family and especially her Mom; she hadn't seen her since early in February. *I need to speak to her.* The Monday after she left Mpho, she called home. Tebello answered the phone; he was turning four that month. He didn't seem too keen to

talk to his big sister, so she asked to speak to her mother, but Tebello said, “She’s still sleeping.”

She must be too sick to come to the phone.

Treasure tried her Mom’s mobile phone next, but it was off. She sensed that

something bigger was going on. Her parents were fighting, or her mother was getting more sick, or probably a bit of both.

Treasure thought about confiding in Alex, but although he was a friend, she felt like she couldn’t offload her worries on him. She didn’t want the entire town knowing that she had a dysfunctional home. She was torn, because if she went home he would want to see her. She decided to stay at the hostel for as long as she could instead of going home.

NEARLY THREE WEEKS later, at the end of the term, Mpho came by the newspaper room at lunch time. He stood at the door and called: “Treasure, do you have a minute?”

She turned towards his sad face. “Why?”

“Sorry, am I disturbing you? Can we talk?”

NOW he wants to talk, after acting like I don’t exist? “Sorry I can’t; I—I have a deadline.” She walked towards the door to close it. “You got what you wanted, and then you said nothing. So what’s there to talk about?”

“I tried calling you,” he countered.

“Yeah? When?”

“Once, I stayed on the line until you answered, then I hung up.”

“Oh that’s very smart, Mpho! How does that count?”

“Hey, I chickened out!” His jaw tensed. “I’m here now, and I want to say something to you.”

“I don’t want to hear it.”

“Treasure, I didn’t know it was your first time.” *Seriously?* She stepped out past him and raced away to her hostel. He grabbed at her hand but she was too fast. He watched her bolt away, like a streak of lightning through dark clouds. The disappointment on her face had crushed him. *I really messed that up, damn. I just wanted to make her feel better.* He stood for a moment with his head hanging, and then trudged away down the long hallway.

Treasure hadn't expected Mpho's gesture. She still felt guilty about everything that had happened with him. She wasn't sure if she was ready for

his sudden renewed friendship. *Maybe I should give him a chance. Let's see if he comes to the netball courts this afternoon. He knows my practice times.*

AFTER THE MATCH, she saw a group of her friends, including Molly and Lintle, standing under a willow tree near the courts.

"Treasure!" Lintle called out. "That was a hard game you guys played.

I saw you running for your life. Those girls are built like men. Complete animals!"

"I'm so unfit, and the heat was suffocating me most of the game," Treasure answered while huffing and puffing. "I thought you guys went to town."

"Well, money's a little tight so we thought it was better to come and support you. Besides, there are some good-looking guys around today."

Lintle had a wandering eye. Treasure took a water bottle from her friend's hand and blended in with the crew as they surveyed the other spectators. The game had been an hour long and Mpho was already gone. *Well what do you know; he couldn't wait 60 minutes?*

After a good laugh with her friends, she made her way to the hostel and ran a cold bath, which was her routine after long days. The bath cooled the fires in her mind, especially when she thought of her mother and the illness that wasn't going away. She prayed that her Mom was okay; she would find out soon enough.

CHAPTER 10

Family teaches you the principles of any relationship.

– Thabo Edwick Phamotse

TREASURE ARRIVED HOME in time for dinner. Her Gran (Thato's mother) was visiting them earlier than usual this year. Had she come because of Thato?

She and Thabo were acting like polite strangers and no one mentioned her mother's illness, so Treasure hesitated to ask.

The kids were sitting and watching TV while waiting to be called in for supper.

Mrs Mohapi laid out the silverware, not saying a word. She had baked some delicious chicken with all the trimmings, but her husband didn't seem to notice. Not once did he mention her cooking, even while they ate.

Treasure's Gran watched them sadly. Treasure saw that something dark was growing between her parents, and that her Granny was seeing it too.

After dinner Thabo excused himself and disappeared. Thato and her Mom washed up while listening to her favourite old jazz music, like Bob James, the best of Sankomota, and Stimela.

While they were all distracted, Treasure made her way to see Alex at their favourite street corner, under an oak tree about a hundred metres away.

As she arrived, Alex was chatting to someone on his phone; she didn't want to disturb so she sat alongside him and kept quiet for a while, waiting for him to finish his conversation. She didn't have much time until Mrs Mohapi would start looking for her.

Alex was so deeply engrossed in his conversation that 30 minutes later, Treasure stood up to leave. She felt rejected once again but didn't want to show

it; she didn't want to be the jealous side chick. However, her disappointment was evident. "I'll leave you to it..." she said quietly and slowly walked away with her head down.

His life is so damn busy. I don't just want to be another item on his to-do list.

As she sped up a loud voice said, "Will I see you again this weekend?" She shrugged, blinking hard. He ran up behind her, caught her by the hand, and as she turned to face him, he pulled her in and kissed her. This kiss had been brewing inside them for a long time. His mouth was warm and firm, moving tentatively over hers.

They stared at each other and stepped away. Treasure blushed.

He came closer again to kiss her. His arms slid around her and she felt his heartbeat pounding against hers. As soon as they heard footsteps, they broke free and ran in opposite directions. She found her mother standing in the doorway.

"Is everything okay?" Thato asked.

Treasure's heart was pounding and her body swimming in sensation. She shrugged. "No. Not really."

Alex didn't call that night.

SHE DIDN'T SEE him until Monday afternoon when she went with her friends, including Chrissy, to buy his mother's famous bunny chow at the Mohapi house.

As they walked in through the garden, they saw him working with no shirt on. The sun shone down on the sweat streaming down his muscular back, disappearing below his belt; slowly he ripped out weeds with his bare hands.

He didn't realize that they were just behind him.

Chrissy ignored him, but Treasure stared. She loved seeing this side of him—

the strong, masculine side. He was built like a soccer player, with muscular legs, rock hard abs, and a smile that could win presidential votes one day. His mom interrupted her thoughts.

“Hi ladies, how are you all? Chrissy, nice to see you dear.”

She spoke happily to Chrissy as she packed their meals. Chrissy didn't mention her breakup with Alex, but she didn't want to speak to him, so they had to leave. Treasure lagged behind hoping that Alex would take notice, but he had his headphones on and appeared to be 'too busy' to look up.

Treasure didn't dare tell Chrissy what had been going on. She tried to keep her distance so that she wouldn't feel any guilt, but each time their eyes met, her heart would stop for a second. The late night chats, Alex waiting for her every holiday to pick her up at the bus stop, everything they had shared came flashing back.

That evening Mr Mohapi called Treasure to the kitchen to announce,

“I don't think anyone has told you yet; we're leaving Libanon and moving to Secunda. We found a house in Evander.”

“Dad, we can't!”

“Excuse me? It's final; all the arrangements have been made. We're moving by the end of Easter. We've found schools there for the young ones and you'll continue at boarding school as normal.”

Treasure gaped at him. *How selfish; why would he break us away from what we know? Why didn't Mom say anything? They didn't even discuss it with me!*

“I've got a new job, and the house there is better. It's good that you're here because you can help us with the packing and moving.

You're old enough to do as much as Lebo does now. We start packing tomorrow."

She was fuming. *Is Dad the only person that matters in this family? He can go alone; it's his job not ours!*

She felt like shooting him. She had never thought this would happen, just as she was getting closer to Alex. How would she tell him what had happened?

Her heart was breaking into a million tiny pieces. She felt her stomach burning; her tears came suddenly and her voice dried up.

She went to her room and cried in frustration, struggling with her feelings of anger and misery. Her sisters wouldn't understand why she was so attached to the place when she was hardly ever there, so it was pointless confiding in

them.

She messaged Alex. He asked her to meet him later.

MIDNIGHT CAME.

She sneaked out of the house and went to the tree on Oak Street where he was waiting for her. They spoke softly and walked to his house. His parents had built a granny flat for him outside, near the dining room, so that he could walk in and out without disturbing anyone in the main house – another advantage of being a guy. They got comfortable in his bedroom, both at peace as they spooned in silence.

"Treasure, things will work out; don't worry so much," he said gently.

All she could think about was how she would be alone, with no one like him to come home to. He turned over, took her hand and wove his fingers around hers.

They stared at each other for a long time, moving closer until there wasn't the slightest gap. His bed was warm and comfortable and she trusted him with all of her body and soul; not once did she feel insecure with him. He kissed her softly, and they melted into each other like two halves of a whole.

They were in their own little world for the next few hours. For the first time, she understood the difference between having sex and making love.

He never said a word but looked at her tenderly throughout. It was almost like his body was cemented to hers.

She didn't want to spoil the moment, but she wanted him to say something, anything.

Is this our goodbye; is this him affirming that he loves me as much as I love him? Or is he just having what he always wanted with me?

Whatever it was, it was beautiful. Everything was in order; it seemed effortless and natural. But human beings always get in the way of letting things work themselves out.

The moonlight was making way for the sunrise, and the birds started to chirp.

Morning arrived, and they parted reluctantly to get dressed.

Alex walked her home and they pretended to be jogging. He started making jokes so that they wouldn't seem tense. Mr Mohapi was watching them from the living room window. As soon as they noticed him, Alex turned back and went home; she walked in huffing and puffing.

"Early morning you had today; are you working out for a competition?"

"Oh no Dad, I just want to be healthy like you," she responded, smiling.

"Okay good; please make your mother some tea."

Treasure gladly made breakfast for her parents and gave her Gran her famous sandwiches with lots of blueberry syrup and butter.

She was riding high on adrenalin from lack of sleep, but it was a night well spent. She couldn't stop remembering and daydreaming about it for a very long time. It had seemed perfect. She felt so happy and buoyant and calm.

CHAPTER 11

To travel is better than to arrive. The journey is life...

A WEEK LATER, the family's big move to Secunda was already underway.

As much as the house in Libanon had been large with a substantial yard, this new house was small, warm and welcoming. Treasure realized that she had a lot of stuff; there were no built-in cupboards or extra storage space.

The kids had to share bedroom space and everyone took turns using the one bathroom. But at least the family could spend more time together because of the smaller space.

With all the packing and moving, Treasure had hardly seen Alex at all since that magical Tuesday morning. She wanted to stay connected to him, but it was a challenge when she had to hide the truth from her parents. She had no excuse to stay at his house during the move. Her Dad was suspicious as it was. She spent all her spare time on Mxit, and sometimes he caught her floating around smiling.

Luckily he wasn't around very much for the last week of holidays. He kept coming and going to and from Westonaria, refusing to let anyone go with him. At some point he hid all the Easter eggs in the small yard for the kids to find that weekend, but forgot to inform anybody.

Treasure worried that things would only get harder. Secunda was far from Westonaria, but that wasn't as much of an issue as money was; she had a feeling that she wouldn't see Alex again for a long time. It depressed her and made life seem unfair. She could only blame her Dad.

THABO ARRIVED WITH the last of their things on Sunday, and everyone was on edge. He had a strange vibe and they could feel it, even though he didn't speak much.

"Did you find the eggs?" he asked tersely.

"Which eggs?" asked Lebo, startled.

"Damn it, the eggs in the yard. You didn't think to look?"

"You didn't say anything..."

"Ugh, why do I bother," he muttered and stalked off in contempt.

So the kids went hunting for the Easter eggs on Sunday afternoon.

Treasure joined them half-heartedly. They were crushed and mushy and some had soil in them. She gave the two she found to Grace and Tebello.

"HAVE YOU PACKED your things? Holidays are over," Thabo barked at Treasure that evening. "You need to catch the first taxi to Wepener tomorrow."

"Yes Dad, I'm ready. But the principal said that I won't be allowed back if my school fees aren't paid in full. They haven't been paid since January."

Her father looked at her coldly. "I said get ready for school, and stop telling me about that uneducated man."

That night, her parents fought blatantly. Thabo accused his wife of being a witch and of destroying everything they had had. Thato was too exhausted to reply.

Wepener

Treasure was excited for winter school, which was held in Bloemfontein every year for Grade 12s. Her friends spoke about it as though the whole point was to hang out with boys at clubs. Although she was 6 months away from her final year at school, she really wanted to be in on this trip. She even paid for it with money her Dad had given her for school fees. She would have to find a way to pay the difference, but she didn't let herself stress. She was looking forward to meeting people, mostly boys, and making friends.

Her cousins on her Mom's side, Ntolo and Shoaby Tau, had a flat in Bloemfontein. They had invited her to stay with them for the two weeks, starting from 1 July. They were from Mphahlele's Hoek in Lesotho but were studying at the University of the Free State. She had spent some time with them at their Lesotho home but she didn't know what to expect from them outside of their mom's shadow.

Secunda

On the last day of school in June, most of her friends had packed and left for their big Bloemfontein adventure a week early. They were probably having a blast while Treasure would be stuck at home for the first week of holidays.

But she was worried about her mom and she needed to be there for her when she could. She had packed her sports bag with her usual casual clothes and got to Secunda via taxis.

She was disturbed by how much worse everything seemed.

Mr Mohapi kept himself busy, always going in and out the house and even travelling to Carletonville, near Westonaria. It was as if he had another family there. "I'm leaving for a few days; I have a lot of work back in Joburg," he would announce.

Thato would look relieved, but sad at the same time. She never spoke badly of him, but at times she would call him 'a stubborn man'. As this was the understatement of the century, Treasure would roll her eyes and say nothing.

There were days when her father would leave the family with no food or money. Somehow, even on those days, Mrs Mohapi would make sure that her husband had food when he got home. She had her

pride. He would thank her, but any hugs and kisses from him had faded long ago.

Treasure hated that he was so horrible to her Mom. What is marriage really?

Didn't they vow to take care of each other through sickness and in health?

Her mother was increasingly thin and weary. She stayed in bed later, and when she got up, she didn't want to go anywhere. Her smile wasn't as bright anymore and she spoke of death often, and of how forgiveness was important. Treasure tried cheering up her Mom with pictures of herself and stories about the things she would do for her when she was rich and famous.

Mrs Mohapi seemed to love her stories.

Lebo would often talk about how their mother needed to eat more, but otherwise she seemed angry with her parents, like she felt no pity for the mess they had created.

The day before she left, Treasure came outside as her Mom was busy hanging up laundry. She was dying to ask her what was really going on with her Dad and why the drama between her parents was just getting worse, but she didn't know where to begin. She loved her mother so much that this situation was killing her; she just wanted to understand it. But speaking to her is like playing Minesweeper! You never know when you'll hit a sore spot.

"Ma, can I help you? There's a lot of washing and I don't think you'll get done today."

"I have all the time in the world, dear," Thato smiled wanly. "The sun's up so don't worry; we still have tomorrow."

"Well, let me help you anyway." She began to hang some clothes. "How's Granny?"

"She's well, my child. Did you know that your Granny is 78 now?"

"Yoh! She's very strong for her age."

"Your grandfather was strong too. He was thirteen years older than her but he worshipped her. They had lots of cattle on their farm – do you remember?"

But my brother was always in jail for stealing chickens or cars."

They laughed and spoke of the holidays they had in Lesotho when Treasure was a baby. She couldn't remember much, but the joy on her mother's face while reminiscing said it all. Love was hard; she had once had it for her husband but now it seemed very different.

Together they washed and hung everything, and most of it dried. As the sun set over the big Sasol towers, they sat together in the yard. "Mom, why is Dad so stressed?" Treasure finally asked.

For the first time, Thato opened up a little. “You know, things are hard for your father; his job transfer didn’t live up to what the contract promised.

This house is costing us a small fortune in rent. He wanted to get a car but we still can’t afford it. Your boarding fees cost us an arm and a leg. But you don’t need to worry; just focus on your studies. There’s only one more year.”

She smiled and reassured Treasure as if to end the conversation.

Treasure knew that wasn’t the entire story. Her Mom was good at keeping the darkness away; the truth was still buried deep within her. Treasure didn’t know how to dig it out, or how to make her see that she wasn’t a child anymore.

CHAPTER 12

The world is brutal when you have no knowledge. — Puseletso Juliet Phamotse-Lee

Bloemfontein, 1 July

Ntolo picked her up at the station. She looked glamorous and relaxed at the same time. “Hey girl! You’ve grown so tall!” They hugged and caught up on some family gossip on the way home. “How’s your mom doing?” Ntolo asked with concern. Treasure wasn’t sure how much she knew. “Um, she’s not bad. She still gets sick sometimes, but you know how strong she is.”

“Yes, she’s always been strong. Your Dad too. You’ve got good genes,”

Ntolo laughed.

And that was that. *Apparently Mom doesn’t tell her sister much either...*

Ntolo and Shoaby’s student flat was cozy with everything in place. It smelled good. “You’re welcome to have a drink; we have wine and beer... Go ahead and enjoy. We’re still cooking so relax; it’s going to be a great little holiday for you,” Ntolo said cheerfully. By mid-afternoon the flat was packed with couples and random friends.

They all laughed and joked for a while, but they also spoke about the racism at UFS. The university often made media headlines for all the wrong reasons.

Drinks and cigarettes were everywhere. Treasure held on to a glass of wine, which she refilled and sipped from all afternoon. She felt like she just needed to drink or smoke to fit in. The students didn't talk to her much though, besides asking her who she was. They had their own gossip and jokes.

Treasure wanted to visit her own friends, specifically Danny. She had met him at one of her netball games. He was a second year student at UFS.

They had been chatting for months on Mxit in Treasure's attempt to forget Alex, and he came to every netball game she played in Bloemfontein.

"Ntolo, one of my school friends has my stuff at her flat and I've called her brother to pick me up; I'll be back in two hours."

Ntolo nodded; she was so busy being a great hostess that she didn't question the details.

Downstairs, Danny had pulled up in his Jetta.

"Hey superstar, I thought your Dad wouldn't allow you to be in the big city.

Hop in! I'm glad you came," he grinned.

"Well, luckily he takes my education very seriously," laughed Treasure.

They went back to his place and Danny gave her a beer. It tasted odd to her but she was enjoying the buzz. They gossiped about Ntolo's friends, and she felt like she was part of the hip university crowd.

"Danny, you literally saved my life," she joked. "Drinking with couples isn't fun; they just kiss every chance they get!"

"If you like, you can come stay with me," Danny offered.

Treasure hesitated. "Um-"

“Hey, it’s no big deal. My brother left for Limpopo yesterday. I told him that you might be here,” he said with a warm-hearted smile.

She didn’t know what to say. It was a bit awkward; they were just friends, not a couple. Danny was cute but a bit too short, not that that mattered much, but she couldn’t imagine being his girlfriend.

She declined his offer to share a joint, and watched the sunset while downing her second beer. The next couple of hours flew past. Danny had another joint, and then took her back to her cousins’ flat.

“Hey I’m serious,” he reminded her. “If you aren’t comfortable here, call me and I’ll pick you up any time.” She thanked him, waved and walked away.

A surprise was waiting for her. Everybody was sleeping as she walked in.

Alcohol had tipped them over like dead fish in a dry riverbed.

There were so many people that she didn’t know where to sleep. She wanted to take a shower but was scared to make a noise. She went back outside and made the infamous call. Then she wrote a note and placed it in Ntolo’s phone cover.

Danny’s flat, 10:24 p.m.

“So what do you have in mind? Would you like to watch a movie or get more drinks? We need to eat, so either we have the pizza in the fridge, or better yet let’s go to Whispers...?”

“What’s Whispers?” Treasure had no idea, but she was keen to find out.

His face lit up. “Oh honey, just put on something sexy and some makeup and I’ll be your guide for the night.”

She was surprised at his reaction. She had NOTHING ‘sexy’ to wear and was a tomboy of note. She definitely had no makeup; her mother had never bought her any or taught her anything about it. She doubted they could afford it anyway...

She searched her old sports bag half-full of tracksuits and jeans and one red dress that she thought she might need for

church.

Danny was looking smart in blue jeans and a shirt; she felt a bit awkward and hoped that her dress would measure up. She took a quick shower, a bit nervous because his bathroom had no lock, but it seemed she had nothing to worry about.

Hmm...Not once has he made a move on me.

She relaxed a little and had another beer in the bathroom while smoothing cream on her freshly shaved legs. Danny went next door to ask his friends to join them.

CHAPTER 13

Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself.

– Philippians 2:3

WHISPERS WAS IN the heart of the city, but not exactly visible to the uninitiated. It was in an unassuming concrete building on a narrow street.

The bouncers kept the doors closed. Of course, those who knew it could probably find it blindfolded.

Treasure had never seen anything like this. She appraised the line: high profile executives, politicians, students, soccer stars, innocent kids intoxicated by the thrill of fun and freedom, and rundown men desperate to escape from their purgatory life, fuelled by their decaying hopes for the future. It was worse than she had imagined. She could barely tell the difference between pupils and prostitutes.

However, everyone seemed equally eager to pay the entrance fee to get in.

The queue was agonizingly slow. Eventually their group reached the front and Danny paid her cover.

Huge men with foreign accents manned the dance floor. The lights flickered so much she felt like she was seeing stars. Danny led her by the hand, gently pushing everybody out the way to make sure no one touched her. Somehow they all found seats close to the bar as a group of men stood and went

through a side door. *Hmm, must be a VIP area.* Treasure sat and ordered two double shots of Southern Comfort with juice. The music was incredibly loud but she didn't mind at all.

Within minutes the clock struck midnight: the lights changed colour and the music went dead. Shrieks of excitement rose from the audience. A huge coloured spot light lit up the stage, and BOOM!

They got an eyeful of strippers.

Young, tall, skinny, beautiful, fresh strippers. Girls wearing erotic lingerie.

They wore loads of makeup, but the lighting only made them look like supermodels on a catwalk. The masses cheered them on as they danced to the beat and worked the shiny poles effortlessly to much admiration.

Treasure couldn't believe that most of them were her age. *How did they even get into this business? How far do they go?*

As she watched them, she began to feel self-conscious about her own appearance. Danny caught her applying Zambuk balm on her lips and he smiled so much that she started laughing.

He shook his head. "You are beautiful, don't stress! Natural beauty." He winked. "THIS stuff, on the other hand, is what we guys call a night out.

Don't be shocked. Even girls can get addicted to this stuff. Enjoy and learn some tricks."

Treasure nodded. She couldn't judge these girls just for dancing. She'd already slept with someone she hardly knew. Moreover, after she finally got together with the one she really loved, he seemed too busy to care when she moved away. She had been a fool. She sipped her drink and kept her eyes on the entertainment.

The music was somehow getting louder, the cue for bras to come off.

Treasure was both excited and astonished. Parts of her wanted to try it right there, but she knew it was just the alcohol talking.

Her attention was attracted back to the side door near the bar when a tall dark woman emerged and called out: “No more right now!”

Two shifty-looking men and a young stripper were standing with her.

She ushered several other men away. She seemed to be the manager. Treasure didn't know what she meant, but as the others walked away onto the dance floor, the two men and the stripper were steered upstairs.

What an odd VIP arrangement. She could only imagine what was happening up there.

“Did you see that?” she asked Danny.

“Sure,” he shrugged. “Don't worry about it.”

This must be the norm. *Just relax; don't spoil the fun for anyone.* The drinks kept coming; Treasure didn't have to spend any money so she wasn't complaining. She laughed as she realised how much fun she was having, at a strip club of all places. *My friends will be SO jealous.*

She had lost count of the drinks and many shots in between. When she started losing her balance, she knew that she was more than just tipsy, and she needed to pee. She walked towards the bathroom.

The line was incredibly long. *Do they only have one cubicle in there?*

The manager she had seen near the bar noticed her discomfort.

“Hey, my beauty, come here. There are plenty of bathrooms and privacy upstairs. It looks like you're not feeling too good. Come up!”

She seemed warm and friendly, so Treasure quickly followed her up the stairs into a private room with an en suite bathroom.

“Oh, thank you, it looks great here. Is this a hotel?” she asked jokingly.

“Okay, but you need to hurry up. And don't mess up my floor.”

“Yoh,” Treasure muttered. *Okay then.* As she went into the bathroom she felt an odd spacey sensation in her head. It was a strange but not unpleasant feeling; she was having a good time. *I can't wait to see the male strippers.*

Guaranteed fun!

Suddenly the brightness in the room made her eyes hurt. Her vision became blurry. She found she couldn't stay up on her feet and sat down heavily on the toilet seat as her thighs gave way.

Whoa, what's happening to me?

She had never felt this ill. She managed to get up by grasping the sink and pulling herself towards it. The bathroom began to spin around her. She drank water from the tap but couldn't hold it in. Throwing up violently into the toilet, she felt like she had just stepped off a wild roller coaster ride.

“Is everything alright in there?” the woman called.

Treasure managed a weak “yes” although it was definitely not.

She stumbled out of the bathroom and looked around slowly. On her left near a curtained window was a single bed. To her right there was an expensive leather couch and a mini bar stacked with alcohol. *So these are the VIP*

rooms.

She wobbled her way to the door just as the manager walked in looking sympathetic.

“Shame, my dear! You drank a bit too fast, hey? Don't worry, it happens to everyone. Here, drink this. You'll be good to go in no time. Come, sit here.”

She gave Treasure a pink pill and a glass of ice-cold water and guided her to the couch. Treasure drank quickly in hopes of feeling better. She sank down on the couch, expecting to recover, but she just felt woozy and covered her eyes. Every time the door opened and closed, the music downstairs seemed to be louder. Every sound that came in made her head ache. Every time she opened her eyes, her tunnel vision was worse.

Danny can't see me like this; it won't give him a good impression of me at all.

Being his guest, she had to be on her best behaviour. And what about these people? Surely they needed the room. She couldn't take advantage of their hospitality much longer. Feeling hot and sleepy, she took off Danny's jacket and tried to blow air on her face. Moments later she heard the door slam.

Maybe the manager is going to get help.

Slowly she lay down on the couch. How long had she been here? The seconds felt like hours. She realised she could barely feel her body anymore.

She was too lethargic to try and move her limbs. *Oh Lord, this can't be right.*

I hope that manager comes back soon.

Two people came into the room. She couldn't see if they were male or female, but they seemed to be talking about her. *Thank goodness!* They spoke softly and moved slowly around the room. *Everything's going to be okay.*

She allowed herself to drift off.

CHAPTER 14

THE DOOR CLOSES.

The lights are off.

Someone is standing in front of her.

Her drool is on the couch. Under her face. Yuck.

She opens her eyes groggily but cannot lift her head.

“Hey, girl. Try not to make a noise.”

A man's voice.

Two more people stand over there.

The earth is spinning so fast.

Are they going to help me?

“I'm going to make you feel like a real woman.”

Wait, what?

What's going on?

What does he mean?

“Tonight, you are my dark angel.”

She tries to sit up, but he pushes her back down.

This means trouble.

He smells. A horrible heavy beer funk mixed with his body odour.

His belt falls onto her feet.

She tries to kick it off but

Her legs are glued to the floor.

Her hands are sweating.

“Please leave me”

He pulls her roughly to the floor.

The freezing cold floor.

He is undressing and laughing.

“Are you ready for me?

I've been waiting for this all night!

That bitch made me pay good money.

Now I see why.

Do you know who I am?

Ha ha ha

I'm soon to be a very happy man.

You will show me how badly you want me

and I will provide the menu!

Now show me that pussy.”

Her heart chokes her neck.

She looks around

For someone to help her.

Where is that woman?

“Please don’t!”

Her voice is hoarse

Her protests are feeble.

She starts shaking, crying

He rips her dress off in pieces.

He pushes her legs apart.

She tries pushing him away.

Kicking and screaming hoarsely

It just entrals him.

The two others come closer,

They take her hands binding them together with rope.

They raise her legs up towards her head holding her open.

They will all have their way with her.

He is holding his penis.

He pulls her head forward

He pushes it inside her mouth.

“Suck me well and I will reward you.

Don’t try anything funny.

I don’t play games.”

She is choking on him

Her own tears blinding her

She cannot move, or anything.

The next one is undressing

He has the biggest penis she has seen.

He is pushing against her pelvis

She cannot see

The first is still busy in her mouth

Who are these people?

The second is entering her

It is much too big

Why is he pushing so hard

He will tear me

She feels pain against her spine.

Trying to kick and push

Making trouble.

The next is turning her onto her knees

Probing her roughly

Oh god, leave that alone

That is the wrong place

He is inside her anus!

Releasing the devil into her skin into her soul.

Their semen all over her body and face

They beat her if she closes off her body;

Minutes take hours as they take countless turns repeatedly *If only they would shut up*

“Oh baby just give it to me,

I’m so glad you chose me,

You taste so good

Baby say you love me! Say it!

Say my name!

Do you want my dick? Harder?

Come for me baby, damn you feel so good!”

Breathing on her like a race horse,

“Get ready, angel, it’s coming...

I want you to taste why life is so good!”

She is dying.

Gagging on the thing in her mouth

It ejaculates all over her face

Disgusting and bitter,

She is spitting

He slaps her, laughing.

Someone, save me

Two more men are here

To have their way with her.

Worse each time

Her soul is leaving her body

Hot and cold.

Giving up.

Kill me, please...

The lights are back on.

The woman is back.

“Honey, here is your fee.

Life is hard work.

You just paid your dues.

Get up, get up, get up.

Leave my suite.”

Someone unties her hands

Shoves her dress into her arms.

Bitch

She needs to fight,

With all the rage and hate lost in her

But her body has no life.

She rakes herself up
Off the bloody floor
Makes her way to the door.
One is there
“Angel, I always tip well.
Here are your drinks.”
He shoves R50 in her mouth.
And he pushes her down the stairs.
Screaming for her life
She keeps her head down
She cannot move.
All she wants is to go home
Someone, please help me.
The dance floor is full of people
Someone is running towards her
“OH, MY GOD”
It’s Danny
“Treasure, why are you naked?
Who did this to you?
I’ve been looking for you for two hours!
Where did you go?
Oh, my god
I’m so sorry.”
He covers her with his shirt
Pulls her up onto her knees.
She has no fight in her,
No words,
Just defeat.

His friends are around her, carrying her out.

She wants no man near her

But there is no choice.

CHAPTER 15

Rape damages your soul; it takes away your sense of humanity; it creates a life filled with fear. Don't let its memory shape the rest of your life. Life is still a choice...

Danny's flat

At first she was groggy. Her body was heavy and her head felt like a bus had run over it. She needed the bathroom but her legs were in so much pain.

“Where am I? Am I dead?”

“You’ve been asleep for two days,” whispered Danny. “How are you feeling?”

I didn’t want to wake you.”

She stared at him in confusion.

“It’s me, Danny. You’re at my place. Do you remember? I switched off your phone so you could sleep.”

She shook her head, and eventually he left. Then everything came rushing back.

She saw herself on the floor with people all over her. Flashes of darkness...

the cold...the smell...the voices...the blood... the men.

Agony writhed inside her. *Why? Why me? Lord, how did I wrong you? Please show me my sin!* She whispered as grief overtook her and her whole body heaved with sorrow. The images kept coming. *Lord, please make it stop!* She curled up in a ball and wept.

IT WAS DARK when Danny came back in. She was lying on the bed, staring blankly at the ceiling.

“Please just take what you want and finish me off.”

“Hey, no, don’t speak like that. Let me help you. I think you need a doctor.”

“Please, just leave, GET OUT, get away from me!”

“Treasure. I’m trying to help, I really am.”

“Please just take me home; that’s all I ask.”

“Should I take you to your cousin?”

“No, please, I can’t go there.”

Danny surveyed the anxious wreck before him. She really couldn’t go

anywhere like this.

“Okay, you can stay here as long as you need. I’ll even move out and give you space, if that’s what it takes. But, if you’re going to hide away, in the dark, whatever happened to you will eat you up.”

Treasure shrugged.

“Please tell me about it. I can help you. But you need to let me in.”

That night was the only thing she wanted to forget—to obliterate from her memory—and the only thing Danny seemed to want to talk about.

She shook her head slightly in anguish. “Are men even human? What do you THINK happened?”

He grimaced and tried to take her hand. She pulled away roughly. “Please keep your hands to yourself!”

“Treasure, enough. I’m not here to hurt you. All things pass; just talk to me!

You need to deal with this.” Danny started clutching at straws.

“One day you’ll wake up and this will all be a bad dream; you’ll be happy and married.”

“Oh please.” There was nothing happy about marriage; if what her parents had was a marriage then she didn’t want any part of it. “Why did you take me to that place? You knew what it was. Did you think what it would be like for me? I’ve never even been to a club before and you take me to a brothel?”

“I’m sorry, Treasure. I had no idea... I mean, you didn’t tell me; I couldn’t know. I’m sorry.”

There was silence for a while.

“I should have asked you, and I should have escorted you to the bathroom. I regret it all, all of it. I wish we hadn’t gone. But I need to know what happened, so I can do something now.”

“What’s the point? You can’t undo what happened.”

“But we can report it, and you can get it off your chest. It’s eating you up,”

he prompted. “So, we were watching the strip show, and you said you needed the bathroom, and then you were in the queue, and then after a while

I couldn’t see you anymore, and I tried to call you but your phone was off.”

Treasure’s mind flashed back to the strange man that had stood in front of her and the shadow of Danny in the dark brought up all kinds of images in her mind. She realised that this wouldn’t go away. “Look, Danny, there’s nothing you can do about it and I don’t EVER want to talk about it. Just...just fuck off with your questions. I’d rather be dead than relive that shit.”

Danny’s face turned white with deep sorrow and confusion. Nevertheless, he tried to remain composed. He was desperate to help her somehow because he truly cared, but it was going to be difficult to earn back her trust.

DAYS PASSED. SHE hadn’t improved. She couldn’t walk properly and she was crying each time she came from the bathroom. Danny didn’t know what to do, and it was driving him insane that she wasn’t eating or talking. He had kept her phone off so that she could rest, and he had no idea what to say to anybody calling anyway.

Treasure kept on mourning and condemning herself. Hopeless rage circled in her gut relentlessly. She hated her stinking body and barely got out of bed except to pee.

This all happened because I lost my virginity instead of staying away from men. My parents trusted me, and look what I've done. Why didn't I listen?

This pain is so much worse than what I felt after Mpho. Now every man has the key to use me. This is my punishment for being disobedient... and drinking like a cheap whore... accepting drinks from strangers! Nothing is ever free.

Look at me;

I'm lying in a man's flat hoping for sympathy...

She had lost her hope in life; it all seemed meaningless.

ON FRIDAY MORNING Danny called an in-house doctor.

“Hi Treasure, my name is Dr. Botha. Your friend here called me to help you.

Please, I know you may not be ready to talk, but I need to check if you're physically okay. The world is a cruel place and there are so many diseases, and we have to be extra careful.” Treasure looked up at the doctor who was trying to put her at ease.

“Do whatever you have to,” Treasure rasped. “You're getting paid right?”

I didn't call you.”

She knew that she needed help, especially with the pain, but she was constantly reminding herself that she had to go back to school soon. Dr Botha took some blood from the tip of her finger and gave her some pills. She also wanted a urine sample, but Treasure couldn't stand the pain of urinating so she claimed to have an empty bladder. Dr Botha offered to examine her, but she couldn't handle the thought of that either. She felt unclean and abnormal.

“Well, your blood seems clean,” Dr Botha reassured her after doing a basic AIDS test. “But please, you must do another AIDS test in three months. This is still the window period. Use condoms religiously please.

I'm also going to give you a prescription. Please drink everything until the medication is complete. And please,

Treasure,” she said earnestly, “you need to see a psychologist soonest or speak to your parents. I know this is rough.

But whatever happened to you, you may also need to report it to the police, so at least think about it.”

Treasure looked at the doctor apathetically. She just wanted her out of her sight. She wasn’t going to explain this situation to the police or her parents.

That is not going to happen. I’ve sinned; let me die in my sin, she whispered to herself. She called Danny back in, and he walked out with the doctor.

Treasure loathed every inch of her body. The smell wafting around her made her want to shred her own skin off her bones. She turned on the hot water in the shower and tried to wash the sin out of her. She took sea salt and scrubbed with it until her skin burned, but nothing could compare to the volcano that was brewing in her spirit. The water ran until the geyser ran out, but she stayed in the cold water. She heard Danny moving around and decided it was time to face him.

“Please pass me some towels,” she asked through the closed door. He obliged. She stepped out dressed, and wrapped herself up in a huge blanket.

She didn’t want him seeing even a tiny piece of her skin.

“I’m glad you’re finally talking to me; I was beginning to think you had

swallowed your tongue.” He looked at her with eyes full of concern. “I made you supper—oxtail and veggies. I enjoy cooking; it helps me relax.”

What could you possibly be worried about? You’re a rich spoiled kid with too much time on your hands. Treasure was glad that he couldn’t hear her thoughts. She just looked at him and let him talk. He seemed to enjoy the sound of his own voice.

Danny served dinner. “I hope you like it; it took me the whole day to prepare.” He tried to make more small talk, but she had nothing to say.

She gazed outside and thought of how close to death she had come. She needed to call Ntolo. *She must be worried sick! But I'm not ready for a lecture or any judgment. I'll text her later.* All the nightmares and thoughts made her anxious; she felt like she was going mad.

Danny was brooding over his meal; he had hardly eaten a bite. His tea was ice cold. He couldn't hide his irritation and frustration any longer.

"I should have protected you, I should have called the police, and I should have killed all of them!"

He hit the table with his fist. She immediately went cold and her face paled.

"Danny, what happened was my fault, now eat and leave it alone."

She could never have imagined that winter school would be so disastrous.

She had left school to sit in a university class to improve her grades, but she hadn't even come close to the gates, never mind doing any school work. Her cousins were probably worried sick about her, but she was not ready to bring any shame on them.

What would they think of me? Now I'm hiding in a flat with a man I hardly know. Who have I turned into? My parents are going to kill me... they warned me so many times. All of Dad's stories about respectable females with good morals... my chances of becoming a strong leader are as good as dust!

"Listen." Danny tried again. "You can stay as long as you need to, but please, you need to explain to me what happened. I honestly care and I cannot sleep another night listening to you cry yourself to sleep. It kills me too!"

"We have nothing to talk about," Treasure stated coldly. "Now I'm going to

pack. I'm leaving in the morning. I need to focus on my school work and forget this entire trip. Once I get back to the hostel, I would prefer that we cut all contact. I won't be coming back here again."

He looked at her as if she had lost her mind. “No, Treasure, please don’t do that. You will force me to drive up and see you at school. Okay so make your choice, but I’m not letting you go just like that.”

“What gave you the idea that we’re a couple? We WERE friends. Please excuse me. I need to rest.”

“Look, whatever you want. I’ll take you back to Wepener once you’ve seen your cousin and said your goodbyes. You don’t have to use a taxi.”

That night Treasure went to bed with a heavy heart. She had no one to trust; everybody seemed to want something from her. Rape left a permanent scar and it felt as everybody could see what had happened. It seemed to her that money gave everybody the license to use her as prey.

Before I had sex, no one even looked at me, and now strangers can smell I’m no longer a virgin; they just take what they want and enjoy every minute of it. She felt like hiding her femininity, but how could she? It’s not worth being alive, she said repeatedly to herself.

TREASURE TOOK A taxi back to school despite Danny’s protests. She didn’t want to spend hours stuck in a car with him. She texted her cousins with apologies claiming that some nasty gastric flu had kept her in bed, and that her phone had died.

The hostel was mostly empty when she got back. She stayed there by herself for a week. She spent a lot of time sleeping, lying in bed or in the bath, feeling totally depressed.

Classes finally began and the first few weeks felt like a gruelling marathon of lectures for Treasure. Strings of students moved from building to building.

She hated every minute and every sexual joke in class made her sick. She preferred the smell of books, the soft sounds of footsteps and hushed voices, and that was all she could handle.

CHAPTER 16

Never live to hand your dreams over to the cemetery.

Secunda

It was a hot spring day; her Mom sat outside chatting to her Dad. Mrs Mohapi had made cookies and banana cake. They seemed to be having fun, although her Mom looked even thinner and her complexion was fading.

Treasure stood at the kitchen door, trying to keep her distance. She felt filthy inside, like she was no longer the child they had raised.

“Hey, missy, bring a camping chair and come join us. The sun’s lovely and we want to hear how you’re doing at school.” Her father sounded genuinely interested, but his happy tone wasn’t going to fool her. She knew how men were. She wasn’t buying his fake smirk. *He’s played the perfect gentleman too many times before.*

“Oh Dad, I had a long trip last night and I’m a little tired. You two seem just fine without me. We can catch up later.”

She sat in the kitchen and placed her head on the table. She felt dead inside.

What if my parents can see right through me? Mom always says a person’s life story is in their eyes. What would she see in mine? I need a shower; I probably smell like a mob of men...

Many of her text messages were unread. She knew they were from Alex.

She hadn’t seen him since April, five months before.

One read:<When you get my busload of messages, please call me or better yet, send me a picture of how hot you are.>

What a rude message... He only loves me when I’m gone and then he just wants sexy pictures of me. What does he think I am?

There was nothing she wanted from him. A man was the last thing she needed. She picked up the house phone and called him.

“Hi, I got your messages.”

“Hey, dear, you’ve been so quiet.”

The sound of someone calling her *dear* was nauseating.

“Well, I’ve been very busy.”

“Yeah? Me too! A lot has been happening. I’m leaving for Vaal Tech soon.

When will I see you?”

She knew what that meant. *When are we sleeping together?*

“I’m not sure. I’m glad things are perfect on your side. Have fun.

Goodbye.”

She slammed the phone down and went to her room. The last thing she needed was more Alex melodrama.

Lebo came into her bedroom that night displeased. “Did you get a chance to speak to Mom?”

“About what?” asked Treasure.

“Oh, if not, that’s fine.”

Treasure looked at her and waited. “Well, are you going to tell me what’s going on? Don’t tell me we’re moving again. We’ve only been here for five months.”

“I’m not really sure, but Mom hasn’t been well. She discharged herself from the hospital three days ago just so you could find her at home. She has a serious liver condition and it’s breaking her. And Dad’s not helping.”

“No, that can’t be true. She seemed so cheerful today, and she even baked.”

“Yes, that was all for you,” Lebo scoffed.

Treasure just shook her head. It was all too much to handle.

“I’ll speak to her later,” she sighed.

THE NEXT FRIDAY night, Treasure couldn’t sleep; the voices from her parents’ room got louder and louder. Was she hearing things...? She got up and went to stand by their door, hoping to disturb them.

“I told you not to speak to those people again, but you keep disobeying me!”

Her movements in the house had no effect. She knocked on the door and that didn't seem to shake them either.

“If you want to leave, go. I would have so much peace.” Her father's voice overpowered her mother's. “You're just a liability to this family. Who do you think you are? You are nothing here!”

Treasure was close enough to hear him thrashing her again; the sounds seemed to her to reverberate around the house.

“If you don't listen I will kill you!”

Is that monster behind the door really my father?

She was so scared for her mother. She knew how it felt to be trapped in a room with someone that hated every part of you, and to wait to be rescued.

That's enough.

She knocked loudly, and swung open the door.

WHY DO THINGS change? They used to be a perfectly respectable family.

Yes, things were always a little difficult. But this was total anarchy. Tension ran high in the house. The walls were closing in.

Thabo ignored his daughter the whole of Saturday. He had stepped away from her crying mother when she opened the door the night before, and told her to get out. She had replied, “No, you get out. We are not putting up with this anymore.” She felt strangely without fear, as if she didn't care what happened to her. Maybe he sensed this, because he pushed past her without another word and went to sleep in the lounge.

SUNDAY BROUGHT CLOUDS that punctuated the day with summer rain.

Treasure stayed in her room reading. There was a feeble knock on the door.

“I have to talk to you,” her mother said weakly and despondently. “I think you know what it’s about.”

Her mother had seen through her! All Treasure could hear was the pounding of her own heart in her ears. She felt desperate with fear. Should she just confess?

“I’m listening,” she said tensely.

Mrs Mohapi let out a sharp breath as though she had just been punched.

“Your father has kicked me out. He wants me not to communicate with anyone, not even my own family, and I refused. It’s time for me to leave.”

“Mom, he can’t chase you out. I’ll leave with you,” Treasure’s voice broke.

“Don’t do that; this is my doing. Let it be.”

“Where are you going to go?” Treasure wept.

“Don’t worry about that my child. I’m going to Embalenhle to stay with your great-grandmother. It’s only about 15 kilometres away. Please, keep your tears for the blessings that will come upon you. Don’t waste them on me, my daughter. This is life.”

Treasure struggled with her tears as she followed her frail Mom outside.

It was drizzling. Mr Mohapi stood at the gate with a sneer on his face. Most of her mother’s things were already in the street: a few pots and clothing.

She picked them up and arranged and rearranged them about herself like a Christmas tree. Treasure moved to help her, but her father spoke up.

“Don’t you dare. This is what happens when you disobey me.”

It began to pour with rain. Her Mom turned and mouthed “Goodbye.”

She turned away slowly in tears, her tiny body struggling to carry the big pots and bags of clothes. Treasure was torn. She felt like her entire life was falling apart. She could only

imagine what her Mom was feeling—the betrayal, and the heartache. The further her mother walked, the more she loved her.

The heavens seemed to cry with them. The rain didn't cease, not even for a moment. The rattle of pots and pans moved further away towards the taxi rank until her Mom disappeared.

Does God hear my prayers? God be with you, mother.

She looked at her father with his mocking eyes. How could he let her mother go just like that? She had been there for him through it all, yet he felt nothing.

Hate grew so swiftly inside of Treasure that she could have killed him.

She left early in the morning to go back to school.

CHAPTER 17

Money is a weapon; its ammunition is pleasure...

Wepener

Treasure thought distance would ease the pain. She filled her heart with her social life. The days went by and exams kept her busy. She kept her worries and pain to herself.

Finally, December holidays arrived. Thabo had moved the family back to Westonaria but hadn't even bothered to tell her. She phoned him briefly on Sunday the 2nd as she was packing up. "Oh, I meant to tell you. Take a taxi to Westonaria. I'll sms you our new address."

She was stunned. A part of her was happy; she would see Alex again after so many months. He was still a friend, but was she ready to face him?

"MY DAUGHTER IS home! Today you can order anything you like!" her father said with his fake cheerful voice. "I know you love meat, so how about you head to the butchery and I'll set up a braai. Invite all your friends over; we can have a great evening," said Mr Mohapi.

Treasure didn't know what to think at first. "Okay, thanks." Her anxiety decided for her.

She didn't want any friends over, and she didn't want to hang out with her Dad either. How would she explain where her mother was? How would HE explain it? She cringed.

If only she knew what had really caused all the trouble between her parents.

There must have been something that set it all off. She hadn't seen the entire story; love couldn't become so cruel and cold without reason.

Despite her misgivings, her family went ahead with a braai on 16 December, the Day of Reconciliation. All her old friends (except Alex, of course) and her Aunt Lineo came to celebrate. Treasure kept to herself, drinking a little bit of wine and feeling nauseous. Her father ate and then disappeared into the night.

HE CAME BACK much later, after midnight, but Treasure was still up waiting. "Dad, I want Ma to come back home." Biting her lip, she knew she was asking for trouble, but she was ready.

"Are you talking to me?" His eyes flashed.

She tried to keep her expression firm. "I am."

"Well then, you can go to her. Don't let me stand in your way. But don't think you'll come back here. If you want to live in the dusty township with no education, then be my guest. Get out of my way!"

He tried to push her out of his way but she kept her ground.

"I am your father!"

"Well, she's my mother!"

He passed her by as though her words didn't mean a thing to him.

The next morning, her father did just as he pleased, painting the house and making other changes before he left for work. Later on when he got back, he took some fish and started chopping it into small chunks.

"What are you doing Dad?" she asked impatiently.

“Well, we all have to eat. I’m making some fish.”

“Where’s Mom? I asked you to fetch her!”

“Listen here. In this house, your mother died years ago. One more word from you young lady, and I will chop your heart out.” He brandished the knife at her.

She could see that he was in a bad mood now, so she went back to her room to keep the peace, such as it was. The house felt empty without her Mom: her cheerful voice was snuffed out, her music was gone, and the delicious cooking had left with her. Thabo’s face said it all. He was unhappy, and anyone could see it. But he was far too stubborn to change his mind, never mind go and fetch her. He had sent her away. *Can a man’s ego destroy him?*

AFTER THAT, SHE spoke to her mother regularly over the phone. Each day seemed to be a blessing; she tried hard to stay strong and happy.

“Mama, how are you? Are you taking your medication as promised? I really want to see you, but Dad won’t let me come. I don’t have any money to travel to Secunda.”

“Don’t worry love, I’m fine. They are taking really good care of me here.

You focus on what you need to do, okay? Do well at school and fight for what you want out of life.”

Her mother had had a special way of easing tension in the family.

Treasure missed her hugs and kisses and her willingness to listen to her fantasies about the big city, Sandton, land of the rich and famous. She no longer had anyone to share her dreams with. Her sisters and brother lived in their own worlds. They only talked when they watched TV together or when they went shopping.

CHRISTMAS CAME AND went, so did the New Year. She saw Alex around from time to time, but he would be busy with his friends, chatting about university girls and events. She was outdated to him. He had seen better now, and sometimes he seemed like a completely different person.

Deep down, she adored him still. She would walk a long distance just to look into his eyes again, but getting close to a man was too damaging. Apart from their casual chats on Mxit and Facebook, there was no other interaction. She had to find a way to let him go.

By this time, Treasure had learned a lot about the value of money. The days without food while her father slaved away in the depths of the gold mines.

The many birthdays that passed without celebration because of money. The lack of love, because money was seen as the key to their education and time was spent toiling at work for more. Men raping her and shoving R50 into her mouth – money seemed like the candy they all wanted but it made their souls bitter. The love-hate relationship had been born. Money gave power and the will to command the impossible from those in desperate need of it.

CHAPTER 18

Life gives you miracles each day; learn to give them energy to live through you.

– Lerato Jeanette Phamotse

Grade 12

Treasure had her mind made up. This was it. She was ruthlessly focused on getting her grades up and enjoying the little time she had left at school. She had even decided not to go to the Matric farewell. It was too much stress, and she didn't want to go with a guy.

She just wanted someone to love her and give her some kind of security and reassurance that she was more than just a sex object. She longed for an uncomplicated friendship; she needed to heal her spirit and feed her mind with the right things. Men had only brought her endless nightmares and anxiety.

That year she hung out with Andiswa Methola, who came from Sterkspruit.

Andiswa was also obsessed with Mxit, but not as much as Treasure, who was hooked. It had become her escape from

reality. She spent most of her lonely nights online, chasing good conversations.

Mxit gave her the freedom and peace to be whoever she wanted.

Moreover, it was cheap and anonymous. She spoke to random people who didn't know her and couldn't hurt her. She found comfort in being listened to without judgment. After Andiswa introduced Treasure to her friend Bianca Flusk on Mxit, Treasure spent even more time online. Bianca seemed to care about her and the things she spoke of.

LATE ONE THURSDAY night Treasure sat in her room, door closed.

Bianca was the foremost thing on her mind. *Damn, I may as well text her.*

<Hey, I heard that you're coming to visit Andiswa this weekend.>

<Hello, what are you doing up at this time? My intention was actually to see you!>

No way, she must be joking. Treasure felt oddly excited and uncertain about this new friendship. <Me! What do you mean!>

<Well, we chat so often and you sound like a great person. What would it hurt to see you?>

<Okay, that's fine. I have my final netball match on Saturday. Maybe you can watch. I'm not the best, but I enjoy playing.>

<Now that's something to look forward too. I'll see you then.> *Is it normal to be so excited about seeing a girl?* She hadn't acted like that with her other girlfriends. She even spoke to Bianca in a totally different way.

Just sleep on it and see what happens on Saturday. She knew better than to open herself up to someone in person. Trust was just another thing she couldn't afford.

FRIDAY STARTED HORRIBLY. The hostel bell was a ghastly thing to hear, and it was going on and on. *Oh my god, what the hell's the matter?*

Treasure couldn't stand the sound.

She left the hostel in a rush to get to assembly, and then a younger girl pushed her aside in a corridor. "Hey! Watch where you're going! Show some respect!" she spat angrily.

People around her stared. The young girl almost started crying. Then Treasure noticed a bunch of boys retreating. "Oh no, were they chasing you?" She felt terrible and tried to apologise but the girl ran away. *I just made a huge scene about nothing.* She glared at the boys. "Get lost, you idiots," she growled at them. Lintle had seen the whole episode so she knew she was going to hear about it later.

SATURDAY EVENTUALLY CAME. It was warm and beautiful, and the sound of buses driving through for the imminent netball tournament brought lots of excitement. Getting out of bed was no problem compared to other days. Everybody was awake and by the looks of it, even Lintle had something up her sleeve.

"Hey, you're a little late for breakfast if you're planning to go to the dining hall. Come to my room. I have extra noodles."

Treasure knew that was not really why Lintle wanted to share a meal with her. *She must have heard gossip and now she wants confirmation.*

Keeping all her secrets to herself was torture, but Treasure couldn't risk any embarrassment. She took her notorious cold shower and made her way next

door, trying to be polite.

"Your room's warm and smells wonderful."

"Thanks, babes, but you don't have to act like a visitor! Sit down man."

Treasure obliged, perching on the edge of Lintle's bed.

The interrogation began. "Is everything okay?"

"I'm fine."

"Mm-mm." Lintle shook her head. "You look unhappy and you've been acting strange for a while."

“Sorry?”

“You’re glued to your phone all the time. You’re moody and rebellious.

You’ve had PMS since like, last year. Are you depressed?”

“Ugh, you’re imagining things, Lintle.”

“Okay, if you say so.”

There was a long pause.

“Treasure, I know you. Are you going to tell me what’s wrong, or should I hire a private investigator to solve this mystery?”

Lintle asked. “Look, I heard about your Mom. She’s been sick for a while now, is that right?”

Treasure nodded numbly.

“I’m sorry. Is she getting any better? I know you may not want to talk about it, but did your father do something to her? What kind of husband is he?”

Treasure just sat in shock wondering how Lintle knew so much. She had never told anyone. How many other people knew about her family? Was her business doing rounds in the school? She felt incredibly uncomfortable and embarrassed.

“I don’t know where you got all of this info but let’s drop the subject please.”

But Lintle wasn’t letting up. “Okay, well, tell me about this Bianca girl.

The entire school is waiting for her grand arrival!”

Treasure sighed inwardly. *Is there anything Lintle doesn’t know?*

“Well she’s my friend, but she’s closer to Andiswa.” “Hmm, really?” Lintle stared into her eyes, looking for any sign of deception.

“Well yes, she’s coming to see her, not me.”

Lintle kept her eyes on Treasure and smiled gamely. Treasure didn’t know what more she could tell her, but that was all she was prepared to offer.

Bianca arrived on one of the later buses, at 2.30. She found the school buzzing with excitement; everyone wanted to see the main match that Treasure would play in at 3 p.m. She focused on Treasure intensely from a distance, watching every inch of every move; her energy and competitive aggressiveness excited her. She moved so fast. Bianca couldn't keep her eyes off her; it was as though her gaze moved her closer to the netball fence. The netball team's performance was almost magical; everything was perfectly timed and amazingly accurate. It was an effortless win.

HANGING OUT WITH Bianca was blissful. She kept talking and joking, while Treasure just gazed at her fair warm skin and her well-glossed lips. She was half-Xhosa and half-coloured. No one else looked anything like her. But there was more to Bianca than met the eye. She was caring and funny, and she was also direct and smart with words.

The attention she brought with her was contagious. Crowds of people came towards the bench they sat on near the hostel gate. Some pretended to just pass by while many stood around and stared at her exotic features.

"Do people do this all the time around here?" Bianca asked, laughing.

"Well, we don't have many good-looking girls like you. And your sexual orientation gets a lot of attention."

"So, you don't have lesbians at this school? With so many girls in one place sharing beds... how's that possible?"

"Well, it's still a little taboo. Those who do it keep it to themselves. There are a few underground couples. It's kind of cute really, because they think no one knows."

"Have you dated a girl, Treasure?" Bianca was hoping that she wouldn't protest.

"Me? A girl? No way," Treasure muttered, more awkward than opposed.

"Well, guess what. You're going to date me now."

"Eh?"

“I won’t take no for an answer. So, what are you going to call me?”

“Umm...” Treasure felt really confused.

“Don’t be shy to kiss me, I won’t bite.”

Treasure blushed. Was this all a joke? Bianca was an immense flirt.

“Okay, I’ll let you think about it. I’ll call you soon okay?”

Bianca kissed her cheek, leaving Treasure mesmerized. Some girls cheered.

Treasure sat still, puzzled. She was a bit embarrassed, but she felt good. She got up and went to her room. Her mind was a storm. All kinds of ideas were dancing in her head.

Someone banged on the door, but Treasure kept quiet.

“Treasure, open the door. We saw what just happened; so are you into girls now?” She took a pillow and placed it over her head.

She thought long and hard. This whole thing felt unreal to her. *How do you date your friend?* She was done dating men or even getting close to them.

Something in her clicked. *Dating Bianca could be my salvation. Men will never come close to me again. I’ll be free of their prying eyes.* Bianca would take care of her heart and, best of all, sex would be off the cards...

THAT NIGHT BIANCA kept quiet, with no calls or messages. Treasure was confused and worried.

She kisses me and now she plays dead on me. Should I call her? But what will I say? She caught herself stressing and laughed. *Am I really DATING A GIRL*

now?

She looked outside. The moon was bright and the future seemed promising.

She smiled to herself and got into bed.

Bianca called her the next morning.

“You didn’t call last night. I waited,” Treasure said with a tone of mock annoyance.

“So, I gave you time to think,” Bianca responded. “But I thought of you all night. I thought I could’ve done more than that kiss. Sorry I didn’t call you; I was studying.”

“I understand. So, are we dating then?” Treasure needed reassurance before committing to anything.

“Let’s focus on our exams and we’ll figure out the rest later.”

CHAPTER 19

The company that you keep determines if you are rich or poor.

DATING A GIRL came with great perks. Bringing her home was one of them; no one suspected a thing. Bianca came to Westonaria for the December holidays and the quality time was wonderful. Mr Mohapi seemed more relaxed and pleasant too. Family time like dinner was more pleasant with Bianca around.

Bianca had a kind and humble soul. She kept encouraging Treasure to model and pursue her dreams while they did housework together. “Every time I look at you, your long legs and petite figure, I see so much potential.

You could have a modelling career full-time!” she enthused, waving a dishcloth. “There are good modelling agencies in Rosebank. They manage loads of famous people. Take a chance! You have the body, and they will love your personality.”

Treasure was scrubbing a pot in the sink. “Dude, I don’t think my Dad would allow me to go to Jo’burg. Do you know how many people go there and come back in a body bag? The streets are supposedly filled with like, gangs and prostitutes. How could I ask him to let me go there? He’d never allow it.”

“Well, high school is over and your marks were excellent, yes? What are you going to do, work in the mines with your Dad? It’s time for a new adventure man! Models get paid SO well. Look at Jo-Anne Strauss or Lerato Moloji. Now, someone that will blow your mind is Joan Ramagoshi. She grew up in Mamelodi and now she has it all! If you have a game plan and

have the passion, nothing's off-limits. I'll support you, don't worry." Bianca came up to her and took her hand. "Look at your family. Your sisters need hope and a good role model. You can change their lives!"

"I don't know, Banks," Treasure took her hand back and rinsed the pot.

"Jo'burg is a jungle. I won't make it out there. It's so busy and competitive.

Didn't you learn anything from *The Devil Wears Prada*?" She laughed. "That life isn't for girls like me. I may as well just be a mine worker."

"Dude, I saw how your eyes like, SPARKLED during that movie."

Treasure snorted and rolled her eyes.

"Hey! That world's made for you! You know some things are made and designed for certain people. Like you are for me..." Bianca came up behind Treasure and held her around the waist. "We aren't done with this conversation, Treasure. I know this is your way of cutting me off, but I know you better than you do."

"Please, if my Dad catches us, he'll have a heart attack."

They kissed quickly and continued with their cleaning.

Afterwards, Treasure gave her a slight smile. "You do know me, but I don't know where to start. I want to walk for great designers like David Tlale and Coco Chanel."

She put on some music and pushed the couch aside to make way for her imaginary catwalk. "Imagine me in my six-inch Gucci heels, dressed by Mark Jacobs, music beating like African drums, my hair in a ball plaited with colourful beads that remind you of the hills and valleys in Lesotho. I would walk gracefully down the ramp, head held high. I would smile as the people cheer for me. 'Treasure, look this way!' Cameras flashing, people calling out my name!" Treasure spoke dramatically, playing out every scene for Bianca.

Her face was bright and full of life and excitement.

“Just look at you my darling. You love the fashion world. We can make your dream come true,” Bianca laughed. “I’ll search for tips on how to get a good agent. When we know what to do, then we can tell your family. For now, let’s just see what the city of gold has in store for you, Miss Supermodel.”

They both felt happy and excited, like kids in a chocolate factory.

TREASURE’S BEDROOM WAS spacious and decorated in white and green.

The white tiles and walls made the room feel breezy and cold. Bianca had

stayed up most of the night to research the modelling industry, and now she was tired. Right across from her, Treasure’s soft caramel body was melted all over the bed. She seemed at peace, in deep sleep.

Bianca had the impulse to rub her skin. It looked smooth and welcoming.

She quietly stood up from her chair and walked slowly towards Treasure. Her nose was close enough to smell the cocoa butter on her feet. She kissed them as though she was worshiping the ground she walked on. She touched her gently so as not to wake her, but just to let her know she was near.

Treasure could feel the sudden warmth around her feet. She pulled in small breaths and fought off the heavy, bad memories of the night at Whispers’

nightclub. She still hadn’t told anyone.

Bianca was melting at her feet. She pulled off her shirt, and came around Treasure’s back and rubbed her neck with ease. She massaged her shoulders and kissed her hairline.

Treasure turned and faced Bianca. She looked like she had woken up from a bad dream.

“Are you okay with me so close to you?”

“Yes.” She felt scared. She hadn’t been intimate with anyone since the rape, over a year ago. But she cared deeply for Bianca, her rock and shield.

How else could she show her how she felt?

“You woke me up for a reason, right?”

“Not really, just to remind you that I’m with you...”

“Come on, look at your eyes, your hands are warm and sweaty.”

They pulled closer to each other. Bianca kissed her slowly and erotically.

They could hear each sound, each breath. There was no rush. Making love was slow and incredibly intimate.

Treasure was a bit uncomfortable, because this was new territory for her.

She knew nothing about how to proceed, but Bianca took the lead, rubbing

her thighs and kissing them. “You need to trust me; just relax and close your eyes.”

Treasure did as she was told and enjoyed the rewards.

“GOOD MORNING, DARLING, you’re glowing.” Bianca was there as Treasure woke. The night came rushing back. Treasure’s body tensed visibly.

“Are you okay? Please say something,” Bianca was concerned.

“I feel fat.”

“What? What do you mean?” Bianca asked.

“Well, I feel like a different person; is that normal?”

“Are you pregnant?” Bianca joked.

“No,” Treasure answered timidly. Her sex drive had been weak since the rape. After last night, she hoped it would change, but her mind had been on her rapists while her body was being explored.

She sat up and placed a pillow behind her. She needed peace and her mind was playing tricks on her.

“I need to shower; I probably smell like a wet dog.”

“Why are you so edgy, Treasure; did I do something wrong?”

“Oh no, nothing at all, I’m just tired. I guess last night felt like more of a job for me. I didn’t even know half of the tricks you pulled,” she answered shyly.

Bianca was too nice, too demanding, too open, too much of everything.

It made Treasure feel silly and off-balance. She didn’t have all the experience that Bianca had.

Bianca was taken aback; she thought they had had a beautiful night, but the first thing that Treasure did was to complain and feel bad about herself.

What had she done to seem like a stranger to her own partner? Bianca looked at her miserable face. She swung her over and held her hands in hers.

“Tell me, did I hurt you in any way? Where do you feel the pain? I’m so sorry, love, if I did.” Her dark eyes swept over Treasure’s tiny body. “We can

go out for ice cream with your little sister and brother. They’re dying to spend time with you.”

Treasure sat dead still looking out of the window.

“Oh, man, I’ve just realised that I can’t, I have to go get you those contacts, and if we can get a list of casting directors or modelling agencies then we’ll have direction,” Bianca said hopefully.

“I don’t think I want to do that anymore,” Treasure mumbled as she pulled the comforter over her body.

“Don’t even go there! We’ve had this conversation before. I’ll help you live your dream. Let me make you something to eat; rest a little.” Bianca walked out of the bedroom excitedly.

Tumbling inside a wave of confusion, Treasure sat up and debated with herself about sex and her new dream career in modelling.

CHAPTER 20

To live a complete life you need life experience.

– Neo Mary Phamotse

EVERY WEEKEND FOR the next few months, Treasure and Bianca roamed the streets of Rosebank and Braamfontein visiting modelling agencies, financed by Bianca's seemingly bottomless family fund. She was happy to take a gap year with Treasure to help her fulfil her dream, something Thabo Mohapi wasn't going to do.

The problem was that none of the agencies were taking Treasure seriously.

All of them seemed to want one type of model: super thin, long hair, two metres tall, etc. Also, they wanted to see a portfolio of the model's photographs.

Treasure got to know the streets of Jo'burg well, but she still felt like a lost child; she was finally 'home' but this home was a ruthless jungle. People only looked out for themselves.

I have to make this work. My siblings need to see some sort of role model in this damaged family.

Anxiety ran deep through her veins and it showed. She relied on Bianca heavily for moral support. Meanwhile, her father had found a new girlfriend; she could tell by the way he carried himself and the extra time he spent on his grooming. It was as if he had found a new life. At least he wasn't spending too much time criticising her choices.

I must be close. I took a gap year just to make sure I get this. I have to prove to Dad that it wasn't a mistake. Even if he doesn't provide anything for me, I need to prove myself to him.

As for Bianca, she loved and cared deeply for Treasure. The more she saw her becoming engrossed in finding an agent, the more it became an obsession for her too.

ONE FATEFUL DAY Bianca found 'Allen the model scout' in a Sunday newspaper. He was a fashion photographer with a studio in his home garage in Randburg. Supposedly, Allen was well known in the media industry. His photos were widely used for tabloid articles. Bianca called him, and soon Treasure was having regular shoots at his studio.

"Steady, hold it...perfect, now that's the shot I needed."

Allen was from Zambia. He could be charming, but he was a loner. Many people only knew him through his photography. He liked to shoot, drink and play chess at the local bar.

He kept telling Treasure how he had run away from great poverty to make photography his life. Treasure listened without saying much as she practised her modelling poses in front of the camera.

Allen would tell her how to move and pose so that he could admire her body without her realising. Every time he saw her, he used his camera as an excuse to play out erotic scenes. Treasure was pure at heart and gave him the control he needed.

What she didn't know was that Allen slept with every model desperate enough to get into the industry. Treasure was merely prey in his web of lies and deceit. He took nude pictures of her, promising to speak to top men's publications and to make her the face of a magazine campaign. But he kept charging her for photos for a portfolio that never materialized.

After weeks of going back and forth, with Bianca paying Allen for his time and photos they never saw, Treasure and Bianca were tired. He still hadn't sent Treasure out for auditions, and she wondered if she was being scammed.

When she confronted Allen, he was full of excuses.

"Honey, this is the fashion industry. You need to accept that it's hard work.

You need to get used to rejection. I'm just not sensing your commitment here. It's not a mall. No one else brings their partners to shoots. Why must you have Bianca all over our working space? You need to fly and I'm the guy who will do that for you. I'm your ticket to fame. Look at Nonhle – I made her! Look at all these stunning girls on my wall; they're my products and they're out there making money posting their lives on Facebook and Twitter.

What do you have?"

Treasure realised she didn't have much at all. Allen kept most of her good pictures, and she had no idea how to create her own portfolio.

“You know, Megan Botha has seen some of your pictures and she was keen, but she needs to see more from you,” Allen claimed, cleaning his camera.

“Who?”

“Man, the MFM editor! She comes here to scout for girls all the time. So you need to BE here and you need to give this everything you’ve got! Do you understand? Now sort out your little hang-up and then we can start working freely!”

“But Bianca hasn’t disturbed us in any way,” Treasure argued. “She’s worried because we spend so much money coming here every weekend and we still have nothing to show for it. I want to be part of fashion shows and do work, but right now we’ve spent so much that we don’t have a cent!”

“Okay, go to my car; there are coins in there. Take a taxi home and think about my offer. We need a quiet space to be creative; these photos need more love and excitement honey.” Allen blew her a kiss.

Treasure walked out and found Bianca standing by the gate.

“I heard what he said and I agree; I need to give you space. I just wonder why he cares so much that he had to fund your taxi fare.” Bianca hid her frown behind her cigarette smoke.

“I’m sorry; I know you’ve been here for me from day one,” Treasure tried her best to make her understand. “I think he just gets distracted, you know?”

In the taxi, they sat apart, each in a different row, with their different thoughts. Bianca had no choice but to bite back a groan of deep frustration as she thought of Treasure all alone with Allen, her fragile body in the hands of a perverted photographer.

How could I allow Treasure to trust this animal? What would her mother think? She needs to find another way to break into the fashion industry...

“YOU SEEM TENSE; this won’t work if you don’t do as I tell you.” Allen

moved around Treasure like a cold midnight shadow. She had persuaded Bianca to let her give Allen one more chance.

“Maybe I’m tense because you’re taking so long,” Treasure countered.

“Maybe I need to fuck you and make you feel at home,” he said bluntly.

He hadn’t gotten off with anyone in weeks and he needed to scratch that itch to kill the edge.

Treasure immediately stood up and started looking for her clothes. She lowered her face so Allen couldn’t see her emotions.

Allen grabbed her leg and pulled her back down. He was strong for his small frame. Treasure was shocked and scared out of her mind. She opened her mouth to protest but couldn’t make a sound.

“You can’t leave now; I’ve done so much work for you. Now show some gratitude, just let me have a taste and you’ll be my right hand girl. Wouldn’t you like to be my right hand girl? I know you’re not lesbian and I’ll prove it to you.”

He forced her down onto the floor with surprising force, unbuckling his belt with one hand while holding her arms together with the other. Her legs were pinned underneath his.

“Please, Allen, I don’t want this!” Treasure’s voice trembled. She couldn’t handle this rampant animalistic behaviour.

“What, did you think that you could come here in a leather mini-skirt and red lipstick without considering my needs?” He kissed her roughly all over her face. “Welcome to the city, baby girl, if you want gold I’m here.” He kept his grip tight and unhooked her bra.

“I will report you!” Treasure was in tears, begging for release. She kept her legs clamped together desperately.

“Try doing that, and you won’t get a single job in this city.” Allen took off his jeans, gritting his teeth. This was the day to devour fresh meat. The excitement in his voice was sickening as he felt up her breasts and buttocks.

“Hurry up now; I don’t have all day! I have two more girls coming in an hour.

Just give me what you owe me!” he demanded abruptly.

Shaking her head, Treasure tried her hardest to pull away, but he had too much power. She tried to shout, but her voice came out hoarse and he slapped her. “Shut up.”

He raped her for what must have been two minutes at most, but it felt like a lifetime. Treasure’s mind was at war; memories of Whispers kept her stiff and breathless with fear. Her life had stopped and the grim reaper hovered over her again.

When he was done, he stood up and let her grab her clothes off the floor.

“You look like hell; go take a shower.”

She staggered out, bumping into a tall white woman at the door. “Excuse me, I have to go,” she gasped, stifling her tears.

“Hold on, young lady, you look like someone I’m looking for. Here, take my card. My name is Megan Botha; I’m the editor of MFM magazine. I would love to speak to you when you’re not in a rush. Is Allen here? I have some news for him.”

“Please, see for yourself; I never want to see him again.”

“Wait! Are you okay?”

Treasure shook her head as she ran out into the busy street. She was a mess.

No one seemed to care; some people gave her mean looks. *I must look like a junkie out for my next fix*, she thought, stumbling in embarrassment.

CHAPTER 21

You are nobody until someone kills you, then you become a story that others call history.

Westonaria

That morning, Bianca had received a call from her father asking her to come home to the Eastern Cape. She left Treasure a note explaining her sudden departure.

Baby, I've left for home; my father needs me. I'll try to visit you again soon.

I spoke to your father to safeguard you for me. I've already said good-bye to everyone and thank you for sharing your home with me; it's been a wonderful nine months. I didn't think I would stay with you so long but I loved every moment. Please watch out for that creepy Allen; there's something about him I just don't trust. Keep your dream alive; I'll be supporting you from the sidelines.

I know this is what you want so don't give up. STICK to it! It will be hard but dreams come true when you fight for them. Please take care of your sisters and brother; they truly love you and so do I. I'll call you soon.

Love B

TREASURE ARRIVED HOME in despair. She swung open the kitchen door.

“Bianca!” she cried out.

There was no answer.

“Someone please help me,” she whispered as her voice gave way. She fell to her knees and cried in anguish.

The house had a coldly quiet chill. It seemed empty.

She realised that the kids were visiting friends. But where was Bianca?

She curled up on a carpet and closed her eyes. She would not get up again until her lover came home.

After a while she realised that there was a tall, dark, broad-shouldered man standing at her feet. She jerked in fear, then saw that it was her Dad.

Treasure's small hazel eyes clashed with his dark brown stare.

“What's going on with you?” She felt the intensity of his voice vibrating through her body. “Bianca had to leave this morning.

Lebo took her to Park Station to get a bus. I know you were very attached to her, but you still have your sisters. I understand you're hurting, but it's time to get up and start cooking. Crying won't make it better."

"Cooking!" Treasure cried. "What the hell...? What's the matter with everybody?!" She got up and ran to the bathroom.

Mr Mohapi stared perplexed at the bathroom door. "Treasure," he called,

"you can't just lock us out. This is how life is, and you can't run away from it."

He walked towards the door to make out what she was saying.

"Dad, you don't understand! She really cared about me. Mom hasn't been here! You never even brought back the one person you took away from us!

You men are all the same! You steal, you take anything you want! You've never protected us; look at what you've done to us. Our mother is dying and you kicked her out! You shot her!" she choked up for a few seconds. "Your eldest daughter has three kids out of marriage and smokes like a chimney!

Your other daughters are all lost without their mother! Where are YOU when we need help? You spend countless nights out with God knows who, you come back in a horrible mood and no one can come close to you." Treasure poured her heart out from behind the locked door.

Her father stood outside it in shock and disbelief. He wondered where all of this was coming from. His life had been so busy that he didn't realise how Treasure had grown and what pain she had been going through.

"Come out; let's talk about all this," he said.

"Dad, you stopped talking years ago; what are you going to tell me now?"

Treasure's heart was pulsating. She sat on the edge of the bath and held her body in a clenched position.

Her father knocked gently. "Please come out; we can fix this," he said, his voice grave with fatigue and emotion.

Treasure opened the door and looked at him with fear and sorrow in her eyes.

“We can’t fix anything. It’s beyond broken, Dad.”

He tried to put his hand on her shoulder but she walked past him quickly.

“I don’t know what you want me to do,” he admitted.

She kept walking.

“Treasure! What happened? What’s going on?”

She reached her room, slipped inside and locked the door.

Her father stared at the door with defeat seeping through his aching heart.

TREASURE MADE A panic-stricken call to Lintle, who was living in Braamfontein while attending Wits University.

“Hey, babes, what’s wrong?” asked Lintle, hearing her fragile friend sobbing.

“Lintle, I need to leave this place; please, can I stay with you for a bit? I can’t be around here; my Dad is here; I can’t see any men; I detest them all!”

Lintle was taken aback. “Well, yes of course. But what will your parents say about you living in Johannesburg? Do you know how hard it was for me to come here? My mother lectured me for an entire month...”

“It’s okay, I don’t care about that. My Mom doesn’t live with us any more so it won’t be a problem.”

“What’s going on; why are you crying?”

“Can we talk when I see you? I’ll leave in the morning. Please fetch me at Park Station.”

“Okay, text me when you get here. I can’t wait to see you again!”

TREASURE SPENT MOST of the night packing her old red luggage bags.

Early the next morning her father left to go to church with Tebello. Grace was still sleeping. Without saying goodbye,

Treasure took her stuff and left home.

She had no plans of coming back.

<Hey, Lintle, I'm in a taxi. I'll call you when I get there.>

CHAPTER 22

Friendship is better than a perfect life alone.

UPON HER ARRIVAL at Park station, Lintle met her and they walked to her flat. Lintle looked like something out of a magazine. She had long brown highlighted hair and wore stilettos. She was charming and full of jokes. She was confident and took extra care of her appearance. Nothing about her seemed normal and she was completely different to the girl Treasure had known in high school.

“You don't look so well; you're very thin, friend. I know you want to model but surely you can still eat can't you?” Lintle said. She couldn't help but stare in disbelief, because Treasure was still pretty despite being so skinny.

Treasure smiled, slightly self-conscious.

Lintle's flat was an open plan studio with a fridge, one four-seater couch and a double bed with pink bedding. It smelled fresh but was a little messy.

“Please make yourself comfortable; this is your new home. There's a shower, no bathtub here, but it gets the job done. There is food so please eat if you get hungry. Here is space for your clothes. The rest we'll figure out as time goes.

I'll make you an extra key in the afternoon.”

Treasure noticed that Lintle had dozens of Italian shoes stacked in their boxes on different books.

“You have so many shoes; are you selling them?”

“No honey! That's my addiction, which Paul nurtures very well,” Lintle said proudly.

“Who's Paul?”

“He's a friend of mine. He's coming over later. He's a nice guy, so don't worry.”

“Okay... so who is he?”

“He works at a private bank. He lives in Sandton. Oh, honey, that boy treats me like a queen. He’s been asking me out for a while now but I’m enjoying the chase. The sex is remarkable! I hope you’re well oiled about sex styles.

People here don’t just have sex with their partners. It’s more for pleasure and entertainment than anything else is. You must see his car...”

Lintle’s eyes were wide with excitement.

Treasure felt like she got more information than she asked for. She forced a stiff smile and then yawned.

Lintle laughed. “You’re tired. Let’s eat something and rest; we’ll catch up properly later.”

TREASURE SLEPT UNTIL three in the afternoon. She woke with a start as Lintle unlocked the door and pushed it open, carrying a load of Woolies grocery bags.

“You’re awake! I made you a key.”

Lintle prepared fresh coffee, and then sat on the couch with Treasure.

They talked about everything that had happened since school. Lintle talked about many things; how the city of gold had given her a new perspective on life, big things that filled Treasure’s head and gave her hope. She was beginning to feel better already. She felt warm and at peace for the moment.

“Did you know,” she murmured, “your hair looks amazing.”

Lintle laughed. “No dear, this is a Lace front wig.” She patted it in the mirror.

“This piece would set any ordinary guy off his budget.”

Treasure looked at her curiously. “What do you mean?”

“It’s expensive honey; it’s imported hair. You’re looking at \$300 plus.”

“Dollars? Since when do we count money in dollars?”

Lintle shrugged and winked. “Sugar, stick with me and you’ll learn a lot.

Listen, I’m going to shower and prepare supper. Paul is very health conscious about his food.”

Treasure closed her eyes to rest and nodded off to sleep again.

Lintle went to shower, thinking about Treasure’s naïveté and how she had a long way to go. *But I was the same a few months ago, just another girl from Zastron... before I came to Jo’burg.* She stepped out of the shower and stared at herself in the mirror. Even her own family would be surprised. *So much has changed...*

“WOW, WHO’S THIS sleeping beauty? Is this the friend you were talking about? When did she get here?” Paul asked, staring at Treasure snoozing on the couch.

“Yes, that’s my old school friend; she got here this morning. Please don’t wake her; she needs the rest.” Lintle pulled Paul away. “It’s been a taxing day for her. Come join me while I cook. Can I fix you one of my amazing cocktails, darling?”

Paul was still staring at Treasure.

Lintle pulled him close to get his attention. “Listen, she wants to work as a model; you know a lot of agents. Can you hook her up with one of them?”

“I’ll see what I can do, but why is she staying with you? Where are her parents? Do you know how much trouble you could put me in if her parents come looking for her?” He was oddly hesitant.

“Her parents are busy, so please stop with the million questions; I’ll take care of her.” Lintle felt irritated. Paul was obviously drawn to this sleeping beauty without even knowing her.

“Okay okay,” he relented and perched on a bar stool near the stove.

“Let me sit right here and hear all about your day. The food smells fantastic.

What are you cooking anyway? You know I don't like much oil in my food, darling?" he said, keeping one eye on Treasure.

"OH HI, I heard voices, and the food smell woke me up." Treasure walked awkwardly from the couch towards Paul.

"Oh, no, I'm sorry for the noise," Paul stood up. "We are loud people and don't know how to behave around guests; please excuse us." He shook her hand. "I'm Paul. It's nice to meet you."

"Guys, I'm almost done. You can take a shower so long, T," Lintle cut off their conversation. "I'll dish up in 15 minutes."

"Oh yes of course, please excuse me." Treasure rushed off to the bathroom.

FOR THE NEXT three weeks, Lintle was busy with exams, but Paul came around frequently to share contacts and help Treasure call agencies so that she could get an interview. She was too nervous to go by herself; her last encounter with Allen was still fresh in her mind. But as soon as her exams were done, Lintle was free to groom Treasure. This time, perhaps, Lady Luck was on her side.

"I'm really grateful that you're helping me, Lintle," said Treasure one morning as Lintle helped her put on make-up for her first interview. "Since Bianca left, things have been hard. We don't talk regularly any more. I don't have money for airtime so we just text. It's hard because she was my pillar of strength up until recently. I like the way Paul treats you. He's smart and humble. I wish I had that ... I loved my father and Alex, but they are totally different people right now. Alex doesn't have time for me. I just wish Bianca didn't leave. Honestly I don't even know if things are still the same between us; all I know is that we are talking much less."

"Well, focus on the job at hand; forget about those other things right now,"

Lintle advised, applying cream blush to her friend's cheeks. "Today you're meeting with G6 Models; they're big in the industry and they take care of their talent. You could be signing a contract with them if you play your cards right."

“You think so?”

“Yes, but you need to smile, and don’t look so tense. These people want to see your personality and charm; it takes more than a pretty face to be on camera. You have to own the room and people need to fall in love with you so that they continue booking you. So loosen up and be who I know you to be.”

I wish it was that easy... Treasure sighed. She knew that Lintle was trying to motivate her, but she felt judged for feeling anxious and edgy. What she needed was empathy. None of Lintle’s words could calm her, and what little

energy she had left, she saved for the actual meeting.

“You sign that contract and I’ll take you out for dinner to celebrate!

When you’re rich and famous one day, don’t forget that I love Italian shoes,”

Lintle laughed as Treasure left to get a taxi.

THE G6 OFFICE was in a huge building in the heart of Rosebank. It was a beautiful office. Pictures of magazine covers were all over the walls, along with flawless headshots of male and female models.

The lady at reception was friendly and polite. “Please take a seat; the director will be with you shortly.”

Treasure was amazed by her surroundings and how polished everything seemed. *Ma would be so proud. She would say, Come on, Treasure, this is where your dreams will come true; I can feel it.* She felt very intimidated, but a wave of calm came over her as she thought of her mom’s serene demeanour.

She could act; she had seen her mother do it many times.

“Next!” a loud voice came from the office.

“Go in, young lady; it’s your turn,” the receptionist smiled.

Treasure took a deep breath and steeled herself to meet the director.

“Hi, I’m Carin van der Walt. Please take a seat and tell me a little more about yourself.”

Treasure perched on a comfortable red seat. She didn't know where to start.

She looked at the perfectly made-up face staring back at her, set off by deep jet-black hair and dark ruby red lipstick.

“Well, I'm from Westonaria. I live with a friend who's been helping me work on my dream of becoming a model.” It sounded as if she was describing a stranger. “Um, we've been friends since high school. She's studying at Wits.

I took a gap year this year to start modelling.” She paused. *Am I babbling?*

“Go on, honey, please continue.”

Treasure looked down and tried to think. There was an awkward silence.

What does this woman want from me? That's all I am. I can't tell her my deep dark secrets. Then I won't get this contract at all. Who wants spoiled goods with no tertiary education? Look at me; there's sin written all over me.

Does she want me to strip down and show her what I really am? I'm a rapist's paradise.

Men use me and kick me out. That's who I am.

“Well, currently, I'm... I just want to focus on my career.”

Carin seemed to understand her discomfort. “Okay, I think you have a unique look and you can do well with us. If you need time to adjust, it's fine.

We'll get to know each other as time goes by, okay?”

Treasure smiled and nodded. Carin handed her a form. “After you sign this contract, your life will never be the same. We make things happen here.”

Without wasting any time, Treasure signed and handed back the contract. It was surreal. *Is this really happening?* She stood up. “Thank you very much.

I'm excited to be a part of the family.”

They shook hands and she left.

CHAPTER 23

If you want to know what a man's like, take a look at how he treats his inferiors, not his equals.

– J.K. Rowling

LINTLE SPENT THE day cleaning her flat. She had a lot on her mind; Paul hadn't come to visit in three days and he wasn't talking much. *He's acting strangely out of character. Maybe he's just stressed out; it's never happened before. Maybe he's tired of chasing me. I should just agree to go out with him...*

It's been long enough.

Her other focus was on Treasure's new gig. *Treasure is such a good person.*

Why does she seem so tense and troubled most of the time? Lintle wanted to find a way to help Treasure forget her past and enjoy her new city life. A whole new lifestyle could be exactly what she needed to make her happier.

Many people came from rags to riches; the trouble was maintaining it all and not falling back into irrelevance.

She was delighted when Treasure returned from her new modelling agency successful – excited and full of life. They talked about her future in the fashion world; she could change up her style and find out what wearing designer clothes felt like.

“Come have a look.” Lintle opened up her Macbook. “These sites will show you how a high end fashionista dresses daily.” She showed Treasure sites like Lookbook, Vogue and Tumblr. There were beautifully dressed girls with gorgeous makeup and striking hairstyles. It seemed like a completely new generation of people to Treasure. Immediately she worried about the price tags on the expensive-looking clothes.

“Those outfits look amazing, but pricey. How can I afford them? I haven't even started working.”

“Relax; you just need a Minister of Finance in your life,” Lintle winked.

“Someone that will, um, support your desires. Believe me, there will be a steady stream of them once you get out of those clothes you’re wearing.”

Treasure wasn’t sure Lintle meant by ‘Minister of Finance’.

“Okay, where do I apply for that?”

“Honey, they just come with the territory; relax, my man is well connected.

Sandton is like a mother that bears all kinds of rich men.”

“Really?” Treasure asked, somewhat incredulous.

“You know what, I’ll talk to Paul. We’ll give you a little tour and go shopping tomorrow. You’ll see why they call Sandton ‘Africa’s Capital of Riches’. Tonight, I’m going to teach you how to be a lady, the things you should drink at dinner parties and the things you can wear.”

“I AM a lady,” Treasure protested.

“Okay, but work with me here; I’m just trying to help you!” chided Lintle.

“No more Mr Price, especially if you’re out shopping with a special someone.

Here, take a glass and join me. We’re going to taste a few wines as we go to see what you like.” She poured wine into two glasses. “Okay, so I’m starting with light white, because we’re going to taste a few...” She pointed at the label. “This is a blend of Chenin Blanc and Chardonnay, from Franschoeck.

You need to be able to say the names, okay? If I catch you saying MerLOTT

—”

“Relax, okay; I took French in high school.” Treasure rolled her eyes.

“You were there; did you forget?” She picked up her glass by its bowl and took a gulp.

“Hang on dear; no man. Like this: hold your glass by the stem, so you don’t warm the wine, and always drink slowly.” Lintle demonstrated. “You want to look like you’re enjoying each sip.” She stopped short and gasped. “My god, we must sort out your nails; you look like you came from a coalmine.

Who would want a massage or blow job from those? First thing tomorrow,

we hit the salon. You probably need to wax too.”

“Okay, I get it...” Treasure mumbled, embarrassed. “Bianca never complained...”

“Ahem, Bianca may have been your sugar mommy, but you’re heading for the big leagues now, not your high school

playground.”

“You’re scaring me... I thought I knew some basics, but now I feel clueless.”

Treasure sipped her wine nervously.

“Okay, tell me what you do know.”

“Um, I know you get sweet and dry wines... and whites and reds and rosés...

and blends? And the whites tend to go with white meat and seafood, while the reds go with heavier red meats.”

“That’s excellent! I’m glad you know that at least.”

“How many different wines are there? I mean, how many of these names do I have to know?”

“Hundreds, thousands; it doesn’t really matter as long as you know what to look for and what you like. When we aren’t buying local wines at Woolies, you and I will typically be ordering off wine lists. You could just order the most expensive, but it helps to have a little background info. I don’t want to confuse you too much, so just tell me when you’ve heard enough okay?”

Lintle sounded like a school teacher, so Treasure laughed.

“Don’t stress, okay; we all start somewhere. We’ll get back to the wine just now. There were some other things I wanted to tell you. You should start speaking fluent English; don’t mix languages too much. Your posture must be on point. Sit up straight; hands on your lap, never on the dinner table.”

Treasure straightened up immediately.

“Yes, like that! Keep your hair tidy at all times; that is your crown so you must look after it. Also, you can’t wear flat shoes around good people; you’ll seem sloppy and out of balance. What else... I won’t teach you about cars. I want you to see them and tell me what catches your eye. Sandton is the harbour of extravagance and we all pay a small price for it.”

“Pay a price?”

“Yes; we make sacrifices.” Lintle grabbed more wine and poured generously.

“You know, I’m glad you’re with me; your appearance would give you a heart attack.”

“You mean like the future me?”

“Yes, just wait, you’ll see what I mean...”

Lintle was the boss of the moment and Treasure, a willing student. They had a lot to celebrate. Treasure was getting her dream job and her future looked bright. There was indeed light at the end of the tunnel.

“OKAY, AND THEN... when it comes to shoes you recommended Gucci, Miu Miu...”

“Stuart Weitzman, Alexander McQueen, Walter Steiger... And every woman has to have at least one pair each of Christian Louboutins, Jimmy Choos, Manolo Blahniks, Tom Fords and of course the master Louis Vuitton.”

“I’m so muddled up; I hope I remember all these names. Let me put them in my phone and do some research on them.... Okay let’s see; you suggested that if my minister of finance wants to buy me clothes I must mention Valentino, Versace, Dior, Armani, Prada, and Chanel. One thing I know a bit about is watches: Patek Philippe, Cartier, TW Steel, and Rolex...”

Treasure kept repeating the names, trying to remember what she was being taught. She was on a roll.

Lintle sat back and listened to her in amusement.

They both felt enthusiastic. The fashion world promised to be full of big brands, luxury dinners and prestigious events. The only thing Treasure had to do was model and upgrade her lifestyle. Her biggest dream was about to come true; she could feel it. Even though at some point she wanted to become a town planner, she knew modelling would give her quick money and saving for university would become easier.

“Back to the wine, before it gets too late!” Lintle announced and fetched

another bottle of pinkish wine. “This is a blanc de noir. That’s when they make white wine from red grapes. Pretty, eh?”

“Blanc de noir...”

“Alright, so ‘cru’ basically means ‘vineyard’ in France, and the most expensive, famous French wines are usually called Grand Cru or Premier Cru.

I’m a bit fuzzy on the difference, but the point is, you can’t really go wrong with any of these.” She paused before carefully pronouncing, “Romanée-Conti, La Grande Rue, Richebourg, Chablis, Chambertin, Montrachet, Le Pin... you get the idea. Just look for the words Grand or Premier.”

“What about champagnes?”

“Most champagne is made from Chardonnay and Pinot grapes. Did you know that champagne was originally a mistake?”

“What?”

“Yes; in the middle ages, it got really cold, and the wine would stop fermenting and then start again when it got warm, and that made carbon dioxide bubbles. The winemakers hated that; they thought the bubbles were BAD and called it the devil’s wine tried really hard to get rid of the bubbles...

for 500 years? I don’t know; they couldn’t figure it out. Especially this one monk—”

Treasure couldn’t help laughing and they both collapsed into giggles.

“Um – Dom Perignon was the monk... Anyway, so that’s who that one is named after. Ummm... some other exclusive champagnes are Bollinger, Krug, Moët, Cristal, Veuve Clicquot, and pretty much anything with the word

‘shipwrecked’ in the title, like Shipwrecked 1907 Heidsieck...” Lintle couldn’t stop talking.

“Hang on, hang on... how do you know all this?” Treasure interrupted.

“Paul tells me this stuff,” Lintle said wistfully. “I never thought I’d be passing it on...”

The hours sped by as the old friends talked and laughed. It seemed like years had passed since high school; they were both new people. The night ticked over to morning and they both passed out on the couch as five wine bottles rolled by empty on the floor.

The following day

Paul arrived early to pick up the girls. He was amused when he saw them.

“Did you guys go out clubbing last night? You look like you have a bad hangover. It must’ve been a wild night.”

They squinted at him from underneath their huge sunglasses. Treasure seemed embarrassed and shy.

“Oh no, we stayed in, and yes had one or two glasses of wine,” Lintle replied and hopped into the front seat of Paul’s BMW 760Li.

“Ha! I know my woman once she starts with her wine; there’s no going back.” He winked at Treasure, who smiled wanly. She felt like her head had been hit by a train. The night had gone so well, but now she wasn’t feeling it.

“Ladies, seat belts on! You’re in for a good ride,” Paul promised.

The car was so comfortable that Treasure immediately felt at home.

“Paul, I love this cream interior,” she ventured. “I’ve never been in such a car in my life. My parents still use taxis...”

Paul looked at her reflection in his mirror in surprise; she seemed so naïve, sweet and angel-like. “Thank you very much, lady. Soon you’ll have one too, maybe something bigger and better. A pink Bentley would suit you.

Keep dreaming big and working hard, and this city will show you miracles.”

“I will,” Treasure promised earnestly.

Lintle listened to Paul’s wise words with no interest. She didn’t have any big dreams for herself. All she ever wanted

was to get married and be a good spoilt wife.

Treasure watched the tall buildings, fancy cars and well-dressed men and women zoom past as they drove north through the city. It was like being in a

movie. The people seemed happy and full of life. She smiled and imagined more to the life she had always dreamed of.

Sandton City was 15 minutes away and Lintle knew it like the back of her hand. She pointed out all the large hotels and spoke like a well-educated tour guide. She had that spark and passion about the city of Jo'Andburg. Her manner was animated but her voice, soothing.

Paul kept looking at Treasure in the mirror. She was radiant and innocent and full of purity, but something in her spirit seemed locked down. He hoped that once she got on her feet, the sad twinkle in her eyes would dissolve.

They started at a restaurant called The Butcher Shop and Grill in Mandela Square.

“Ladies, here we are. We’ll start with some meat to help kill your hangovers, and then do a little shopping,” Paul proposed.

“This place is well known as a pickup spot for sugar daddies,” Lintle whispered to Treasure with a wink. “There are others, umm... Browns in Rivonia; Pigalle Sandton; the Radisson Blu Hotel around the corner; San Bar here at the Sandton Sun; La Vie En Rose in Illovo; Mezepoli in Melrose Arch; Annica’s Boutique Restaurant, and of course the Hard Rock Café. And don’t forget the notorious ZAR...”

Treasure’s eyes widened. *So women sit there and wait to be picked up?*

How ... awkward?

Paul interrupted her thoughts. “I’m going to the Bryanston Country Club just now for a round of golf, so you enjoy yourself with my credit card...

and, hey, please don’t kill me; I have my phone so I’ll get all the notifications.

Treasure, look after this one,” he nodded towards Lintle. “She knows too many shoe shops for her own good. Otherwise, knock yourselves out.

Remember that we have a dinner date at the Capital Moloko Hotel. They are important clients, so you both need to look really good.”

Not being able to afford things was weighing heavily on Treasure. She had been living with Lintle for free so she felt like she couldn't accept anything else. “Thank you for lunch Paul, but I'm sorry; I can't take anything else from you. The shopping Lintle can carry on with. I'll find a place to sit down and wait for her. I'm sure I'll find something to wear in her closet.”

“Don't be silly; look where we are; a pair of jeans and a dress won't kill you.

This dinner is crucial for me. Plus, who knows where we'll end up; this is the city of gold and anything goes, baby!” Paul said encouragingly.

Treasure didn't want to embarrass Lintle further, so she nodded and continued with her meal.

CHAPTER 24

You can't mislead a person who knows his way home but you can easily fool anyone who doesn't know where they are going.

– Mzilikazi wa Afrika

AT 11, PAUL STOOD UP. “Ladies, I need to leave you; my tee off time is 11:45. I don't want to make the guys wait.” He kissed Lintle, paid the bill and left.

“This guy really likes you,” Treasure said in awe. “The way he looks at you and all the surprise gifts he buys... he must be very wealthy.”

“Treasure, he's really a blessing. He makes sure that I get whatever I want and he works very hard.”

“He must; I mean his car is a monster among the others I've seen. The clothes he wears, wow! I'm impressed. Every time I see him he's dressed up.

How much do bankers make?”

“A lot... and I practically forced him to get into golf you know; it’s the best way to network. His clients are politicians, businessmen, all top people.

I’m in love with all that he gives me.”

Treasure wondered if her friend was really in love or just obsessed with the material benefits, but she dared not ask Lintle directly.

Walking around Sandton City was like going on a journey. The mall was huge and full of people clutching multiple shopping bags. Treasure looked at them with wry amusement. *How can they afford all those designer goods.* The shops looked so exclusive that she didn’t feel worthy of walking in.

“Come on, we don’t have the whole day; let’s get in here and find your slender physique a stunning dress.” Lintle pulled her into a designer store and pointed at the rails. “Look at all these; you’re going to look amazing. All the men will want your number.”

The sales girls looked at her with a calculating eye, as if they could see that she didn’t have a cent to her name.

Treasure felt uncomfortable. “I’m just going to look at the shoes quickly.”

She spotted a patent black strappy 3-inch heel.

“Excuse me, do you have this shoe in a size 7?” Treasure asked an assistant.

“Sorry you can’t take that; it’s reserved for Khanyi Mbau,” the assistant replied as she grabbed it out of Treasure’s hand. She didn’t seem to care what Treasure’s shoe size was.

“Oh sorry, who’s that?” Treasure looked at Lintle.

“Just choose something else,” said Lintle softly. “We’ll talk about her later; there is always something to learn from her.”

Treasure felt small, but continued uneasily. “I found these; they seem comfortable.” She held a pair of pointy patent flats up to Lintle’s shocked face.

“Oh hell no, you cannot wear flat shoes to an exclusive dinner party!

What are you thinking? Your appearance will reflect badly on me. Now let’s get you something more appealing!”

She found a pair of metallic laser-cut strappy six-inch stiletto heels that were the price of two smart-phones and got them in Treasure’s size before she could protest.

Treasure was horrified. She couldn’t wear a shoe ten times her net worth.

“LITTLE, there’s no way I can take those; I can’t even walk in those heels, and the price tag could feed an entire village. I don’t think Paul would approve, and you haven’t even got anything for yourself yet.”

“Leave Paul up to me. He’s okay; this won’t even put a dent in his pocket.

Trust me, Treasure; the guy is buying an Aston Martin in a week so he has plenty of money.”

Treasure looked down, trying to hold back her tears. She remembered the

days her mother had fed her and her siblings bread and water for dinner, not having a cent to buy milk, never mind meat, while her father ran up and down Secunda trying to make a living. Her pure heart couldn’t understand this extravagant life. Deep down, she wasn’t sure she could do something like this even for a loved one. It didn’t seem right, and she didn’t want to be a part of it. But what choice did she have? Her tongue had already declared that she wanted money. The power of the tongue is dangerous; already it had brought her to the city.

LITTLE paused and stared at her friend’s downcast face.

“Shame, you don’t need to be so distraught friend,” she consoled her. “Try to loosen up and just enjoy this day as a special treat; you look like you need the boost. I promise you there’s more where this came from! Now, let’s get you a dress, and then we can sort out your hair. You look like a porcupine in those braids. Come!”

Treasure felt so grateful that tears came to her eyes.

Lintle guided her to a rack of shiny and sequined party dresses. “Oooh,” she purred, “these will bring out your inner tiger.” She held up a one-shoulder animal-print dress in copper and brown.

Treasure grimaced and shook her head. “Too much, way too much.”

Lintle pouted and pulled out an asymmetrical red satin gown with a ruffled neckline.

“No.”

“This one?” It was a strapless mini length prom dress in a gorgeous shimmery bronze. “Look, it goes with the shoes, and it brings out the warmth in your skin.”

Treasure was surprised by how well the combination worked. “I like that.”

“Good choice. I think you’re getting the point now; you’re starting to feel the vibe here.”

Lintle seemed so eager and happy with herself that she gave a generous tip to the rude sales girl. “If you can’t live like me, you have to at least aspire to live like me, otherwise what are you doing in this city?” she taunted her, smirking. The girl looked sheepish.

Treasure was taken aback. *That’s a mean thing to say... but I guess the truth can be bitter.*

Lintle grabbed the shopping bags and stalked out of the store. “I gave her that tip because she needs it, poor thing; I understand. Working in a lavish boutique but can’t afford a thing in it. What a shame.”

Treasure hurried to stay close to her. She felt clumsy next to Lintle, the modern chic made-up madam. It was like a housewife pulling her help around a shopping mall, or a scene from *The Devil wears Prada*.

“We must get you a nice fragrance too. Follow me; I know the right store for that,” assured Lintle. Treasure quickly forgot what had happened and focused on the friendly faces around her. They passed couples holding hands, pregnant women,

businessmen and families. People came in and out of five and six star hotels and fancy restaurants, business centres and clubs. There were even travellers pulling their luggage.

“Some people leave their countries to come and shop here,” offered Lintle. “They visit their friends, buy food, and return home with meat and clothing. You see? It’s the mother of all cities in Africa. Whatever you see in New York or Milan, you have all of that luxury right here.” Treasure nodded.

Sandton City seemed like a hot spot for business and pleasure. It seemed like a happy affair for everyone.

Stuttafords was packed with customers. Some sort of sale was taking place but the prices still seemed high to Treasure.

“Everything costs more than a kidney! Who shops in here? Only the president’s wives can afford this.

Look at these price tags.”

“Hey, lower your voice.” Lintle reprimanded her. “Be on your best behaviour, and act like this is home for you. Never declare poverty; always speak well of yourself. I keep telling you your subconscious mind is way too powerful and you seem to don’t understand that.” She quickly chose a bottle of Kenzo Amour Le Parfum for Treasure “Let’s get this paid for and then head over to Diva Divine Salon in Bramley!”

“THIS IS WHERE we get a cab.” They stood outside the Michelangelo

Towers near the local taxi rank on West Street.

“Why don’t we just use a normal taxi? These private cabs cost a fortune, on top of the ten thousand we just spent in three hours.” Treasure was really getting worried. None of this was normal for her.

“Come on, it’s not even your money; what’s bothering you?” Lintle frowned.

“Just get in; we still have a lot to do. If we stay in here one minute longer, you won’t be able to do your hair. Paul has called twice already to check our progress.” She seemed irritable.

By the time they arrived in Bramley, Lintle had calmed down. “You’re going to look so spectacular. I can’t wait!”

Treasure didn’t want to say much anymore, she was already tired and moody.

This frantic day was a bit too much for her.

“Welcome to Diva Divine, ladies!” greeted the service manager, Erica.

“Please take a seat; someone will attend to you shortly.”

Lintle introduced Treasure to Cedric, the weave expert at the salon. They chose a 22 inch weave that took so long the salon had closed by the time it was finished. At the same time, a nail technician gave Treasure a classic manicure and pedicure.

Getting her hair done was surprisingly painful and she had to hold back tears most of the time, but it was worth it. It had an overwhelming effect. The person she saw in the mirror was completely different; she looked like an African-American.

Having a makeover is so liberating, but change does not come easily!

Cedric was very pleased with his work. “You look like a real supermodel.

Naomi has nothing on you! Give me a Tyra Banks pose... There you go!

Straight out of Vogue, darling.”

“Paul is done with his golf,” Lintle announced. “He’s coming to pay for our hair. It doesn’t come cheap you know,” she teased Cedric.

He smiled, “Oh, I know girlfriend. But isn’t it just fabulous?”

Treasure stood up and hugged him impulsively. “It’s gorgeous! Thank you,”

she enthused.

“Oh! I’m glad.” He waltzed off to the front desk to calculate the bill.

“Girl, you look amazing,” Lintle offered as Treasure kept running her fingers through the smooth texture in awe. It really was striking. She looked so mature.

“The best thing about golf is that they shower at the course, so Paul can take us home to get ready.”

As they admired Treasure’s hair from all angles, an unusual black car with red rims pulled up at the gate.

“Ladies, do you know that car? We don’t like opening the gate at this time; the salon has closed and it might not be safe.”

Lintle’s phone rang.

“Hello, babe. Oh, is that you? We thought it might be an intruder. Okay, I’ll ask them to open the gate.”

Paul drove in, in a sleek black Vanquish Aston Martin. Everybody’s eyes opened up like the Big Hole in Kimberley.

“Are you sure that’s Paul?” Treasure hesitated. “He wasn’t driving that car earlier.”

It was. His tall light muscular frame appeared at the main door. “Looking stunning ladies; you guys have done well I see.”

“Oh thank you, Paul, I’m truly grateful. I feel all brand new and beautiful.”

Treasure seemed happier and her genuine spirit made Paul pleased.

“Let me sort out the bill here; ladies feel free to go and greet the newest family member.”

Lintle’s eyes were glued to the car; she hoped they were using it that night.

She grabbed the keys and explored the car while Treasure stood at a distance in admiration. Paul came up behind her.

“Isn’t she a treasure?”

Treasure was puzzled. “The car? What do you mean?”

“Well, she’s something like you – soft and gentle on the inside and a beauty from afar with an engine that makes men cry.”

Paul came closer to her left shoulder with his chin close enough to stroke her skin. His flirting made Treasure feel extremely self-conscious, but she remembered how good she looked and she decided to play along. “It’s stunning; look at how Lintle fits right into it, a perfect match. She’s fallen head over heels for it. I think you have a new rival,” she grinned impishly.

Paul laughed. “Yes, I might as well give up now. Competing with bags and shoes was easy, but this? I’m just another plaything. Well, let’s get the show on the road; I know you’re both dying to feel what this baby can do on the highway. Let’s have a taste of this machine. You have two hours to get ready; I know women need more than that.”

Paul opened the left back door for Treasure and hopped into the driver’s seat.

The ride back home was smooth and joyful.

Lintle was taking a myriad selfies and posting them to her Facebook wall.

“What are you doing?” asked Treasure.

“Honey, life is only as good as it looks on social media. If it’s not on Facebook, it never happened...”

Treasure realised that to this crowd, sharing pictures was less about sharing moments with friends and more about showing what you had, the people you knew, and how much you could spend in one go. The lifestyle had to be opulent – having countless followers on social media, with thousands of likes and comments and retweets, showed how powerful and influential a person was. Treasure was surprised to find that she wanted a piece of that life, with that kind of power and influence.

CHAPTER 25

Don't over-exaggerate your importance in the eyes of those who seem uninformed about you; intelligence is silent yet under-estimated when arrogance is celebrated.

AT THE DINNER TABLE, Paul sat between Lintle and Treasure. Opposite them were the Minister of Arts and

Culture, Mr Trevor Zuma, and his business partner Tim Morgan. Tim seemed very wealthy, charming and flirty despite not being quite so noble on the eye. He did not have a guest for the night, whereas the minister had brought along his on-off girlfriend Sonia.

She seems too young to be around these men, Treasure thought.

Dinner went by like a summer night breeze, hot and cold but mostly enjoyable. Treasure felt confident with her makeover. She followed Lintle's lead; her friend obviously knew how to handle these dinners. They enjoyed the four-course meal and the wine that Paul ordered.

The men drank and talked about their new toys, the cities they had visited, their golf and their political vendettas. Treasure wanted to be a part of the discussions but she felt too shy to say a word. Besides, Lintle wasn't particularly interested in the conversation; she kept herself busy taking pictures of the food and the bottles of wine, as well as endless selfies.

"Paul, my baby, come closer into my picture. Make sure that the minister isn't covered; yes, that's perfect. My followers are going to DIE when they see who we're dining with tonight."

She handed the phone to Treasure expectantly. Treasure stood up, took the picture, and handed the phone back to Lintle. She didn't feel cheerful anymore. It was boring being around old men and they gave her the chills, but she didn't want to show her discomfort.

Tim kept ordering drinks for everyone at the table. "Please refill whatever the ladies are having and give us your cigar list. Better yet, give it to me," he asked the waiter. He had a pleasantly deep and husky voice.

Tim turned to face the ladies and elaborated on his habit. "When I relax in my lapa, I enjoy Cohiba Esplendido, Cohiba Behike, or Gurkha Black Dragon.

People like to associate cigars with power and wealth, but I simply smoke them while I'm enjoying a good book. That's how simple my life is from time to time."

Treasure was stumped. She knew nothing about cigars. She looked at Lintle, who simply smiled coquettishly and confessed, “Oh, we don’t know much about cigars. But Cohiba was Che Guevara’s personal brand, I think?”

“Well, yes, Cohiba is quintessentially Cuban,” Tim agreed. “But it’s good to branch out and try other cigars. The Gurkhas are just as prestigious, especially when infused with cognac.”

As the waiter returned with the cigar list, Lintle appraised Tim with a shrewd eye. He was difficult to read. Dressed like a golfer, his short hair, formfitting navy golf shirt and trim tan Nike slacks didn’t say much. However, his watch indicated a higher calibre. It was an exclusive Greubel Forsey Invention Piece 3 24 Secondes Incliné. That gave his image quite a boost.

“Treasure, are you seeing this?” Lintle whispered, pinching her friend, who had taken no notice despite her professed love of watches. Treasure’s eyes widened with admiration as she studied the luxury Swiss timepiece as discreetly as she could, thinking that Lintle’s eye was indeed like a roaming rattlesnake. Eventually, she couldn’t help herself.

“Mr Morgan—”

“Tim, please. Call me Tim,” he urged her cordially.

“Tim,” Treasure repeated shyly, “your watch is beautiful. It’s a Greubel Forsey?”

Tim’s eyebrows rose. “Indeed it is,” he said, his lips slightly upturned.

“May I have a closer look at the tourbillon?”

Without hesitation, he got up and came to sit next to her, unclasping the black alligator leather strap and handing her the piece. Her excitement was obvious as she examined the rare beauty with its platinum casing and gold dial plates

inscribed in French. At the side of the watch, a curved sapphire glass provided a window onto the rotating 24-second tourbillon, inclined at 25

degrees.

He leaned towards her to ask, “So, can you tell me why the tourbillon is inclined?” The scent of his cologne – bold yet dignified; sexy in a reserved way – surprised her as she admired the minuscule interconnected components.

“At 25 degrees?” she smiled. “I’d have to guess that it’s something to do with negating the effects of gravity on the gears.”

“That is correct.” Tim had a lovely straight smile; his teeth gleamed like pearls despite his nicotine habit.

They chatted a bit more about the mechanics of the watch and what you could time in 24 seconds. Treasure turned it over to read the French message inscribed in full on the back.

“*Une plage de fonctionnement... Fleuhr!*” She affected a French accent. “It would take me ages to decipher this.”

“Oh, I haven’t even begun,” Tim confessed. “But I definitely think we should, don’t you? Imagine dying without ever knowing what they were trying to tell us.”

“Hmm, maybe how to travel through time?”

“Exactly! We can compare notes next time.”

“Next time?” Treasure froze inside; did he think she was flirting?

“If you like,” Tim nodded. He asked for Lintle’s phone and took a photo.

“There you go; you can translate it in your own time. But whatever you do, don’t put that photo on the internet. They’re very *pehrticulehr* about that sort of thing.” He winked.

“THANK YOU SO MUCH for dinner; it will be a miracle if I get home in one piece, but I need to take care of my lady and her gorgeous friend.” Paul shook Tim’s hand as well as the minister’s.

“Let’s meet on Friday for a round of golf,” suggested Tim.

“We’re glad that you’re enjoying the new toy. Such things can make other young men lose focus on their source. Keep us close and we’ll take you higher,” the minister chimed in.

Paul nodded graciously and climbed into the car where Treasure and Lintle were waiting, already half asleep. “Ladies, I hope you had a good time,” he exclaimed, but no one had the energy to respond.

A FEW DAYS LATER, Paul came by with a gift for Treasure. Lintle was helping Treasure prepare to model at her second major fashion show, which was at the Melrose Arch precinct near Illovo. Treasure was getting ready in front of the mirror.

“Hello, ladies. How’s my Lintle treating you?” He kissed Lintle on the cheek but his eye was on Treasure’s flawless model body.

“Oh, she’s been amazing,” Treasure praised, fiddling with an earring.

“We’ve been running up and down for fittings with different designers. It’s been hectic but fantastic.”

She was so excited she didn’t notice the way Paul was staring at her body, transfixed. Abruptly, he held out a small gold box. “Before I forget, Tim asked me to give you this.” Treasure looked over her shoulder at Paul’s hands. “And he requested your phone number, so I passed it on. He said that he’ll talk to you as soon as you’ve opened the gift.”

“What is it?” she asked curiously.

“Well, open it!” Lintle chided. “We also want to see what’s inside.”

Treasure took the gift from Paul and opened it gingerly to find a shiny black glass flacon with a crystal-encrusted stopper, delicately wrapped in tissue paper. A soft white card was inscribed with the words ‘To a certain Treasure: continue appreciating the finer things in life.’

“What’s this?” Treasure was puzzled and uncertain.

“THAT, my friend, is an exclusive Robert Piguet FRACAS Swarovski perfume bottle!” Lintle exclaimed, her eyes wide. “Are you kidding?! It’s like one in a million! It’s damned expensive. You’re a lucky girl; Tim

obviously likes you.” Like lightning, Lintle reached for her phone and passed it to Treasure. “You need to call him right away and thank him.”

“No, I can’t,” murmured Treasure in a daze. “I don’t have... I mean, I can’t take this; I’m sorry. I barely even know the man. What did I do to deserve anything from him?”

Paul looked stunned, even impressed, yet he hesitated.

“Okay, hang on,” he took over with peculiar urgency.

“PLEASE , you NEED to take this. He’s a very important client of mine. And he’s really a great guy. You have nothing to worry about. But don’t offend him please.

You need to accept this gift and call him.”

Treasure was confused by his concerned attitude and contradicting words.

They were both putting immense pressure on her. *What’s the big deal?* She opened the bottle and smelt the cap. It smelled expensive, but not overpowering; sensuous and fresh, with glamorous feminine floral notes.

“Well, okay, it’s actually really nice!” she admitted shyly.

She dialled the number that Paul gave her. After three rings, his pleasant gravelly voice answered. “Treasure my dear. I’ve been waiting for your call. I hope you like the little gift,” he said in his low, sophisticated voice.

“Oh yes, thank you so much,” Treasure said sincerely. “It smells divine.

I’ll wear it tonight at the fashion show.”

“Well that sounds perfect,” Tim said smoothly. “Finish up, and I’ll drive you there.”

“Um – sorry?” Treasure was taken aback.

“I’m parked outside, and I’m not taking no for an answer. This evening’s going to be perfect for you.”

Treasure was alarmed. This was going too fast.

“Oh no, it’s fine thank you. Paul’s taking me.” She tried to dissuade him gently.

“I guess you didn’t hear me. I’m outside so tell Paul to get you ready.

Cheers, I’ll see you shortly.” He hung up.

“Well! Tim is outside, apparently. Paul, you didn’t tell me this. What’s going on?” Treasure was flustered. “What does this man want and what did you say to him?” She got up and rushed to pack a bag. At least she didn’t have to do her own make-up, and she knew that her weave looked gorgeous.

“He wanted to get to know you so I told him a bit about you – don’t worry.

You’ll find out what he wants soon enough.” Paul brushed away the question.

Outside the glass reception door stood a blue Maserati Quattroporte, with Tim waiting next to it. Paul walked Treasure out and formally re-introduced them. Tim took Treasure by the hand and opened the door for her. Treasure felt nervous but somewhat excited, with butterflies in her stomach.

“Please relax. Tonight is your night and you’re going to be remarkable on that catwalk. I must say the perfume does smell exceptional on you: a priceless gift for a princess.”

Treasure smiled and kept the conversation light.

The fashion show was a major success. Treasure felt like a star on the catwalk. Tim had a mesmerizing stare and handsome smile that he used to good effect every time she appeared; he seemed to always be in her line of sight. It felt good to have him there, supporting her. Like she had nothing to worry about.

CHAPTER 26

Some keys are not meant to open doors but can surely open your heart. Most times leaving the door closed is the best option.

– Bongani Shongwe

TIM STARTED VISITING Treasure more frequently. Afternoon lunches were their favourite pastime during the week. He drove her around to shows and events, and picked her up after every casting. He funded random shopping sprees and spa treatments. On weekends he dazzled her with trips to the bush, expensive gifts, dinners and game drives. It seemed like a fairy tale, except with a sort of 'godfather' instead of a 'fairy godmother'.

Treasure felt that she desperately needed a good man to give her hope that not all men were disappointing. If Paul was a good example, Tim was even better. He was intelligent, a smooth talker, generous and hardworking, and he knew how to take care of women.

Tim was growing on Treasure. She felt comfortable around him; he filled her need for a father figure, friend and guide. He made her feel special, desired and treasured. Whatever she needed he provided, and it seemed like the next step in their relationship was close. She was spoilt with money, which came in handy for her modelling events and her new lifestyle.

After about three months, Tim booked them a weekend away in Cape Town at the One and Only Hotel. This was the first time they would be sleeping away together. However, Treasure had her own room and space.

Not even once did Tim pressure her or ask for sex. He was too much of a gentleman. Only light kisses and hugs were on the menu.

ANOTHER THREE MONTHS passed; life was fast and each weekend was a party. Tim became the centre of her world. She was addicted to him and the lifestyle he came with, and she was in love with the idea of having someone to take care of her. He gave her all of his attention and spoon-fed her gifts and money. What was there not to like?

Her modelling career was taking off, and so was her relationship. Social media played a huge part in her everyday life; she posted every lunch, every gift, every gig and every trip she took with Tim. She wanted people to see that she was

getting high ratings and that she had a man who gave her status.

It worked; people started treating her like a queen.

The greed and rudeness of some people in the modelling industry was frightening, but she was determined to succeed one way or another. In this city, you had to know the right people to get through the door, and Treasure bulldozed her way in. Tim was her key to power by association. She was called onto well-known media platforms and TV shows. She made friends like Kenny Kunene who gave her access to the best VIP parties all over the country. She was on the exclusive lists of clubs like ZAR that gave models a PR boost; she met other ambitious women and models who were respected and fun-loving, like Miranda Dlamini and Ella Kayembe; and yes, she even met Khanyi Mbau.

Life was good. She was becoming a member of high society, and she was hooked on the attention and the good times. The void within her was quickly filled by the sudden fame. She replaced her need for genuine love with social power and Tim's presence. Social media validated her relevance in the modelling industry as she started appearing in blog posts, then magazine features, then more blog posts; fashion and fame are always feeding on themselves and each other.

CHAPTER 27

The darkness never marries the light.

– Tebello Justice Phamotse

“I’VE BEEN TRYING to call you, Tim; it’s been TWO WEEKS and you’ve said nothing. My messages have all gone unanswered. And now you pop up out of nowhere?” Treasure asked irritably. They were sitting in Tim’s car outside Lintle’s flat.

Cool, calm and collected, Tim pulled out a little box. “Well if you open that, you’ll have your answer. Stop worrying so much; you know I’m yours baby.”

Treasure took the box and opened it. “Keys? What are these for? Is this a joke?” Realising she had no idea what was going

on or how to react, Treasure suddenly felt paranoid.

“That is the set of keys to your new apartment. It’s a two-bedroom townhouse with a swimming pool and braai area. It’s fully furnished.”

Treasure was too blown away to respond. She stared at Tim as he continued.

“We’re going to have wonderful romantic dinners and date nights there.

I know you’re very scared to be alone so it’s in a secure complex in Rivonia.

And inside the apartment is a SECOND key for the garage, where something extra special is waiting just for you.”

“Um...”

“It’s your choice really, when you want to move in. You have the keys so you can get your clothes and move in right now. I can even call my guys to help you move if you have a lot of things.”

“You mean I’m going to have my own place? And a car?!”

“Yes,” Tim laughed.

“...I don’t even know how to drive!”

“That’s fine; you’ll learn, baby.” He watched her with amusement.

“Wow; I don’t even know what to say. Let me just... calm down a bit.”

Treasure took a deep breath in and out. “My own place?!”

“Look, it’s not a mansion...”

“Thank you so much; I’m so excited!” She may not have seen it yet but she knew that it would be amazing to have her own space where she could even invite her mother over. She hadn’t seen her in over a year, although they texted each other often.

“Let’s go up and tell Lintle. She won’t like that I’m leaving, but at least she’ll have privacy and space with Paul again.”

“No problem; you can go up just now. I’ve also booked us a room at Twenty West Executive apartments in Sandton for tonight.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, I think we have a lot to celebrate. We can have dinner there and enjoy a massage in their lovely spa. And...we’ll have a suite all to ourselves, so that we can finally BOND.”

Tim held her hand and squeezed it as if he was reinforcing his statement, so that it sank in that it was time for them to finally have sex.

He had been patient and careful around her, but as far as he was concerned, tonight was the night. They looked at each other and it dawned on Treasure that sex was the real key.

“Come on; don’t look so disorientated; it’s going to be fun! Now go and tell your friend about the goodies your man has gotten you. I’ll wait here and check my emails and make some calls. Let me know if you need a hand to bring down your things.”

She slowly climbed out of the car with the keys in her hand. Tim closed her door, seeming very pleased with himself.

It all seemed so abrupt. Treasure’s instincts told her something was off, but she couldn’t refuse Tim’s generosity after everything he had done for her.

She climbed the stairs in shock. She was baffled as to how she would explain it to Lintle.

“Um, I have good and bad news; which do you prefer?”

Lintle was cleaning and seemed distracted again. “Umm, just tell me both.”

“Well I’m moving out, actually; I mean, now, or tomorrow....”

“What do you mean? Lintle gaped at her.

Treasure felt oddly embarrassed. “Uh, well, Tim just gave me these keys to my new place. It’s in Rivonia. I’m not sure what to do now. We also have a dinner date and I won’t be coming back afterwards. We’re booked in at a hotel in Sandton.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful! It’s clear you’re for keeps!” Lintle was too happy about the new house to care how Treasure was getting it. There was no worry or panic in her eyes. She pulled out a large travel bag and kept talking while she packed Treasure’s clothes.

“I like a man who knows his business. Be good; listen to him like you’re his wife, and make sure you please him well tonight.”

“Okay...”

“He clearly loves you, so why not? Remember, never make him angry.

Seal off every doubt with a bottle of wine.” Lintle seemed to have turned into a Stepford wife in two seconds flat. “Read the newspaper, especially the business section every day. Men like it when a woman is informed and has an interest in what they’re doing. Oh, and you have no choice now; you need to start learning golf. You have to come up to his level. He will need a teammate when he’s playing a couple of rounds.” Lintle went on and on.

“These young boys won’t treat you nearly as well, so take this rough diamond honey. He may be in his fifties but who cares? We want those Gucci’s, right!”

Treasure was more worried about what was to come that night. She hadn’t had sex since she was raped by Allen the pervert photographer, and she had just avoided thinking about it.

How am I going to do this? How do you even sleep with a man old enough to be your father? Tim was double her age. Does he even have a full erection?

She suddenly felt sick; all kinds of disturbing images filled her mind. The rapes she had endured kept creeping into every vision of sex she had. She sat quietly on the couch with her head in her hands while Lintle continued to pack.

“Honey, it’s not the end of the world, think of all that you’re going to have.

If you’re cunning, get him to send you back to school. UNISA is fantastic for your lifestyle. You’ll get books at home, do

assignments and just go in to write exams. And you're a 'straight A' student so I don't see any problems.

Relax; think long term. Think of all the holidays, the gifts, making love on a yacht.

You really have it good. So many girls go on endless internet hunts or prowl through Sandton on foot to find your kind of man. Just make him happy in bed and Paris could be your next home."

Treasure perked up. Lintle was right. Tim wouldn't mistreat her. He was different; he was the type of man she had been waiting for. The sex might even be amazing, if she gave him half a chance.

A TEXT CAME from Tim: <Baby, come down, I miss you...>

"He wants me to go; can I get the clothes tomorrow? I'll just take what I need for the night," Treasure pleaded.

"Definitely," said Lintle generously. "Plus I'll go with you and see your new place. Let me stop all this and get you back to your knight in shining armour; men like him shouldn't be kept waiting. We treat them like kings at all times.

Now have fun and stop being a nervous wreck!"

Treasure packed a night bag and went back downstairs.

SLEEPY AND HAPPY after a long massage, she found herself in a luxury suite, elegant and refined, with classic paintings and prints adorning the walls. The colour scheme was romantic white and red with a hint of silver.

An opulent king-size bed with Egyptian cotton bedding was the prominent feature in the master suite, outclassing the bar and even the huge plasma TV

mounted on the wall. It was an ideal setting with a panoramic view of the Sandton skyline, and glimpses of light from Alexandra Township, also known as Gomora, to the east. At the corner of the bed, two pairs of plush slippers and two robes were laid out. Treasure took her time to appreciate everything, her eyes wide with admiration. She was getting ready in the bathroom with its Italian marble and luxury vanities when Tim

returned from ordering room service. She came back into the living room and welcomed him with a kiss on the cheek.

Tim didn't waste any time. He took her hand and led her into the master suite. She felt a bubbling fear in her belly as old memories came flooding back.

Tim may have sensed that something was wrong, but that didn't stop him.

The night would go ahead as he had planned it. Before she could protest, he took off her negligee swiftly and guided her hands towards his belt to help him get undressed.

They were both naked now. There was no going back. She gulped. Tim seemed oblivious to her discomfort.

CHAPTER 28

Even when a lion is hungry, it won't eat grass; don't change your principles just because your stomach is empty.

– Mzilikazi wa Afrika

“BABY, YOU LOOK so sexy,” he murmured, kissing her neck. “Let me show you what I need; would you like that?”

“Yes, um, keep going...” she whispered hesitantly.

“On your knees, my baby...” he directed.

Her eyes wide, Treasure complied. This wasn't quite the romantic encounter she had expected.

“Come and meet the King.”

She wasn't sure what to do, so she held it gingerly and tried not to grimace as she put it in her mouth. It tasted of salt and sweat. She squeezed her eyes shut and did her best to please him.

He became somewhat impatient with her efforts, moving her head firmly back and forth with his left hand. He told her to place her hand on his testicles and move them around. She tensed up in discomfort.

“Relax; treat it like an ice cream, yes, that's it... use your tongue, that's my girl. Keep going...”

Treasure felt as though her head was fused onto the sweating shaft. It was hitting the back of her throat and she almost gagged but forced herself to keep going. Her knees hurt, her jaw began to ache and she slowed down.

“Keep going, my baby,” Tim instructed, barely noticing her restrained choking. He was entranced with her body and her small waist, with her nipples standing at attention. She was finally his, feeding on the salt from his body. He relaxed and pulled slightly out, letting her catch a breath.

She looked up at his eyes; he was caught in a stupor. His body had taken

over; he was weak and willing. She slowly pulled him down to lay him on the carpet. He sank downwards, accepting all that she did. She climbed rather awkwardly on top of him, trying to move her body against his while sliding her thighs over his legs.

He reached up to pull her face towards his for a tongue-plunging kiss.

She managed to calm the probing, kissing him gently and taking in small gasps of air. He was moving his ample pelvis up against her. She could feel him trying to insert his erection and quickly took a condom from the top of the coffee table, but he grabbed it from her.

“Don’t ruin the moment; that thing will kill my erection,” Tim whispered in her ear. “I want us to bond. Let me feel you so you know I’m truly yours.”

Treasure didn’t want to disappoint him. She allowed him to slide in and out, although he was slightly big for her and it hurt.

Tim held her by the waist and lay back to move in deep. He watched her moving; she seemed to be teasing him. He imagined that something had taken her over; he felt as if he was dealing with an animal.

Her body glowed with sweat. Tim looked at her and saw something that he badly needed. She was not the sweet and innocent girl he had once thought; she knew what he wanted.

She could give him the thrills and vitality he had needed in his life for a while.

TREASURE FELT DROWSY but she wanted to finish this. She forced herself to ride him faster, until he eventually came. He pulled a cigar out of his pants and lit it up. He was at his greatest high.

The hotel room was a haze of smoke. Emotionally exhausted, Treasure dipped her head down onto his shoulder. She didn't experience nearly the same high, but he didn't bother to ask.

"There's something I need to tell you, Treasure," he said. He tried to get her attention with body kisses, but she was too tired. Eventually he shook her awake.

She pulled herself closer to him sleepily, waiting for the magic words.

After all, she thought she had done an excellent job, especially considering

her doubts. If he could reciprocate, she might even start to enjoy this.

"Go ahead, I'm listening," she murmured, tired but peaceful.

"I want to be honest with you. I'm married," Tim stated matter-of-factly.

"I live with my wife Daphne, and I have two daughters and two sons."

Treasure's eyes opened wide. She couldn't believe what she was hearing.

Is this a joke? She sat up to confront him. "So what am I supposed to do now?" she frowned.

"Well, it won't be a big problem; it's not like I haven't dated before.

Nothing will change. Don't worry; it's normal for men like me."

Her heart sank. *It's true. How is it possible? What is he doing with me?*

We've been together for over six months and he said nothing all this time!

Little had checked all of his social media pages and there was no sign of a wife.

How could someone keep a secret like that in this city? What sort of wife had tolerated all of her posts tagging Tim? It made no sense. Treasure stared at him and struggled to keep her cool.

“You just slept with me, and NOW you decide to tell me this?” Her tone was harsh. This was all coming at the worst time possible.

“I just said, I will take care of you. Daphne knows that I have someone.

She doesn't know that I treat you better. I just want you to know who I am and what I have. You're still my leading lady. Don't be in doubt; I love you and I want you to know more about my life so that you're comfortable with your space.”

“I... I don't know what to say,” Treasure mumbled. Tim smiled at her and kissed her cheek. “My dear, I'm more than a common boyfriend. I can help you to open a small business and even get you government tenders. I will be your lover, your business mentor, and your life coach.” He got up to pour a glass of wine for her and continue with his cigar. The discussion was apparently over.

Treasure was taken aback by his manner. He was used to this; it was no big deal for him at all. She allowed the wine to soothe her angry thoughts; she was too tired to argue. She just had to suppress all her worries and continue with her mandate. She had hoped that he would truly love her for the person she was inside, but no one really knew that person.

TREASURE WOKE UP in the morning feeling very tired and sore. Her intimate parts were on fire. The rape memory tortured her as she gazed at herself in the bathroom mirror. She desperately wanted to forget and start over with this new man, but his smell on her skin was a horrible reminder.

Tim noticed the discomfort in her movements in the bedroom mirror. He opened the window and lit another cigar.

“Relax, you’ll be fine in the evening. Just get that bath tub ready. I’ll join you in a second.”

As she watched the running water

, Treasure knew that it was more than burning skin that troubled her.

Her mind and heart were like a rumbling volcano. But she couldn’t express her feelings to anyone.

“The water’s nice and warm; come on in.” Treasure called out. She wanted to act as normal as possible.

“I can’t,” Tim replied as he came in. “I just got a call from home; I need to take my son to a school game. Enjoy your treat. Everything’s fully paid for so after this, you can have breakfast downstairs and then catch a cab to your new place. The address is on the key holder; the driver will know where it is.

Here’s the cab fee.” He patted her cheek and left.

She shook her head and kept scrubbing her skin.

She hated who she was becoming: a high-class prostitute, in expensive couture with a luxurious lifestyle. *That’s what social media calls it.* She had the modelling lifestyle to cover it up, but people on Facebook had already started calling her names. She grimaced. They had only fuelled her desire to claim this man for herself. If his wife couldn’t make him happy and keep him to herself, Treasure would find a way to replace her. She wasn’t giving up;

she was desperate to have a good career and to be a good example to her siblings.

She also wanted to give her mother hope and strength by doing well. *Tim is going to give me all that and more.*

Admittedly, there was a part of her that still thought of Alex. He was attending school in the Vaal, but he didn’t seem to have the same feelings for her. She hadn’t seen him in two years, and she was also a different person now. If he could be a

playboy, she could also play this game. She pulled in a deep breath and collected her things from around the suite.

She hurried downstairs. A cab was already waiting for her.

CHAPTER 29

Sugar daddy not so sweet...

– Diteboho Grace Phamotse

THE NEXT COUPLE of years passed quickly. Treasure was enjoying her new home. Lintle would visit often to blow off some steam and have a well cooked meal. Treasure was what they call an untrained chef. They enjoyed wine and long hours in the kitchen cooking up a storm. Lintle would sleep over and they would go jogging together in the mornings. Paul also came to enjoy the feasts every last Sunday of the month, when he was not travelling.

But something always seemed to be missing. Treasure hardly spoke to any of her siblings. She avoided being asked about going back to school and whenever she visited them, her father seemed not to care much about her whereabouts, so she kept to herself. The only friend who was really there for her was Lintle, even though it seemed that she cared more about the money Treasure would share with her, especially on their countless shopping trips overseas.

Treasure became used to being Tim's lover and/or trophy girlfriend, depending on what he needed from her. She learned not to ask about his wife or to interfere when his wife was mentioned.

With Tim, her modelling work, shopping, socialising, Treasure fell into a routine of sorts, but she was never bored. She had started using the BMW

that he bought for her so getting around was much easier. Tim made sure she could afford to do almost anything she wanted when he wasn't there, although he kept strict watch over what she spent her money on. He opened a bank account for her, but it was an offshoot of his account so he had complete control. He was also notoriously jealous of any friendships and activities that he hadn't sanctioned. But she excused him these

faults because he was mostly sweet and loving, and he even gave her money to send to her mom.

Then, things began to take a turn. Tim seemed to be more absent and edgy;

he saw her less often, and when he came over he was less attentive and caring. He was acting out of character, or at least not like the character she thought she knew. Eventually she realised she was seeing him less than once a week. *We used to be together almost every day. What's going on?*

The loneliness was horrible so she would go shopping for no reason, and even that became a bore. She didn't want to be the annoying girlfriend so she kept herself busy learning, keeping up with social media and continuing with modelling jobs.

Her career was the only exciting thing she had; from the travelling to attending exquisite events all over the country, Treasure was a socialite of note.

One day in November, Treasure made a phone call that she had been putting off for a very long time. She had some big news.

"Hi, Mom, it's been so long. How have you been? I'm sure Dad told you that I haven't been home. It's a long story but I'm on my feet and working hard."

"Hello, my baby, I heard you're with a wonderful man in Sandton now.

It seems like you're getting what you always dreamed of." Thato sounded wistful. "I see you on TV sometimes and I say, that's my girl..."

"Yes, I'm modelling, and I have a boyfriend, but it's not that great. I miss you so much. I mean, I'm good; so don't worry about me. I'll come and see you soon."

"Thank you for the money you've been sending me. It's really helping now that I don't have a medical aid."

"It's not much Mom, but I'll do my best to help you."

"How are my other children? I've been writing letters but no one's responding... So should I send text messages now? Life

has become more fast and complex.”

“Mom, people don’t write letters anymore; send them a Whatsapp or a text message.... I’ll send you a new smartphone, okay? I’ll send it by courier next week. I wish I was home with you but I have to be here to work. I have been looking at going back to school. It’s just that I’m a little busy right now ,

what with working and my social life.”

“Thank you, my baby. I pray for you all the time, you know. Remember to be true to who you are and fight for your dreams, and make sure you fix things with your father. Family is a strong foundation especially when you become famous. Fame can destroy you; it’s an animal and a beast that eats the weak.

I’m no one in this world, but you’re my seed; shine my baby. Never put a man first; not once. If he loves you, he’ll show it every chance he gets.

Humble yourself in front of all. Choose your friends wisely and remember that no man is an island. Handle yourself like a queen even in your darkest hour.”

“I will, Mom, I promise.”

“I need to see you my child. My day is coming soon. You know I’m ready; this world isn’t meant for the weak. I love you.”

“Thank you, Mom!” Treasure was close to tears. She realised she couldn’t tell her mom her news without crying, so she quickly hung up the phone.

EARLY THE NEXT day, Treasure prepared to blow Tim away with a full breakfast from the Michelangelo Hotel: two baked eggs with tomato and feta; shrimp with steak and a variety of ham; waffles and pancakes with berries and cream; boated bread and almond croissants with cheeses and preserves.

She had spent most of the night trying to find the right words to break her big news. She was both nervous and excited as Tim arrived.

One of her biggest dreams was coming true and she needed to share it with somebody.

“Wow,” he laughed, “this is some world class setting you have here. The food looks delicious, and you look amazing in that pink dress.”

“Baby, please eat quickly; there’s something I want to tell you,” Treasure said eagerly. Her essence was different; there was a delightful enthusiasm.

“Okay, you seem cheerful so just tell me!” Tim was pleased.

“So, I don’t know if you noticed, but I put on some weight recently.” She smiled sheepishly. “I thought it was from indulging at all these social events.

But my eating habits didn’t really change that much, so I went to the doctor a couple of days ago... and... I’m sixteen weeks pregnant! We’re going to be parents!” Treasure smiled happily, her eyes dancing, with her hands on her tummy.

Tim dropped his utensils and leapt to his feet.

“You’re joking, right? Are you trying to kill me!?” He gaped at Treasure with his hands on the table.

“No; let me show you.” She swallowed her disappointment at his reaction and fetched a scan and a doctor’s report from her bedroom. He glared at them intensely.

“It’s weird that I didn’t know for so long,” she continued. “But my periods were normal, and...”

Abruptly, Tim threw the papers at her with vehemence.

“Hey!” she said in protest.

He pushed her up against the wall. “You just sent my heart from one to a hundred,” he growled. She tried to object, but he gripped her throat and put his face close to hers.

“Do you want to ruin my reputation? Is that your plan? You want me to MARRY you now? Do you have *any idea* what people will say about me?!”

She shook her head mutely.

“No? You don’t? You will kill that thing and I will make sure of it!”

Treasure was terrified to see this side of him. Visuals of her father flashed in front of her eyes. Tim kept squeezing her neck to a point where she couldn’t breathe. “I’ll pick you up tomorrow morning and we’ll sort this out!” He let her go and stormed out.

Treasure was left in a state of shock. She didn’t know what to do or say.

Out of pure instinct, she rushed to the front door and locked it in case Tim came back to do something worse. Then she went into her bedroom and locked that door as well, trying to calm herself.

Maybe he’s just shocked. He’ll come around. This is our baby; he loves kids and he would never kill it. Besides, it’s too late for an abortion. I will not kill my own seed – there’s no way. Tim loves me; he’s just shocked... She kept convincing herself.

She spent the rest of the day tidying, trying to stay calm and daydreaming about the baby. It was so exciting. She had so many plans to make. She didn’t know its gender yet, but she had a tentative list of names she had always liked, both English and Sotho. This baby would be well educated and proud of its origins. She swore to protect it from indifference, neglect, trauma, injustice and domestic violence. She texted Tim that evening. <Don’t worry, baby, everything’s going to be fine. I don’t need anything, but I ask for your love and support.>

There was no answer.

TIM ARRIVED EARLY the next morning, before six. He let himself in and stood next to Treasure’s bed, fuming while she slept. Eventually he kicked the bed.

“Wake up, bitch! This is MY house. Get UP!”

Treasure woke suddenly, disorientated. She sat up in a panic and pulled her blankets close protectively. This was all totally wrong. “What’s happening?”

“Get dressed. Bring your ID document and wear something comfortable.

And DON'T eat or drink ANYTHING.”

“Where are we going? It's so early. I just woke up! I need to shower.”

“Get OUT of this bed, woman,” Tim growled. “NOW. We have a seven o'clock appointment at the Sandton Clinic. You want to go dressed like that?”

Treasure got up and got ready. She was overwhelmed with emotion: defiant and scared and panicking and angry. Maybe he just wanted to check that the baby was really his? That was fine with her. He could have a thousand paternity tests. Once he saw that baby's heart beating in its tiny body he would love it too.

At 6.35 she got into the car and sighed. “This drama is really not necessary.”

Tim snapped and glared at her. “Listen, if you know what's good for you and your mother you will do as I say, otherwise the money will stop and you will both have nothing. So just listen to me and your cosy life will carry right on, with diamonds and dresses and champagne and buffet breakfasts.”

His obvious contempt for her made her regret not securing her apartment or even changing the locks. *What did I expect from him? A baby shower?*

She contemplated escape, but he was driving as fast as he could, and he had locked down all the car's doors and windows. Even if she could somehow throw herself out, she didn't want to harm her baby.

A nurse was waiting for them at the clinic entrance at 6:55. She clearly knew of a 'situation' that needed taking care of. She was cold, fast and business-like as she examined Treasure, while talking over her head with Tim. Treasure wasn't aware of their exact arrangement, but it didn't seem promising.

Who knows what Tim has told her? Surely they should be doing an ultrasound scan?

The nurse didn't engage with Treasure's questions except to tell her to

“Relax; everything will be okay.” It wasn't very convincing. Treasure nicknamed her *Iron Hlaudi*.

By 7:15 they were escorted to a ward where she was put on a drip with Tim standing close by. Treasure wanted his reassurance, but he was still angry and moody under his blank expression. She began to feel dizzy and tired, and then she fell into a deep sleep.

“WAKE UP, MY ANGEL; I'm taking you home to rest.”

It took Treasure a while to orientate herself. She was a little drowsy but she managed to get out of the bed. She was still wearing a hospital gown and she could feel a lot of discomfort in her cervix. Had they been checking on the baby? Maybe they had done some kind of invasive DNA test.

As she sat in the wheelchair Tim showed her, she realised there was a thick sanitary pad in her underwear, as though she had had a miscarriage. But that didn't make sense... She looked up at Tim and his expression confirmed her

worst fears. A cold lump descended into her core as she realised what had been done to her. She went into shock as Tim knelt next to her and spoke grimly, very quietly into her ear.

“If you say ONE WORD I will take all that you have in a heartbeat. When we get to reception, sign all the documents and say nothing. You know what I'm capable of, so don't test me. Remember, we are a happy couple, so smile and thank everybody on your way out.”

She was too weak to respond. Tim pushed the wheelchair out of the ward to the reception area. *Iron Hlaudi* was there, looking indifferent and dour. She gave Treasure a document to sign. Tim paid the bill and helped her into the car. The drive home passed in a daze. Before she knew it, she was back in her own bed.

“You need to rest. I guess all that food you bought yesterday will come in handy after all.” He kissed her cheek and left her.

THREE WEEKS PASSED, and Tim didn't visit Treasure once. She was exhausted, mentally and emotionally. She was desperate for support. But she had no one to reach out to.

On some days he phoned her to see if she was 'out clubbing', which Treasure found preposterous. How could he be so out of touch? Her heart and mind were not in that space. Not once did he say that he loved or missed her.

He was on his own planet, with no concern at all for the human life they had made and lost.

Treasure sank into a deep depression. Her morning tea was gin and tonic; lunch was wine and home-delivered Nando's chicken. Dinners were tears and hot wings accompanied by her new best friend, chocolate pinotage.

Her doctor refrained from asking too many questions and prescribed anti-anxiety medication. It made her apathetic and drowsy. Entire days were spent weeping and sleeping. She felt numb, but told herself she was healing.

She couldn't bear the pain otherwise.

Eventually, Tim started coming around again. He carried on acting like nothing significant had happened, and he was also more controlling than

ever. Treasure felt too alone to fight back. She would have to keep up with this charade for now.

CHAPTER 30

People have to talk about you. Because when they talk about themselves no one listens.

– Bonang Matheba

A few weeks later

Late one Saturday afternoon in February, she fixed herself up, downed an extra tranquiliser and took a cab to Lintle's place. She found her sitting on the kitchen floor in tears, drinking vodka and MOFAYA.

"You're too gorgeous to be sitting on this ice cold floor. Lintle? It may be summer but you can still get sick. Why are

you crying? Where's Paul?"

Treasure sat down next to her. "Hey! Are you going to talk to me?" She looked at her friend with hopeful eyes.

"I think Paul's seeing someone else," Lintle whispered hoarsely. Her face crunched up as she fought back tears. "He's always busy... he barely replies to my messages. Every night I look at WhatsApp; he was last seen way after midnight... but he ignores me. This week I saw him once and... I know him, he would never..." she shook her head, "come here without having sex, but on Sunday, he barely stayed an hour... He kept looking at his phone from the minute he walked in... and everything is about work and golf. He's all over his golf clubs and nowhere near me. I've tried every trick in the book to get him in the mood but he doesn't even notice. What's going on with my man Treasure; am I losing him? If he works so hard why is it so hard for him to miss me?" she sobbed.

"Shame, man. That sounds dramatic, friend," Treasure consoled her.

"Maybe he's just preoccupied with some business stuff. You know how men get when they go into their caves. Tim's been acting the same way, but I think his wife is keeping him busy. I don't really know because he said his wife isn't very sexually active; anyway, I don't want you to stress like this.

I've seen Paul with you. He's amazing and he loves you very much. You know things get hectic at the banks this time of the year. So give him some support and let him be; he'll come around. Don't worry, okay? I doubt he's seeing anybody."

Treasure pulled Lintle up and they hugged. "I'm sorry," said Lintle. "I just get paranoid sometimes. It's so silly."

Treasure paused. "Listen, I'm sorry that I don't speak to you as often as I

should. Tim doesn't like it when I'm on the phone when he's around. He gets a little... jealous and edgy. I don't know why he makes such a big deal about it.

Every time I want to see you, he gets moody. I'm trying my best to keep him happy. But I am not strong anymore, so much

has happened.”

“But, Treasure, I barely see you two anymore; what’s going on?” Lintle was alarmed. “Since you moved out you’ve slowly isolated all of us. I know I do visit at times but something in you is cold as ice at times.”

“No man; it’s just that I’ve been travelling more, and each time I get home I have to cater to Tim. He usually leaves my place after twelve and that’s not the most appropriate time to call you...”

Treasure wanted to be truthful without worrying her friend, but she couldn’t.

In all honesty, what she wanted to say was that Tim had become very difficult. He came over whenever he wanted and demanded painful sex more often. The honeymoon phase had worn off; he was jealous and possessive, and he still went home to a wife who could be sleeping with a younger man and he wouldn’t even know it.

‘How about we go to the weekend social and stop stressing about men,’

Treasure suggested. ‘We have money in the bank; let’s blow it.’

THE WEEKEND SOCIAL was at Constitution Hill, not far from where Lintle was living. It was packed with people; the picnic set-up made the sombre concrete environment feel warm and welcoming. Treasure and Lintle ate, drank and chatted while a live band played African music. Later on The Soil made everybody get to their feet, enjoying their soulful hits.

Many people came over and requested pictures with Treasure. Lintle was more than happy to take them. Treasure was surprised at her spreading fame.

It seemed like more people were taking notice of her than ever.

Then someone asked, “Hey Treasure, is it true that you date that old mafia millionaire?” Treasure was stunned and embarrassed.

Lintle quickly pulled Treasure out of the way and changed the topic.

“Okay guys, Treasure needs to have fun too; we’ll take more pictures later.”

She directed Treasure out of the crowd and got her a drink.

“Hey, I must say you’ve worked hard and you got what you wanted.

Look at all these people; they *recognise* you. I was watching some of your TV interviews; you conduct yourself very well.” Lintle was truly happy for her friend.

Treasure shrugged. “I don’t know how it’s all happened but I’m loving it... I guess people took notice when I did the David Tlale fashion show a few weeks ago. Plus all the events put me in the spotlight; my job is amazing really.” Her phone beeped loudly.

“Does Tim still call you every minute to double check who you’re with?”

Lintle asked.

Treasure shrugged. “Not exactly. I mean, I’m on my own a lot. I’ve cut out more of my old friends and I don’t hook up with new people that I meet at modelling gigs... People have even been calling me names on Facebook, and I’m just not up for that. It’s hard because I care so deeply for Tim. When he’s in a good mood, he dances and tells me stories about life in Alexandra and what it was like to be part of the struggle. I don’t know what makes him so angry sometimes but for some reason I always make him upset.”

“Is that all? I know you, Treasure, and I can see when you’re hiding something.”

“Yes, well, there are things that I can’t disclose about my relationship; I need to respect Tim and his privacy.” Treasure was too scared to mention the abortion. If Tim found out, who knew what he might do? Her eyes teared up; she looked away and composed herself again.

Lintle appraised Treasure; the clothes on her glowed more than her face.

Her Prada sling bag sparkled more than her smile. The perfect bounce in her Giuseppe Zanotti shoe was not visible in her life. Lintle was scared for her

but said nothing. She knew what could be happening. A lot of businessmen and politicians had young girlfriends – that was no secret, but how they treated them behind closed doors was anybody’s guess. Life in Sandton didn’t come cheap and everyone had a price to pay or a pending sacrifice to make.

“Oh crap, I just got a message from Tim; he’s at my place. I have to go.

You know how he gets when he can’t find me. He’ll call everyone and demand to speak to me!”

Lintle grimaced and shrugged. “Okay, but you owe me; you know I wouldn’t take that from Paul, right?”

“Remember when you told me not to keep my king waiting?” Treasure reminded her. “Well my carriage is here; I need to go!” She ran out, almost losing a shoe. *Just like Cinderella.* Lintle wished that she could find Treasure a new Prince Charming.

TIM WAS PARKED outside Treasure’s house. He stood at the door smoking like his life depended on it. “So this is how you want to play it, Treasure?”

“Baby, I didn’t know you were coming today.”

“That’s why I came; you do as you please! Who gave you permission to roam around at this time of the night? Look at what you’re wearing, tight jeans like a prostitute!”

“Baby, let’s get inside; it’s freezing out here.”

“Treasure, do you think I’m your fool? Who just dropped you off at the gate?”

Is it one of your boyfriends?”

“Baby, come on; you must have seen that was a cab. I went to Lintle’s place and we decided to go to the weekend social

event,” said Treasure defensively as she unlocked her door.

“You didn’t bother to inform me? It seems like you’re forgetting who feeds you. I own each and every thing here and as soon as you step out you inform me.”

Treasure was shocked to hear the hurtful words coming out of Tim’s mouth.

He was fuming with anger, pacing up and down and smoking in the house, which he never did. She tried to calm him down.

“Baby, I’m sorry; I should have told you, but you haven’t answered any of my messages in the last couple of days and I didn’t think that you would reply to this one.”

“That’s the problem! You don’t think. That’s why your father kicked your mother out! You’re just like her – disrespectful!”

Treasure was mortified. How dare he bring up her mother? He knew nothing about her or her history, nor did he know her father. She looked at him and saw bitterness and rage, and she felt the same way. Both of them were fed up.

They sat in silence for an hour, Treasure massaging her throbbing temples.

“You did this just so that we would fight all night and I’d be unable to sleep with you, right? You know that this is my time to go and yet you can’t be bothered to apologise and fix the problem,” Tim said rudely.

Treasure couldn’t believe her ears; the same man that had called her away from an event, made her angry and insulted her mother still wanted to have sex. She was amazed and disgusted. She stood up and went to make tea in the kitchen, still annoyed at his comment.

Tim followed her into the kitchen. “You’re my woman and that is my cookie.

Even the Bible says: ‘Don’t deprive your partner of sex.’ So you will give me what belongs to me, if you’re still my woman?” It was a rhetorical question, because he wasn’t giving her a choice.

Treasure continued making tea but felt Tim's cold shadow around her.

She saw from the corner of her eye that he was undressing. "This isn't the right time for sex Tim!" She pushed him out of her way.

"Oh, so you want to give my cookie to someone else, just like you've been cheating on me all this time."

Treasure was bored with his accusations. She went into the bedroom and drank her tea, trying to be calm but trembling with fury.

Tim came in angrily. "Oh no, you won't blow me off just like that. Either you

will provide for my needs or we don't have a relationship!"

Treasure thought long and hard. This manipulation had been going on for months. Tim was out of control and she knew she couldn't say a word that mattered to him anymore. She stood up, switched on some music and dimmed the lights. Slowly she took off her jeans, pulled up her T-shirt and placed it on the floor. Tim took off her bra. He kissed her neck and squeezed her breasts. Treasure showed no reaction but didn't refuse either. He pushed her backwards onto the bed, did some foreplay robotically and then had his way with her. There was a pause and she hoped it was over, but no.

"How about we increase the pace? I want you on your knees. Anal is my desire today." Treasure looked at him and his smirk said it all; there was no way out. His mind was set.

Treasure was on her knees as he forced himself into her, pushing and pushing, dry and tight. He seemed to prefer it like this.

Treasure tried to make sounds to show her discomfort, but he was enjoying his power too much to care. Tears flowed down her burning cheeks, dripping onto the carpet, yet she still kept her screams in. The rough carpet slowly peeled her skin off her knees.

She found some comfort in the sound of house music in the background.

He explored her body but he could not arouse those alien sensations in her anymore. His own desires were too great to care about her emotions. The twinkle in his eye for Treasure was gone; she was just another possession that he owned.

Eventually he stood up and got dressed. “Get yourself something nice to wear for tomorrow night; we have an awards dinner to attend. From now on I want you to leave this modelling thing alone; it’s not a lucrative career. I saw pictures of you between two guys the other day. What do you think my friends say to me? Who respects naked women anyway? So please stay at home and I will provide for you; you don’t need to be out except when you’re with me. If I see anyone close to you I will kill them. Ask your young boys who the Alex Mafia is; then you will know my roots!”

He left money on the coffee table and left.

Treasure sat gingerly at the side of the bed, staring at the money and trying not to make her pain worse. *Am I really just good for trophy media appearances and sex? He wants me to be like a housewife, but I’m not even married to him. Could I give up all I have just to sit around and be a sex slave?*

If I died in his arms who would bury me? Who do I really belong to?

She loved Tim, but that wasn’t enough for her anymore. His kind of love wasn’t comfortable or blissful. Still, she couldn’t just leave. She tried hard to reason with herself but her heart was in agony and her body was numb to what had just happened.

She couldn’t help thinking of all the men that had meant something in her life; she had always tried to see the good in them but now hate was the dominant feeling in her. Her father claimed to love, yet he was dangerous and ruthless. Alex was a player of note and she could never have him. Tim was a greedy, power-hungry man. All the men in her life had taken pieces of her, yet she kept hoping they would change.

CHAPTER 31

“Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you produce you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get.”

– Jesus, Matthew 7:1

TREASURE WOKE UP EARLY and assumed command. She cleaned the house and started cooking. She texted Lintle.

<Hey Lintle, come for lunch? I’m cooking... & bring Paul.>

When they arrived, Treasure took Lintle into the kitchen. “Is Paul okay?

He looks tired.”

“Yes, he’s fine,” Lintle said with forced cheer. “We were busy all morning, if you know what I mean!” She winked.

“Oh, ok; I do.” Treasure was surprised because Paul seemed uneasy. “The food’s almost ready; give him a good portion, okay?”

She disappeared, leaving Lintle to make the last salad.

Paul was sitting outside on the bench with his head in his hands, facing the ground. He sat up quickly when he saw Treasure.

“Hey, are you ok? You seem troubled. Can we talk?” “Hey, uh, sure. How have you been?” He tried to deflect her concern.

“Thank you for the invite; I need a decent meal. We haven’t seen you in a while. And Lintle tells me you’ve become something of a chef in the kitchen...”

“I’m not THAT good but I can make food come together pretty well when I want to.” Treasure smiled at him. “So, where have you been lately?

Lintle isn’t well when you aren’t around.”

Paul looked at her and looked down, then sighed and rubbed his eyes.

He spoke quietly. “Tell me, what are you doing tomorrow? Can we meet for

coffee or something? I actually need to talk to you. Preferably in private.”

That got Treasure’s attention. “And please don’t tell Lintle; it’s just you and I.”

Lintle disturbed the awkward conversation with a plate of hot food.

“Baby, please take your food; my hand’s burning,” she said with a laugh.

They ate, enjoying a bottle of wine while Paul had beer. Despite their troubles, the alcohol kept the conversation flowing and light. Nobody wanted to address the dark undercurrents in their lives.

The conversation died down towards 4 o’clock as they ran out of superficial things to share. Treasure began to feel nervous.

“Guys, you’ll have to excuse me; I have to go get something to wear for dinner tonight. Let’s do this again soon, ok?”

“Thank you, yes, it’s been lovely.” Lintle and Paul exchanged looks, but hugged her politely and left.

TREASURE HURRIED TO Sandton City, bought the second dress that she tried on and then rushed back home, feeling frazzled. She showered quickly.

Tim picked her up exactly on time at 6.30. “I told you not to wear black,” he muttered when he saw her dress.

“It’s actually navy blue,” she corrected him. “Um, it looked lighter in the shop...”

“It looks black now,” he retorted, as if she had bought the dress and dyed it the wrong colour on purpose. “You know I don’t like black on you. It’s like when a white girl wears yellow. It doesn’t work.”

What bullshit! It depends on your skin tone. Aaargh... I can’t wear black because I’m “black”? Isn’t that racist? Treasure was fuming. But she knew it was pointless arguing. She stayed quiet.

The dinner was a blur; she felt pushed from one table to the next like a trophy, greeting Tim's friends and golf buddies. They barely had any time to talk properly.

She dreaded going back home, with the memories of the previous night

keeping her on edge. But eventually it was time to leave.

She swallowed champagne as fast as she could to try to numb the coming pain. But it would have taken another few litres.

The gentleman's club

The next morning, Treasure got up early, threw away the remains of the beautiful blue dress, and left to meet Paul in Hyde Park. They met in the mall near the cinemas.

"Hey, this place is classy, and it's not as busy as Sandton or Braamfontein,"

she observed, greeting Paul with a hug.

"Yes, I like it," he agreed. "This is where I come to cool my mind."

They sat under the canopy at a large restaurant with mellow lighting, and ordered mocktails.

"So why did you call me out here?" Treasure broached.

"What's going on? I hope you didn't ask me here to help you break up with my best friend.

Do you know what that would do to her?"

"No, relax; it's not about that." He paused. "The three of us have become good friends, wouldn't you agree?"

She nodded. "Yes; I mean, I don't see you as much as I'd like to, but you're my best friends."

"And how much do you think I make at work, roughly?"

Treasure's eyebrows shot up. "Straight to the point huh? Um, I would say you make a fortune, based on your cars, your house, your clothes..."

"Treasure." He paused. "People like your man and his friends fund my lifestyle."

Treasure was lost. “Hold on; do you mean the men who own the bank?”

“No, I’m part of a gentlemen’s club called the Hockey Club.” He nodded oddly as if he was trying to imply something.

“Another gentleman’s club?”

Look, I know you’re part of high society and all that; you’re rolling big; we’ve all hit the big leagues,” Treasure shrugged.

“What are you getting at?”

“No, it’s more than that. It’s a network of people, but it’s exclusive and

private. There are a few young men like me in this club, and about twenty millionaires. These older men have to know you and trust you. You must have a high profile job. Some of the young guys work with the government, getting tenders or begging for promotions... Golf is just a medium we use to meet and interact with new members. It’s like initiation. We go away for the weekend in the name of golf but it’s actually how we get to do all these things.”

“Ok...which are...? I don’t get it. You play sports?”

“It’s a figure of speech. Think about golf, ok, versus hockey. This— these club members... these big shots pay us a lot of money. A LOT.”

“Paul, you need to be more specific. Apparently I don’t know what hockey is, because you’re making it sound really weird. What EXACTLY do you do for them? How does it fit in with your day job?”

“Well, it’s like this. I hardly work at the bank anymore. I’m like a glorified consultant there. Anyway, I get paid more to sleep with the wives.”

It hit her like a slap in the face. “Wait, WHAT?”

Paul sighed. “We’re booked after hours, and sometimes during the day, to come to their houses and meet their wives and seduce them. Usually the men are out with their girlfriends.”

Treasure’s heart began to beat faster; she couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “But how—? Who are these people?”

“That’s how these old men manage their households. They want us to do it because they know us, and so that the wife doesn’t date someone else or someone younger. It’s all about control. Often the wives have no idea where we really came from.”

“But they sleep with you anyway?”

“We seduce them, Treasure. You’d be surprised at how easy it becomes.”

He wiped his eyes tiredly. “With some of them, it’s different; the wives know what’s happening and they ask for our services. They’re tired of their husbands not satisfying them in bed or whatever. Either way, we’re not allowed to have direct contact with the women initially; we speak to club members only.”

“Lintle doesn’t know?”

He shook his head. “And that’s not all.” Paul paused. He couldn’t even look at her. “Some of the men even sleep with us for their own pleasure. For these old men, it’s all about the power and entertainment; they’ve been with their wives; we’ve been with their wives; they want to be with us... sometimes they demand our wives and girlfriends too.”

“But why?”

“It’s all about breaking our ego and pride. We’re like toys in their sick game.

I just have to remember that none of it means anything; it’s just sex. If it was something else, I would do that instead.”

Dammit, I can’t hear much more of this. Treasure was flabbergasted. Her eyes were as big as saucers; she hadn’t touched her drink.

“Don’t look like that, Treasure; I had to do it.”

“I’m just... trying to process this. What about Lintle?”

“I do it for her, you know that. Lintle is my life; she believed in me when I was just another banker, and she encouraged me to do whatever it took to be great. And this is where it lead

me..." He sighed deeply. "I wanted her to be happy and to have everything she could ever need. I wanted to be the one to always provide for her, to see her joy grow day by day, by my hand, not by anybody else's. I want to stop but I will lose everything."

Paul's fervour was intense and heartbreaking. Treasure felt bad for him and for Lintle. Her friend's old words played in her head.

'I practically forced him into golf you know; it's the best way to network.'

'His clients are politicians, businessmen, all top people. I'm in love with all that he gives me.'

Treasure hid her head in her hands. *This is tragic. If only Lintle had known...*

Paul leaned over the table. "Listen, you're a good person, Treasure, and I can't let you live like me. I'm a man and I can rebuild my reputation quickly,

but in Sandton a girl's reputation is all she has."

She looked up. "Don't worry about me; I'm not involved in this like you are.

When exactly did all this...hockey club stuff start?"

"About the time I met you. Remember when Tim sent you that perfume?"

"Yeah?"

"That's when I was meeting all his big shot friends. You know, Tim's wife is not even that old, but money creates a monster in some people."

Treasure felt a strange pang in the pit of her stomach. *What am I missing?*

"Paul, what EXACTLY does Tim have to do with this? Be honest."

Paul was taken aback. "That's what I've been trying to tell you. This isn't just about me. Tim is smooth; he practically started this Hockey Club. And you've never heard of it."

“No, I haven’t.” Her shoulders slumped heavily as she realised she had been duped like everyone else. She looked at Paul and saw they were both weeping.

“It’s time you knew what kind of man you’re sleeping with. I brought him into your life, but it’s your choice if you want to stay. He knows how to play people. He pays for his friends to play golf. He has another girlfriend, you know. And he sleeps with other young men too – it’s no secret Treasure.

I’m sorry; I really didn’t want to hurt you.”

She shrugged with despair. “The truth always hurts.”

“Yes, it does. Look, it’s your choice what you do after this, but please, don’t tell Lintle. I love her deeply, and she won’t understand. She’ll probably blame herself; she wanted me to play golf at the beginning.” He laughed bitterly. “She thought it was a brilliant networking strategy. And look where we are now.”

Treasure was too despondent to reply. They sat for a while without speaking as she soaked up her tears with a serviette. Paul was teary too.

Eventually he took her hand and wished her well. He paid the bill and rushed

off to a meeting at the bank.

TREASURE DROVE ALL the way back home in a haze. Paul’s devastating confession played like an earworm in her head. She was in agony and despair.

She couldn’t make any sense of it. *What kind of animal am I in love with?*

Getting home took ages; she drove slowly, crying, taking the longest routes and stopping in the quietest corners. *How am I going to look at Tim the same way, when I don’t even know who he is?*

Her entire past tormented her; nothing seemed right about any of it. Her life was crashing right before her eyes.

This is insane. Why does a married man with a stable girlfriend on the side want yet another girl, and to sleep with

guys? Why does he need so much sex? Is he bisexual? Is that why he wants anal sex all the time?

Eventually she got home and still nothing made any sense. She realised she had no one to talk to.

Right on cue, the moment she sat down, she got a call from Lebo. For a moment she considered spilling her dark secrets to her big sister.

But Lebo had bigger news. “Treasure,” she cried, “she called for you, and you didn’t come. She begged you, but you denied her. You were her hope and peace. She believed in you. She loved you so much and you didn’t see it!”

Treasure was lost in shock and denial. “Lebo, who?”

“Our mother has left us.” Her loud cry broke from the other side of the phone. “The funeral will be in Embalenhle.”

Treasure broke down in tears. No pain could come close to this. It was a cut so deep that no one could fix it.

She got on her knees and prayed.

Lord, I’m not meant for this; I’m not strong. My mother was my everything.

She was the reason I’m here. How do you take my only anchor in this life?

How could I love all of this but forget her? I should have gone to her. I was so blinded.

*How could Tim do this to me? I was faithful; I was willing to give it all up for his happiness. My foundation was my downfall. He took my baby! I gave him my body and soul. He made me his empress. Look at what I have... Look at my clothes, but **I don’t own my own soul!** Oh Father, I forgot you in the thrills of my life. I was everything he wanted me to be. I cry because they took my innocence. I let them take whatever they wanted. Oh, Father who am I? I have nothing; my family is broken. Father, take my soul; I’m not worthy of this life.*

She fell on her knees as her tears washed the floor.

Something in her said:

“I am your everything; I will never leave you nor forsake you. Call my name and you will witness my grace and power. No Man is beyond my hand.

Your life is your truth. Why cry for the dead? I am THE LORD YOUR GOD.

I have the power to give and take. You chose this life; now you can walk away...

Start living the life I called you for. Be the light in my children's eyes.”

CHAPTER 32

The beginning is always close to the end; make a choice; live or die.

– Lerato Phamotse

14 February 2013

Treasure stood at the kitchen sink with her hands to her head, pounding on her skull, pushing the sounds deep into her brain, as if she was pushing back all the memories that she had of Tim, so far back that her memory would erase them permanently.

You've survived three days without Timothy Morgan. You will be fine. She kept trying to convince herself, but it was like mission impossible. *Just keep your phone off. In fact, take the battery out. Who knows; he could track it...*

Earlier, she had rushed around in a frenzy, pulling down all the blinds, locking everything that had any kind of key, as if she could shut off her feelings from reality. *Lock all the doors. Close all the windows. Darkness is better than daylight; I can't even stomach my own reflection.* She hadn't eaten in days, except for a spoon of old yogurt and some grapes.

The truth of the matter was that Tim was like a shadow; he was in every little thing she saw. He knew every step she took, everything she had was in his name. He was the foundation of her existence. Now she had to live with herself and the reality of being another charity case in Tim's life.

Pacing around the wooden dining table, it seemed like her world had finally caved in. The voices in her head cried and clashed. *But what will I do?*

Where will I go? I can't afford to live in this lavish townhouse, the BMW in my driveway, the clothes I wear...!

Calm down Treasure; you just have to find a way to solve this.

How can my life ever be normal, when so much is always being taken from me?

Why hasn't any one phoned me; don't they care?

You switched your phone off earlier, you idiot! Try to keep up.

That's enough; park yourself for just a second. You'll drive yourself insane!

Dammit Treasure, there must be more to this life than rich men and fast cars, champagne and spa treatments. But how do you run from the one that feeds

you, the eye that monitors you hourly? Fear drags you under even before the idea of leaving can emerge in your head. When you love the enemy – the one who is killing you – it leaves you no options.

What if it's all a lie? Could Paul be that deceitful? But why would he lie like that, anyway?

None of this makes sense!

She had had more than her fair share of near-death experiences and drama; even being disillusioned was a daily routine.

Living in the heart of Sandton clearly wasn't enough to save her. It was inevitable that she would be deeply hurt again and again. Why was she surprised? *Marked for disaster, and destined for demise.*

Time flew by in a haze of memories and voices speaking back and forth to her. Later that afternoon she went and lay in the bedroom, hoping it would be easy to doze off. She leaned back against the pillow, her hazel eyes twinkling sadly against the darkness of the closed blinds, waiting for peace to come over her. But even breathing was not easy.

Somehow, the chat she had had with Paul kept playing back like a bad dream; his words made her lips curl inwards like a bending spoon. She kept replaying their conversation from three days before...

I'm part of a gentlemen's club called the Hockey Club. These big shots pay us a lot of money to sleep with their wives... That's how they manage their households. They want us because they know us, and so that the wife doesn't date someone else or someone younger. Some of the men even sleep with us for their own pleasure. It's all about the power and entertainment; breaking our ego and pride...

The more the words played in Treasure's head the more she loathed herself, and the more she wanted out! *But how?* She took a deep breath, but it didn't fill the void in her chest. Her thoughts were held inside a grenade, and her lungs were compressed in a bomb shell. She pulled her knees closer to her chest and pressed them hard together, trying to close the void that had been present since the moment she realised that the man she almost had a child with was sleeping with other men...

He has a wife and he still cheats! How could he claim to love me? How much

'love' can one person give? Why the need to be sexual with the entire nation?

Even VAMPIRES don't eat so many people.

Life stopped for a moment. She stood up and shut the bedroom door in rage .

Would he even confess? NO. Don't think about him.

It all left a bitter taste in her mouth. Even now, knowing what she knew...

ALL that she knew... she tried to dismiss it and stay as numb and vacant as possible, just so she could get through another day. Why was it so unbearable to take in?

Little deep-rooted Treasure, who are you? You're dating an old man; he could be your father! Even worse, he's married, and

sleeping with younger men for entertainment. So who are you in all this? Does money really control your entire being?

She felt like a rusty barge pole floating down a misty river, going nowhere; even a goldfish searching for food would be better off.

She spoke out loud, not realising that her voice was way louder than a whisper.

“But you DESERVE this agony.”

The words hit home. She slipped off the bed and onto the floor. Lying on her back on the ice-cold tiles, with her hands on her gut and her eyes glued to the ceiling, nothing else made sense.

She switched on the TV as a distraction to vacuum up the voices in her head, and stared at it blankly from the floor. She was numb, ice-cold, and motionless.

THE DOOR BUZZER startled her from her anguish, and her heart fell to her stomach with fear.

“Delivery for Ms Mohapi; is anybody home?”

Someone with a husky voice kept yelling at the front door. After some hesitation, she made her way to the kitchen and opened the door slowly.

A bold old man dressed in red and white stood there with a smirk on his timeworn face.

“Why are you disturbing my peace?” Treasure lashed out. With shock in his expression, he pushed the large box towards her.

“Ms, I’m just here to deliver,” he replied reasonably.

“Who the hell is this thing from, and where’s the return address?”

The courier looked at her and said nothing, knowing that she wasn’t really looking for an answer. He seemed rather uncomfortable with her crankiness.

Sure, it would be SUICIDAL to have a conversation with me at this point!

She rolled her eyes, signed for the package, and slammed the door shut, leaving the old man bewildered.

Treasure placed the mystery box on the table and contemplated it. It was a large rectangular gift box, well secured with tape.

More THINGS. And for what? To apologise? To declare something? I need HONESTY, not things. Why do men think everything is for sale?

On the side of the box was a green card. She didn't want to read it or even touch it, but her eyes kept glancing over to it. *Dammit!* There were only two people she knew of who would make such a gesture. The first one was Paul.

If Paul wants to apologise for what he's done then he must bring his fuckedup ass here himself! Does he really think that gifts move me anymore?

Well, he has another thing coming! He's the one that brought me all this pain. Did I

ASK to know that my partner is a pimp – even worse, a conniving high class male prostitute? No! It's almost like he WANTS to destroy my life, my solid relationship, and me.

Eventually curiosity got the better of her, and she grabbed the card.

You bring great joy to me. I hope you come out of your black hole and dine with me tonight. I'll pick you up at seven. Look sexy for me. XO AS SHE

STARED at the skilfully typed message, the echoing terror in her gut expanded, becoming bigger by the second.

Now she had no doubt that Tim had sent it; this was his style. She examined the box closely.

She thought for a long second, trying to understand why he was doing this.

What game is he playing? Does he know that Paul has shared their little secret? Paul would be crazy to tell him.

Moments passed by and her curiosity got the better of her. “Okay fine!” she gestured irritably, stripping the duct tape off the box. She lifted off the top cover, rummaged through layers of fine gold tissue paper, and pulled out an exquisite yellow dress with one shoulder strap and lace trimming.

Wow, she whistled. This must’ve cost a fortune. He must love me, right...?

Dutifully, she made her way to her bedroom and laid the dress out on the bed.

But this doesn't really prove anything... why wasn't he this nice when he first forced anal sex on me? Now after days of not talking to me, he thinks he can just splash out on some gifts and then dictate what I do? He's out of his mind!

But what do I do? He's going to be here in a couple of hours... how will I look him in the eye? He'll probably see right through me and demand to know the truth. I better keep this information to myself until I have a plan. To help her persuade herself yet again, she ran into the lounge and put on some house music to shake off her sadness. She had so much music... she chose a favourite old song, but it just made her tremble.

What's going on with me? I'm my own worst enemy; how will I ever be able to sit there and pretend that nothing's wrong? I need to speak to someone, but who? My mother's gone, dead and cold, bones and all. Who do I have?

She sat down on the carpet and wept.

“I want none of this life!” she cried out. Not even the music that she treasured so much could repair her wrecked heart. The last thing she needed was to be sitting in a room full of drunken people with Tim asking her irritating questions and touching her. She crawled back into bed and cried herself to sleep.

CHAPTER 33

Let them love you a little more than you do; then you know your love won't suffer.

– Neo Mary Phamotse

18:35 p.m.

A shock of fear woke her up from her peaceful nap and pushed her quickly out of bed... tears still running down her bony face. She ran a bath hastily.

Time was closing in fast; Tim was very punctual.

Treasure looked at herself in the bathroom mirror and clenched her muscles tightly as if she was pulling all the broken pieces back together, pulling her soul back in to reanimate her body; she needed something to resurrect her dead glare. She had lost herself in her own tears; it felt like a stranger was inhabiting her corpse.

Sitting in the warm salty water was so soothing for her; she washed her body slowly and gently, looking at every inch of her skin. Her long weave felt soft as silk on her lower back. The tub's precipitation sealed the room with what seemed like morning fog. The comfort of this space calmed her soul; it was something she should've done days ago.

Forgetting that time was not her friend, she put a mask on her face and lay backwards in the tub leisurely and calmly, as if she was listening to birds singing in the background. *I have to try to forget about Paul and all that he poisoned me with. Tonight, my man is coming home.*

She splashed water on her face to quell her nerves and sudden excitement.

"Seems like someone is enthusiastic..." a low voice said.

With her eyes still laminated by the water coating her face, fear swelled up inside Treasure; she froze in the bottom of the tub, hoping that something would kill the moment swiftly.

"Tim... Is that you? ... Please say something."

The shadow kept an icy silence, hovering suggestively over her frame.

The large mirror reflected Treasure's long legs towering up through the vapour and down again towards her waist, water covering her Eden's apple.

A hand moved in the water, sending ripples against her skin. She shivered.

As she struggled to keep her emotions in check, the shadow whispered,

“Let me have you... let me feed on what’s mine...”

The steam made her sight hazy. The shadow came closer...

“Well, hello Timothy Morgan.” She swallowed with both fear and relief.

“How did you get in?”

A rough hand pulled strands of her hair over towards the left side of her shoulder, sealing off her left nipple. She inhaled sharply. She blushed as her knight brushed her back gently with one hand, a moment tender and surreal.

She gasped as she basked briefly in the intensity of his visceral, primal attraction. Desire pulled the room closer and smaller, like the tension at a volcano’s mouth...

Abruptly the door opened, breaking the momentum, killing the spell.

“All checks done, sir.” Tim’s driver Theo stood in the hallway.

“Give us a moment; you know what ladies are like, one moment you think you know them and the next they want you to buy the entire world,”

Tim said mockingly. He quickly closed the door and walked Theo out.

Treasure jumped out of the bathtub speedily and slipped into her bathrobe.

“What a waste of a good thing,” murmured Tim as he returned. “But I have you all to myself tonight, so I will make up for that.”

He moved closer to her in steps so small even a tortoise could walk faster.

Treasure watched him warily, wondering how he had made it through the front door without a sound. His gaze pierced her

thoughts, making her look at him, dazed. She was speechless.

“Is this how you welcome your man? I’m more than your companion you know.”

She shook her head and decided to play along.

“Indeed. That’s a beautiful dress you sent me; what’s the occasion? A bottle of perfume would have done the trick, you know.”

“Should I spoil the surprise and watch you turn into a dry cauliflower, my dear? Get dressed and let’s get moving. I hope you’ve been resting in my

absence; we have a long programme tonight.”

Tim seemed very content with himself.

“Impressive, isn’t it?” He watched Treasure closely as she dressed with his eyes glued to her body. “I’m a man of many talents, don’t you think?”

Treasure was too nervous to say a word. Paul’s voice kept adding in things she didn’t want to hear. It was bad enough that she had lost a child by Tim’s wicked doings; the knowledge that she now had of his ways was unbearable.

Tim paused to look at her face with curiosity. “You seem to be all here and there, certainly not with me; what’s going on? Are you feeling unwell, or do you have something to say to me?”

Treasure closed her eyes and smiled at him, without giving too much away.

“No, I’m good; not to worry. I just want to know where we’re going.”

Of course that wasn’t the truth, but this wasn’t the right time to start asking him anything.

“It’s a surprise. Are you ready yet? The driver will probably think we’re up to something... shall we?”

“THEO, OPEN THE DOOR for my lady.”

Theo did as instructed.

“I’ll be driving us on to the location after I drop you off at your residence.

How is that beautiful wife of yours? You must bring her around for dinner,”

Tim offered magnanimously.

Theo was dazed but relieved that he would be spending the evening with his pregnant wife. Uncertain about the dinner, he simply nodded graciously.

“Thank you, sir.” That can of worms was best not opened tonight.

The Blue Porsche Cayenne was big enough for a fleet of children and more than enough to comfort one’s ego. The cream interior smelled new and extremely clean. Treasure sat comfortably in the back seat feeling like a prom queen in her gorgeous yellow dress; her heart filling with excitement, she willed the night to go smoothly.

“Ok, drive south; oh wait. Why am I even directing you? You know where your home is.” Tim’s excitement showed in the jokes he was making.

Newtown was fifteen minutes away from Morningside without the hectic Sandton traffic, but Treasure barely noticed the distance. The city of Johannesburg was beautiful, with coloured lights moving across the Mandela Bridge. She sat in the back seat and enjoyed the ride as Tim and Theo joked about money and politics.

“Are you aware that our president is getting married again? Do you know that we are going to pay for everything he does until he dies? That man is an inspiration. Maybe I should get myself some concubines!” Tim laughed at his own joke. At least he was keeping the mood light, something Theo didn’t often experience with his boss.

“Isn’t my lady looking spectacular tonight?” Tim prompted.

“Indeed, sir.”

“I knew this dress would look beautiful. She will be the belle of the ball!”

Treasure suddenly realised that she was in a twisted version of Disney's Beauty and the Beast, where instead of her Beast slowly revealing his charming nature, she was witnessing an evolution in the other direction. She put the thoughts out of her head as she usually did and gazed out of the window.

This particular evening there was something spectacular about the night, literally something out of this world. They were surrounded by the tallest buildings, historical monuments, bloody soil covered by concrete laid down by apartheid rulers, air that smelt like triumph, and an unimaginable sense of tranquillity. Sparkles of magic filled the horizon; the balmy summer air made people feel warm at heart and the feeling was contagious. The streets of Newtown reverberated with party vibes.

“Well, here's your tip for tonight. Get your wife something sweet for her tooth; feed her well!” Tim said cheerfully as he shook Theo's hand and sent him off. Theo smiled and waved good-bye. His block of flats was colourful and clean and lively. The happiness flowed over into the car. Treasure climbed into the front seat and turned up the music.

Tim buckled her in firmly with his eyes looking straight into hers as Mi Casa played soulful house in the background. His eyes said a million things.

“So you want to tell me why you've been so quiet the past three days, Treasure?” he murmured, running his index finger down the slit of her dress... At last, the dreaded question. She pretended not to have heard as she grooved to the music.

Seeing that she wasn't going to reply, Tim smirked at her and drove off, two kilometres away from Theo's, down a quiet secluded road underneath the highway back to Sandton.

For some odd reason there were no other cars behind them; the road was clear... the only movement was above them on the highway filled with fast cars making their way to the north.

He slowly brought the car to a halt in the middle of the road, carefully choosing a spot under a bridge where you could see

just enough but not too much. The car was still idling, music playing loud... Treasure looked around.

A couple of inches away from her, Tim gave her what felt like a long gaze.

She avoided his stare. He switched off the engine, killing the light. The windows were so darkly tinted that she had no idea where she was. He got out of the car and came around to her door. She opened it curiously.

“Is there something wrong with the car? Did we hit a pothole?” Her butter-smooth voice was tinged with worry.

“No; come closer.” He held her hand and lightly pulled her out of the car.

Right across the road, two pedestrians passed by without seeing them.

“Did you lose direction?” she asked

“Just step down, little one; don’t worry, my moonlight.” He spoke as though he had just run for miles... slightly out of breath and far too focused on her.

He held her hand and oscillated her slightly. “Come, we’ll take it leisurely,”

he said mysteriously. His eyes shone but were guarded, giving nothing away.

Treasure stopped questioning him. The fresh evening breeze blew her gown

from side to side, just enough to tickle her supple skin. Their gazes locked, eyes half closed... something big was brewing between them. They were at the core of a coming storm, where everything fed on their energy.

He pulled her in for a penetrating kiss, closing the car door, distracting her lips with his warmth. He folded her in his arms, hugging her soul so close that she could have burst into tears. The wind swept all her anxiety away in that instant, and Treasure fell freely into his embrace, bottomless... nothing mattered any more.

Abruptly he held her at arm’s length and redirected her to the car bonnet.

Her legs felt slightly paralyzed; her heart pounded, racing to catch up with her feelings. Tim tossed her on top of the quivering car, the music drowning out any other sounds in the area.

“HOW...HOW DID we get here?” Treasure tried to interrupt the moment.

Tim seized her dress and threw it upwards over her head, leaving her long ramp-ready legs exposed.

“Pretty lady, just listen closely,” he said in a low voice. “Your music is still on... focus on that and let this be.” He pulled her towards the edge of the bonnet and caressed her toes with his fingers as he slipped off her stilettos.

Treasure gasped for air as her dress bulged around her like a pregnant cloud.

She bit her lower lip to hide her slightly fretful grimace. With her toes, she unzipped his pants. She placed both her hands behind her body, with her fingertips gripping the car bonnet for balance.

He tilted her legs apart, moving his damp lips between them with lust emanating from every pore. Her nipples rose and stood at attention. With her head tilted slightly backwards, and her hands knotting across the bonnet, desire exploded in her body, wanting more of the unknown; feeling hot and cold; breathing slighter and faster by the second.

She let all the angst and despair of the last three days pour out, straight into him, binding them together. His eyes gazed up at her, luminous with yearning through her dress. Her mouth was slack as she tried to drag precious air into her lungs; with her dress still billowing over her head, air was deadly yet dreadfully needed.

She leaned further back on the bonnet, pushing herself closer against him, her thighs closing around him. He brought her to a frenzied trance... stirring places that still waters can only try to reach. Trying to control the disorderly reaction in her body, in that moment, that very alien moment, there was no order in the whole city.

“Let me see what I have. I know you want me, don’t you? You can’t stand that I feed you well.” He spoke to her body as though it was a separate woman, arrogance personified. He went deeper, shaking all that still slept in her body, making Treasure squeal.

“*YOU. ARE. MINE!*” Tim said forcefully, emphasising each word. “All of this... and nothing less.” He slipped his fingers erotically through her toes, as though to remind them that they were equally important.

An overwhelming melancholy washed over her, slithering down her spine and bringing unwanted flashes—visuals of Tim and Paul in this identical pose, enjoying each other, just as Tim was enjoying HER. She called out,

“Tim! Me – not – me...”

Suddenly, Tim rose up, yanked the dress up over her head and around her neck like a bag and slightly choked her, piercing her simultaneously. He moved inside her harshly, shocking her out of her thoughts and bringing her to death's door, then releasing her back to life. As he moved out, he eased his grip on her throat, then moved back in vigorously and sealed his grip again.

The feeling was both thrilling and petrifying.

Faster and deeper he moved, as though trying to find a solid resting place; he pulled the fabric of her dress closer to his face, as if to see if she was still alive. Mesmerized, she stared right into his eyes, begging for mercy.

Her heart constricted in love's favour; she looked vulnerable yet pleased. Tim seemed somewhat out of his body, his power and control strong yet diluted by her.

If THIS isn't a declaration of love then what IS? Does he know what I'm thinking? Treasure's mind went in circles, from Paul, to Tim, to this affirmation of his love, or whatever this was... Her body was one with Tim, but her mind was at war. His body tensed as he finally released... like an

overburdened volcano letting rip into all the corners of her soul... he caught her off guard, trapped in the moment.

He released his grip on her dress and pulled away from her. Treasure slid off the car in a daze and searched for her underwear on the ground but with no luck. In this slight moment of the night, all semblance of control had been lost. She moved to find her sanity in the back seat of the car. A box of tissues lay at the far end.

She tried to pull herself onto the edge of the seat but she was still in shock.

With her left leg firm on the ground, she placed her right knee on the seat and pulled the box towards herself, exposing parts of her body to the wind. Her mouth was dry from dehydration.

Clouds in pretty shades of pink hugged the sky. Tim stood at a distance with his mind on his cigar, puffing away his blood rush, not in the least worried about what had just happened in

the middle of the road. The city looked enchanting and lively. He was at peace.

Treasure felt unsteady as she cleaned herself, wiping her legs in an awkward bent position. Only her right knee, hand and half of her head were in the car.

Her yellow dress curved along her spine and draped downwards over her left leg, where the delicate fabric pooled onto the rough tar.

“Keep that position!” Tim surprised her with a firm grip around her waist, pulling her closer to his crotch. She held her breath and closed her eyes in disbelief.

The thrill of the silent night breeze over her delicate skin woke her senses and clarified her mind. She eased off her left leg and decreased the tension in her body, pulling down any animosity left in her veins. She kept her hands firm by sinking her nails into the cream leather seats.

Tim admired her as he moved her dress swiftly out of his way. Her body was well sculptured, perfection personified, like a beefy V-8 yellow monster Chevrolet Camaro. Her eyes gazed ahead like an eagle would into a reckless flowing river. A small streak of sweat ran from her breasts down along her mid-waist.

Each tip of his fingers was tense and his arms were still, filled with the will to

extract pleasure. He slowly rolled the edge of his manhood around her rear. It slid along her bare skin like melted chocolate.

She followed the direction of his hand on her back, arching her back, welcoming him... until it touched her tightly wound *rosebud* at her rear...

coursing a perfect disaster through her bloodstream. He thrashed deeply and solidly into her, like he was wielding a sword.

A shockwave pulsed through her body, blocking her airway, shooting stars through her eyes. He pulled her closer to him as though he needed to extract the life from her before assaulting

her again. Treasure kept her pain stifled in her gut; tears skated down her bare cheeks onto the luxurious seats.

Tim moaned saccharine nothings into the night.

“Now, this is it, hold on, baby... This is life! Bend lower for me...”

He pushed her face down into the seat and drove into her again, breaking all of her barriers. He gave her more of him until he had nothing left. He moaned, oblivious to her pain, then dragged his fingers down her back, ripping the dress to top it all off.

Treasure had no words. Shock had her body and her mind was in turmoil: there was too much to take in and to ruminate on.

CHAPTER 34

Africa will write its own history and it will be a history of glory and dignity.

– Patrice Lumumba

TIM KEPT HIS EYES on the busy road as the car drove off into the lights of the highway; everyone in Jo’burg had something to do tonight.

Treasure sat on the edge of her seat, with her hands crossed over on her thighs and her eyes downcast. The air felt dry and prickly. Things seemed louder than what they were; the music in the background sounded like a war zone now.

This is life? Life can't be this cruel. “I can’t walk in this dress; it’s torn. I don’t think we can go like this,” she spoke up.

But at least Tim was looking at her differently; his eyes were glued to her tortured body as if she was an empress, a Black Diamond! So, momentarily pleased and happy despite her pain, she smiled as he dialled a friend.

“It’s me. I’m on my way to you. I need the best dress you have; the last one got torn.”

Tim drove with so much enthusiasm that he didn’t seem to notice Treasure’s discomfort.

She stared down through her fingers until all she could see was her dress.

The voices in her head were arguing again. They said all kinds of things and none of them made sense.

He owns my body and soul... what can I give that's really mine? Is this love or pleasure?

Look at his face...

No! I cannot... I won't...

I can't even feel my heartbeat right now... Am I dead? Am I still me?

Why does it feel so good yet so bad?

The lights were bright like a tsunami over the city. Treasure found some peace in the smooth ride all the way to Sandton. Still uncertain about where they were going and what she was going to wear, she kept herself as calm as she could, slightly detached with memories from her childhood.

“We’re almost there. Your make up needs a touch up my dear; you look a little flushed.”

Tim tried to brighten the mood with light conversation but Treasure was still lost for words. Tim smiled at her, patted her knee and muttered something to himself.

Shortly after that he turned into a private driveway. A bright sensor spotlight shone directly into the car. A young concierge in a suit opened the gate and let them in. The house was enormous, with a white Bentley in the driveway and three police dogs running around barking at the roar of their engine. The concierge quieted the dogs with a low whistle. He was easy on the eye, with a well-trimmed beard and huge man guns. Treasure caught herself staring at him. *I wonder if he's also in the Hockey Club?*

He was carrying a white laundry bag, incongruous over his giant biceps.

“This is for the lady; I hope she likes it. It is probably our greatest work. A lot of women have asked for it, but you know we save these for special occasions.”

The spotlight switched off, leaving the yard a little too dark to see. Did he wink at Tim? Treasure couldn't be sure.

“Thank you; this will change her evening!” assured Tim.
“Please just put it down on the back seat.”

The concierge didn't seem too keen to come closer to the car, so Tim took the bag out of his hands, saluted, and pulled the car out of the driveway, still as joyous as before. Small tears began to rain down from the heavens, as if the night was crying, washing away the sadness below.

Tim drove past the Morningside Centre on Rivonia Road towards Sandton City. “You're going to have the night of your life, my little Treasure.

There's a great surprise in store for you tonight.” His words were no more than noisy traffic to Treasure's ears. She was still perched on the edge of the seat, silent as a lamb, staring at the streetlights and the magnificent cityscape.

The night was indeed stunning; the city sparkled with light and movement.

Tim pulled into a driveway at a boutique hotel. Cars and limousines swamped the driveway and the main entrance was buzzing with guests.

“Look at all these people,” Treasure gasped. “Wow, it looks like the Met Gala. Is it for Valentine's? Is there a place for me to change?”

Before Tim could answer, someone was knocking on the window. It was a hotel employee. Judging by Tim's reaction, they seemed to know each other very well. Tim opened the window slightly and had a brief conversation with his friend, then turned to Treasure.

“A private suite has been set up for us; we'll both change and join them once we're on point again.”

Treasure was dumbfounded and relieved at the same time. The smart young gentlemen had already opened her door; he held her new dress over one arm.

He sensed how uncomfortable Treasure was and smiled at her to help her feel at ease in the vibrant surroundings.

“Evening Ma’am, welcome to the Valentine’s Ball. My name is Neo; may I guide you to your suite?”

“It’s okay Neo,” Tim interrupted. He came around and helped Treasure out of the car. “Just show us where we are booked in and I’ll take care of the rest.”

Another porter came promptly to move the car to a secure parking.

As Treasure held her dress together to prevent it falling off her, she looked up at the tall hotel. Its architecture somehow managed to be modern yet extravagant at the same time. Neo took them discreetly around the back to avoid prying eyes, and lead them into a private elevator. Within seconds, the door opened on the 12th floor.

“First door on the left sir. Suite 1211.”

Neo gave Tim a keycard and disappeared back into the gold and silver elevator.

TIM SEEMED VERY pleased with himself. He smiled nonstop and walked with his head deep in the highest clouds.

“After you, my lady.”

He opened the door to a mini palace. The room was elegantly decorated in black and white.

“So formal, yet so welcoming. You’ve outdone yourself this time,”

Treasure acknowledged, smiling.

“There’s a bath tub and a Jacuzzi on your right, AND an outside shower...

which we can both take advantage of... tonight, my love, I’m all yours.”

Treasure turned away and rolled her eyes; after what had happened earlier on, what she needed right now was a hot

tub...with flavoured bath salts and velvet jazz in the background. *Now that sounds like a better plan.*

“What time should we be ready? I don’t want to derail your plans.”

“Well, we have an hour to ourselves, so if we shower together I can safely say we have two hours...”

“Your maths is a bit off,” she laughed. “I’m going to go for the tub...and yes, alone. I can do a lot in that hour.”

Luckily he agreed.

Treasure filled the marble bath with warm salty water, climbed into it carefully and soaked her wounded body. This luxury hotel was living up to its name. She allowed her thoughts to drift.

This Black Diamond has taken so much from me, including my baby... our baby... That was just three months ago... Yet after all we’ve been through...

he’s still so decent sometimes... But how can I ever just forgive him?

Why do I still want every part of him so badly when I also want to punish him so desperately? He took and never asked... He hurt me and never said sorry; yet I’m here in this fancy hotel; I’m still with him.

I wonder if his wife knows where we are. What did she do to deserve this—a

husband that belongs to the Hockey Club, dating a woman half his age, sleeping with all and sundry... How does she sleep at night? Where is she when

I indulge in her husband’s wealth? Does she also get flipped over and taken up the butt? Maybe she also knows the monster and she got tired of his outrageous demands.

“HEY, WE DON’T have all night... and if I had joined you, you wouldn’t be so miserable in this tub by yourself.”

Treasure sat up and laughed, embarrassed by her thoughts.

Tim hovered over her in a black tux and navy shirt with white cuffs, looking all kinds of gorgeous.

“I’m almost done, Love.”

She washed the rest of her skinny body, wrapped herself in a soft Egyptian cotton towel, and made her way into the main bedroom, where she was surprised to find a chubby blonde woman dressed in a white uniform setting up a small table.

She looked at Tim in confusion. “I didn’t know we had a guest.”

“Oh yes. Meet Ruth; she’s your makeup artist for tonight. I messed up your striking face, so this is my way to say sorry my dear. Take a seat and she’ll do her magic on your face fast; we don’t have much time. Dinner will be served in twenty minutes. I’m going to make some phone calls in the next room. Five minutes ladies!” And he was gone.

CHAPTER 35

A wise woman wishes to be no one’s enemy; a wise woman refuses to be anyone’s victim.

– Maya Angelou

RUTH SEEMED VERY EXCITED. “Hi Treasure! So good to meet you,”

she smiled with a mouth large enough to swallow a tidal wave. Her faux suburban

kugel accent was awful.

Treasure managed a smile back. “Thank you; you too.”

“This man clearly *worships* you. I saw the lovely dress on top of the bed.

I couldn’t keep my eyes off it. It must be an import!”

Treasure smiled politely as she sat down. “Actually, I think it’s local...”

“Oh no, that’s impossible dear. Don’t be ridiculous,” laughed Ruth. “It’s far too exquisite.”

Say what? “I’m not sure what...”

“Please, relax. I’ll be done in no time.” Ruth’s large eyes were wide open, sparkling with delight between lashes drooping with mascara. Layers of powdered base clogged up her wrinkles.

God... I hope she does make-up better on other people.

“If you don’t mind me asking, how long have you been with Mr Morgan?”

He’s quite a fine catch, I must say... a real hunk with money!”

“It’s been three years, Ruth, and yes, many say he is.”

In between instructions to look up or down, Ruth kept prodding with the utmost inquisitiveness, making various inordinate remarks about how picture-perfect, tall and handsome Tim was. Treasure would smile slightly and try to ignore each comment, but she winced every time Ruth said something

inappropriate.

I can do my own damn make-up; this woman is pissing me off. Why didn’t Tim ask me if I needed someone? Why does he never ask me anything? Ugh, because it’s Tim and he always does what he wants, that’s why.

“I hear the ball is crawling with high rollers and celebrities. The driveway is a rainbow of exclusive investment cars. You’re a lucky lady indeed.”

“Thank you, yes, I know,” Treasure said politely. *Please just focus on my face lady.*

She kept her thoughts to herself as Ruth continued applying makeup with curiosity virtually radiating out of her. There was silence for a while, but it couldn’t last.

“Three years, you say? That’s quite long... and you seem so young!”

“I’m twenty-two,” muttered Treasure. *Almost 23.*

Ruth frowned and stopped applying the makeup.

“You’re just a child! You know, I’ve heard of young women dating older men, but I didn’t think it was genuine. There are

documentaries about you people; it's actually revolting."

Treasure couldn't believe her ears. "You people? Which people?" *Who is this woman?*

"If he's married, and they usually are, do you know what this would do to his wife?"

"His wife—"

"He probably has children yearning for their father! And yet you are here, eating his money with no sense of disgrace or concern! You have NO

shame," she accused, shaking her head. "You are just a child; where are your parents?"

"I'm no child, Ruth." Treasure said coldly. She was getting irritated. *Who is this woman to judge me? She has no idea what I've been through.*

"Let me advise you, if no one else has told you: this man will leave you high

and dry! If sex is what he wants, he can get it from a real woman! What can a child like you offer him?"

Treasure sighed in disgust. *I've had enough to deal with today. What the hell is wrong with everybody?!* She began applying her own makeup in the mirror as Ruth went on.

"You need to think a bit before you spread your legs for balls and baubles!

It's so selfish, wrecking homes because you need another handbag!

My own husband was trapped by a little money-hungry sex-trap like you,"

Ruth snarled in fury.

Treasure's discomfort reached its tipping point. She stood up abruptly.

"You know your way out, Ruth; I suggest you use it," she said icily. "My

'sugar daddy' is not paying you to insult me!"

Ruth abruptly held her piercing tongue and shook her head in disbelief.

“I’m sorry; I didn’t mean to step on your toes. I just haven’t met... someone like you before.”

Is that meant to be apology? Treasure remained unimpressed. “Get out.”

Grabbing her dress from the bed, she dashed into the bathroom, pulling the door closed so roughly that a glass on the coffee table fell off and smashed on the floor.

The sound of breaking glass drew Tim’s attention like a siren. He hurried through into the bedroom, finding Ruth trembling like a leaf, shocked at her unusual outburst turning a routine job into a nightmare. She finished packing and snapped her carry cases closed.

“Why the rush? Is everything okay?” Tim asked.

Ruth just looked at him and shook her head as she hastened out the door. He stared after her incredulously.

“Treasure? What happened? Are you alright in there? I hope you got done.”

He knocked on the door but there was no answer.

“Come out, princess! It’s almost time. Are you running away from me too?”

For a moment, he felt a quiver in his spine, a fear he couldn’t explain.

Slowly the bathroom door opened. A delicious aroma greeted him as a sumptuous cloud eased through the door. There stood a beautiful doll-faced model in a gorgeous red gown.

“Why would I leave you to dine without me, sir?” Treasure smiled coyly.

Tim couldn’t believe the woman before his eyes. She glowed; she was so radiant and regal.

“You’re mouth-watering, Treasure.”

He came closer to his princess, kissing her gently. He held her upright against the bathroom door, their foreheads meeting in the centre, pressing together.

The closeness was comforting after the unwelcome ambush from Ruth.

Treasure pulled him even closer so that his chest met her bare décolletage.

His body was like melted cocoa butter, soft but gratifying, softly pulsing with the promise of climaxing again.

“My queen, why do I need you so badly?” he murmured. He kissed her soft lips.

She submitted to his warm affection. “I need you more, my king.”

Tim slowly released her and straightened her dress, taking a step back and drawing in a breath. He sighed as pinned up his shirt. “My surprise will be spoiled if I keep you in here all night. Come, let’s go make this night a fairytale.”

“Surprise? What are you up to?”

“Just take my hand, and all will be revealed...”

TIM STEPPED OUT of the lift and waited for Treasure to follow. Two beautiful hostesses dressed in black and gold greeted them.

“Good evening Mr Morgan... Mrs Morgan.”

“Good evening ladies, we’re booked at table M.”

“Certainly; your other guest is already seated, sir; this way.”

Treasure was rather pleased to be referred to as Mrs Morgan; something inside her wanted that position badly. *I know he’s married, but a girl can dream...*

But who was the anonymous other guest at their table?

As they followed the hostess past the many other tables, Treasure felt like royalty in her designer dress, and Tim treated her with great admiration. He kept her close as he held her one hand and walked in front of her. This was something she had

been dying to have with him for so long – respect, love and care.

She felt the excitement in the air as everyone in the restaurant seemed to be happy and enjoying themselves. A live band was playing and the lights and decorations were dazzling. The opulently furnished dining room was buzzing with celebrities and movie stars. Even the politicians were outnumbered, like pebbles in deep-sea waters. Red and gold draping hung from the ceiling, with fresh roses and lilies scattered around the room.

The hostess led them into a large VIP area, dimly lit with tiny red tea lights and gold candles.

At the far end, Treasure saw one table set apart from the others, with a woman sitting facing the balcony.

The hostess indicated that very table and Tim took the lead. Treasure felt worried and confused, but they were moving too fast to speak. Tim seemed excited yet remained composed. They reached the table and he pulled out a chair for Treasure. The mysterious white woman had been waiting a while surely, yet she seemed so relaxed, patiently sipping her wine as she watched them with some amusement. She was beautiful, in a cotton blouse with a white high-waist pencil skirt and red Gucci stilettos. Who was she?

Treasure sat down gently and looked at Tim with some concern. He smiled enigmatically as he removed his jacket, placed it over the back of his chair, and moved over to the guest.

“I’m glad you could honour my invitation. You look stunning as always, my love.”

Wait, what? What’s going on here...?

They both smiled, and he bent to kiss her lips.

CHAPTER 36

Treasure those who are able to treat your secret like a death sentence; they will keep it better than when they are dead.

–Tebello Justice Phamotse

“TREASURE, I WOULD LIKE you to meet my wife, Daphne.”

Daphne stood gracefully. Tim looked thrilled with himself as he directed his open hand towards Treasure, whose eyes widened in utter shock and disbelief. In that moment, her face dimmed like a fallen seraphim's. It was as if life had stopped and she was left dangling at the centre of all the spectators.

She rose to her feet, slightly shaking, knees weak. Her heartbeat raced like a cheetah's. She held out her hand to greet Daphne but wasn't sure if she could meet her gaze.

“Lovely to finally meet you, Mrs Morgan,” she stammered.

They shook hands but Treasure's eyes kept dancing from her face to his.

What is this nightmare?

“My, you look lovely, Treasure; it's been a long day and I've really been looking forward to this dinner,” murmured Daphne.

“You have...?”

“Oh yes; Tim has told me so much about you, and you've certainly lived up to his hype,” she laughed gently. “You're indeed a gem.”

Daphne was elegant and polite; her eyes sparkled with delight as she held Treasure's hand firmly with warmth.

“Ladies please take a seat; let's order some refreshments so we can get properly acquainted.” Tim settled down and waved for a waiter. Treasure's knees practically buckled as she sat down again. Her mind was all over the place. She kept her eyes locked on the candle in front of her.

What is this?

What did Tim tell her?

Why is she so calm? Is this a ploy?

Oh, Father, get me out of here.

Why is Tim such a fool?! Are all men this imprudent? I don't NEED to know this woman...

She stayed dead quiet as she waited for a waiter to break the ice with a drinks menu. Her mouth twisted along with the thoughts in her head. Her brow creased as if her memories threatened to jump out of her head onto the dining table, exposing what they had been doing for the last three years .

Just run out of here; don't look back, her subconscious urged.

“These back drop portraits look so whimsical; whoever designed this area did a fantastic job. I hear that you're a model Treasure, so you probably understand images better than I do. What's your opinion?” Daphne beamed.

Treasure smiled back wanly. Daphne appeared to absorb her vocabulary from Top Billing. *God, I hate that pretentious show,* Treasure realised.

“Yes ma'am, they're charming.” Her words were short and cold as she looked away, cutting off eye contact with them both. Her hands felt wet and her knees kept knocking at each other; the nerves in her chest had her heart squeezed in a vice-like grip.

Tim sat back in his seat, keeping out of the conversation; a smile hung provocatively from his jaw as he gazed at them both intently. The tension in Treasure was clearly visible whereas Daphne was calm and at ease.

Is it because she's done this before? Has Tim introduced another woman to her? Treasure's mind kept throwing out questions but her mouth was glued shut. No words could escape, but the betrayal in her eyes said it all. *Now that we're all here, what are you going to do to us, Tim?*

“Ladies, the night is perfect. I have my two favourite women by my side and yes, Daphne, Treasure is here to stay,” he breathed, moving at an achingly leisurely pace, savouring every moment. He held both their hands as if to assure them of his admiration. “You two make me forget everything; you're my therapy and safe haven. I want this to be the beginning of our seamless life; I know you two will get along famously just

like you do with my bank cards,” he chuckled.

Treasure’s thoughts glued her lips together.

Her subconscious gaped at her in stunned silence as she gazed longingly into Tim’s eyes. Part of her found that his soft confessions, his truth made him more sexy and attractive. How was it possible? Like forbidden manna from heaven, his words were cutting as he told his wife the details of his relationship with her. His intense concentration betrayed no hint of doubt; though he was in the midst of a love affair, he seemed cool as a cat.

Treasure sat back in terror and embarrassment. *How will this woman react?*

Why is he even telling her?

DAPHNE RETURNED HER attention to Treasure. “Treasure, you’ve really made an impact in our lives and I’m so happy to finally meet you. Let’s celebrate this moment with a good bottle of wine, shall we? A vintage Chateau d’Yquem. It’s a traditional white wine that I only ask for during exceptional moments like these.”

Exceptional? This is horrific! Treasure struggled to keep her composure as ice filled her heart. *This room is full of delighted happy people celebrating, and here I am, humiliated once again.*

She ran her fingers across the edge of the table trying to wipe the sweat off her palms.

Don’t give yourself a brain haemorrhage, Treasure. She tried hard to stop shivering and maintain a lady-like posture.

Her face felt split in two. Still smiling phonily at Daphne’s glowing countenance, trying her best not to seem tense, she thought of her tryst with Tim under the bridge moments earlier, and what they could be doing instead of playing happy families. She shifted nervously in her chair.

Time was moving too slowly but Tim seemed to enjoy each and every moment, with Daphne playing along so well that it made Treasure the odd one out. Her subconscious gazed at her disapprovingly over half-moon specs

– *say something you fool!* Still, no words came out .

“Our wine will be here shortly so why don’t we look at the menu?” Tim prompted. “Only the best meals are served here, and only the best eat here.

What a fantastic place to celebrate.” He took the menu from the centre of the table, getting both of the women’s attention. “It’s going to be a long night, so let’s be cheerful.” He read aloud.

– Native oysters, Almus White Caviar (Served on Flora Danica China, South Sea Pearl, Amethyst Bamboo Salt)

– *Salon Blanc de Blancs, 1959*

– Pacific Blue Fin Tuna, Chorizo, Watermelon, Ponzu

– *Le Montrachet, Domaine de la Romanee-Conti, 1991*

– Tiger Prawns, Gold leaf with French Salad

– Golden Opulence Sundae: Five scoops of Tahitian Vanilla Bean ice cream mixed with Madagascar vanilla and Venezuelan Chuao chocolate and topped off with a 23K edible gold-coated leaf.

“This meal sounds like a good feast for queens; the chef here is magnificent,”

Tim spoke proudly.

“Well I definitely feel like splurging, so why not over a good meal?”

Daphne enthused. “I’d really like you to enjoy these dishes Treasure.” Her voice was warm and seductive. She pulled out her Gucci reading glasses and brought the menu closer to her eyes, nodding at Tim over the top edge.

He placed an order for the three meals without consulting Treasure and continued talking softly to Daphne..

They’re practically intertwined. Treasure’s world fell away beneath her feet as panic gripped her throat. She tried pulling herself together, repeatedly squeezing her fists under the table, but to no avail. *This is it. I can’t continue with this dinner!*

Tim finally noticed the trauma in Treasure's eyes.

"Treasure, my darling, please join me on the dance floor." He gave her a reassuring smile as he waited for her to make a move. But Treasure sat glued to her seat with shock.

"Treasure, you can't keep a good man waiting; take his hand and dance.

"Life is too short to look so dead!" Daphne smiled and lifted Treasure's hand towards Tim's. Treasure stood up slowly as Tim lead her to the dance floor a few steps away from the table.

He secured her in his arms and stared into her cold hazel eyes; he seemed genuinely warm.

"You know she's scared too, right?" He kissed her gently on her forehead.

Treasure held on to him for dear life. Shivering slightly in his arms, she rested her head on his shoulder and her thoughts on his shirt. His body covered her like the sky above the ocean.

"I thought it was just the two of us tonight; what is she doing here?"

"Don't be so rigid, love. I have a plan you know. Just relax."

"This is your WIFE, Tim! You could have warned me!"

"Calm down, please, baby; I have this under control. Let's just savour this evening. She is a beautiful soul, so don't get all worked up; just get to know her."

"I really don't see this working out. I can't bear to even look at her, and I don't know who I'm supposed to be when I'm around her."

"You are my woman, Treasure, and she knows that. Now try to act like it, and sort yourself out!"

"Don't speak to me like that; this is entirely your fault!" she muttered angrily.

"I never asked to date a cheating husband or even...just... leave it! You know, I actually just want this night to end. Can't I just go home and leave you to enjoy time with your wife? I

don't belong here. I feel like all eyes are on me now. These people probably think I'm your child or a prostitute!"

"Okay, okay, fine; I get it. I'm sorry for not warning you. I wanted it to be a special surprise. Please just calm down."

"I don't know if this is good or bad or just stupid. It's like I woke up in the middle of a bad dream only to walk into a nightmare!"

They danced slowly as Tim held her close but he was still minding Daphne; they locked eyes over Treasure's head and she nodded at him to say she understood the situation.

"Baby, let's get back to our guest. Our wine has arrived. It's going to be an outstanding night, okay? You wait and see. There's so much you'll learn from her, and you'll see that she needs your energy and creativity in many things."

Tim took Treasure's hand and guided her back to the table.

"DAPHNE, WHEN WE SPOKE earlier, I said I had a couple of surprises tonight and yes, meeting my striking Treasure was one of them; however, I would like for you two to exchange numbers."

Daphne lifted her eyebrows.

"I don't want any division or doubt about where I am from now on," Tim explained. He held both their hands and spoke openly, and for a moment he seemed so genuine, speaking from the heart, staring into their eyes, hoping to dissipate the tension still radiating from Treasure. "You two will get along wonderfully; I can sense that. There is so much more that we can do as a unit."

Daphne looked over at Treasure with a superficially resigned expression.

"Treasure, I can see he isn't letting this go, so honey we might as well enjoy our new unison. What do you say...?"

Treasure, feeling calmer after some wine, responded without expression.

"I'm not sure what he really wants from us. I'm just a nobody, Mrs Morgan."

“Don’t speak that way; he means well. I can’t always be looking for him, and now at least one of us will always know where he is... and for security purposes that could turn out well for us all.”

“But I’m a very private person, Mrs Morgan. I don’t really want to know anything about his home situation; I think things were fine just the way they

were. I don’t know, but I need time to process all of this... I hope you both understand. This whole arrangement is, um, new to me, and I wouldn’t want to mess up the dynamics of what we share.”

Daphne bit her lip in response and seemed about to retort, but dinner was served and any talk quickly subsided.

Just as the menu had promised, the meal was exquisite and ticked all the right boxes. Long after they had savoured the last morsel of creamy vanilla with Venezuelan chocolate, the restaurant was still buzzing, but the conversation at their table remained stilted. Eventually Daphne made a move.

“What a night; that meal deserves more than a few Michelin stars. I don’t think I can eat anywhere else after this.” Daphne stood up and cleared her belongings from the table, nodding at Treasure, who sat still in echoing silence.

“I hope to see you soon my fair lady; this evening was indeed fit for royalty and you were a fantastic host. I never thought I would enjoy such a spectacular evening with my husband’s mistress!”

Treasure swallowed what felt like a bucket of ice in her gullet. She felt she was at the edge of an aggressive volcano, holding on to a slippery reality, trying not to slip backwards. Fighting the impulse to tell them exactly what she thought, she slowly stood up, holding out her hand to thank Daphne for sharing a meal with her, but the words seem to evaporate from her throat.

“Well ladies, let’s call it a night. Both of your drivers are waiting outside to take you home.” Tim took their handbags and led them to the foyer.

His pride puffed his chest up even bigger than his ego. He walked tall and flamboyantly so, passing on his regards to the hotel staff as well as the guests he was familiar with.

Side by side, his two beautiful madams walked. One could say they had just discovered the true meaning of the words, 'Diamonds are a girl's best friend.'

No one could know what would come next, but Tim knew this was the beginning of a revolution that only insiders would understand.

CHAPTER 37

SHE LAY FACE UP, staring at the ceiling with her hands clenched over her tummy and her face distorted. The shock was keeping her awake all night, remembering and analysing every word and gesture, even the small talk, but not revealing anything new. It reminded her of when she was a kid, feeling bored to death and aimlessly peeling pastel dots off an endless strip of paper.

Something in her spirit had been silenced. Her apartment was completely dark; any light was blocked by her double layered blinds.

At the break of dawn, the sun rose with the loud peal of a telephone call.

"Hello Lintle, my long lost love..."

"Yelloooooow, darling sugar baby," Lintle laughed. "It's been ages... So my life is a mess and I need your advice, for once, ha. Paul is gone again! And I'm heartbroken; I wish you were here."

Treasure's gut tightened; she knew the truth, but how much could she say?

"Oh no, not again. That man! You know, I think it's time for you to finally straighten things out with Paul. I mean, what's going on, really?"

"He doesn't want to take my calls and I can't run after him. Where were you yesterday anyway? I tried calling you all day and night but you disappeared like a vampire."

“Don’t even ask about my night Lintle!” Treasure groaned.

“Was it that bad? I bet all this attitude comes from you being around Tim. I promise you that man is poison; even worse, he’s like the devil in a million-dollar suit. I hope you’re just sore from bending your back, ha ha ha; the sex was good right? You know I taught you well; no man should ever go to bed ‘hungry’.”

“Please, it was far from that; get your mind out of the gutter. He was just on some other level and I wasn’t part of his glory. Last night’s drama is better left alone until after I have a glass of wine and some hot wings. Come over later?”

“I hope he didn’t hurt you again Treasure; you don’t sound very happy.”

“No, not at all; I just don’t want to deal with that whole messy affair.”

“Well, let me share my crazy world with you... Paul has been a no-show lately and he doesn’t share anything about his life with me. The secrets in his eyes terrify me. I can’t even call him for just a chat; the conversation has become a yes/no charade. I guess he’s finally gotten bored of me. It’s strange that he still mentions you though. I’m not sure if you guys talk over the phone or what, but let him know that I miss him. At least, if there’s one thing I can bet on, it’s that he would never cheat on me. That man’s obsessed with his job; not even I can derail him.”

Treasure sighed. *If only she knew.* “Please Lintle; men are just a waste of time. You need a hobby, or even better, ask him to take you on a golfing trip.

There are some nice courses that have spas and other things to do. Or better yet, learn the sport.”

“I don’t want to go anywhere with a person that doesn’t have time for me... I just want to hear his voice, you know; a phone call once a day wouldn’t kill him. It’s like he doesn’t want to see me at all; I may as well be dead to him.”

“Please Lintle, you need to get some control of the situation; just go to his place and see what’s going on.”

“I’m not chasing anybody. Anyway, have you spoken to Tim about you going back to school? If that man can afford Tom Ford I don’t see why he won’t pay tuition!”

“Tim’s busy, and I can’t keep bringing up more expenses for him to cover.

Anyway, I want to go to the Durban July!”

“Ja well, those come and go; why don’t you get your education sorted and then milk him for a house? That rented apartment isn’t yours, and neither are any of those little goodies he gets for you.” A strange nasty tone had crept into Lintle’s voice. “It’s time for some serious shopping. Imagine all the guys that WOULD actually marry you, but here you are stuck with this old codger.

Treasure, this game is called ‘Opportunity Costs’; you have to keep track of

what you give up and what you get back! The life we live isn’t for cheap niggers!”

“I know that, Lintle.”

“Well then?! Tim needs to live up to his Sugar Daddy status! Who wants a Broke Daddy or a Stingy Daddy!? I would rather date Max from Alex than stick around with a greedy old man. Well, maybe not Max—he lives below the bread line—he doesn’t even qualify as an afterthought. But my point is, get your man to MARRY YOU! Period! Three years is good enough for me.

Once Paul comes out of his cocoon hiding place, we’re heading straight to the altar, even if I have to chain him to the pastor to get it done! I’m not going to let my reserve bank go just like that.”

“That may be right for you, but I’m not going to be anybody’s second wife, Lintle! Are you insane? That man has far too much going on. It’s like Bafana Bafana at the World Cup! Catastrophe! And you know how I feel about men, honestly. The hate in me has grown to a point where I can’t even stand

their SMELL around me. I'm glad Tim isn't with me constantly – I would just freak out.”

“So I guess that's why you never told me about your baby with him, right?”

Paul told me he saw you at the hospital in November but that you were out of it. Well, I guessed you had been pregnant, what with the not drinking much and always being tired. So, how's the baby, madam?”

Treasure pulled in a heap of breath and looked up at the light on the ceiling.

Burning tears filled her eyes and her heart pounded with mixed emotions.

“Treasure? Come on, it's not rocket science.”

“Yes, but it's not easy.”

“So how is the little one?”

“Look, I really can't talk about it right now.”

“Oh yes? Please, spare me the hormonal drama. I'm so sick of your personal bullshit. You still have no idea how lucky you are. I hope Tim knows what he's in for. I mean, there's just no turning back now, is there? Don't make

him regret it.”

“LITTLE...” The world stopped and the rage emerged.

Treasure's voice dropped dangerously. “Just. SHUT. THE FUCK. UP! You're so goddamn BLIND.”

“What?”

“Yes! You know nothing! Stop acting like you're my mother! Why don't you ask Paul where the fuck he is? Or what old man he's fucking next! I bet you didn't know that all his money comes from Tim and his stupid ‘Hockey Club’. That's what you should be worried about: your man's a gigolo!”

“Okay, now you just sound mental. I don't have to listen to this.”

“I would if I were you. Life’s a bitch, and we *both* got fucked! You have no idea how it feels to be a mother and lose your baby!”

“Treasure, what on earth are you talking about, seriously? Dissing Paul won’t help you or the fact that you can’t keep a man or a child!”

“God, you have no idea what I’ve been through, Lintle.”

“Yes, and I don’t know if I should care.”

“And you call yourself my friend? Just for the record, you add no value to my life, and Paul loved you, he DID, but now he’s so high and dazzled by money that he doesn’t see you for shit, and it’s your fault! YOU pushed him into the hole he’s in now.”

“How dare you blame me? I’ve only ever done the best for my man, unlike some people. I’ve been playing this game much longer than you. Don’t think you can win this!”

“THIS GAME is LIFE, girl, not me, and you are being PLAYED by the GAME, not by me!”

“Look Treasure, you used me for my kindness and then disappeared. I taught you how the city works, and now I’ll watch it swallow you alive. I’ve seen many girls like you and trust me, you’re no different. You’ll be begging at my front door soon! This city thrives on seeing young blood being sucked dry and washed up, and you’re next.”

The rage in Treasure broke all limits as she threw down her phone and covered her throbbing eyes with a pillow. The pain and memory of her unborn child was too much to bear.

IT HADN’T BEEN a major fight, she tried to reassure herself. She cleared her throat but felt a rush of fear coming on to shake her from her delusion.

Okay fine, I was rude, but she was being a real bitch. She stood up from her bed heading to the bathroom to freshen up. I shouldn’t have yelled at her, but she was getting up in my business, and what the hell was she thinking when she spoke about my child? She knows nothing, and her mouth is too big

for her anyway. I hate yelling, but it feels good inside to say whatever I want to say.

As she immersed her body in the tub, she remembered Lintle's voice; there was something black and buggy in it that made her heart skip a beat.

There was so much left unsaid in that conversation, things she didn't say that could have changed it all, but it was too late. She sank into the warm bubbly water and sealed off the conversation she had with herself.

AT TEN O'CLOCK that night, Treasure was busy on Facebook when a message came to her phone from an unknown number.

<Hi dear. Dinner was lovely, and I've booked us in for manicures tomorrow morning, eight o'clock at the Moloko Hotel in Sandton. I'll pick you up at seven thirty sharp. We have a lot of girl time to catch up on. Ciao. Daphne M.>

Treasure sighed. *Really?* It had been a long week and she wasn't up for another unpredictable date. There was so much she wanted to do, but it seemed like everybody else already had plans for her life.

Damn, these people have no boundaries. How did she get my number?

Even worse, she obviously knows where I live... Who gave Tim permission to pass on my private information? If not for that slut of a man, I wouldn't have this cow harassing me. What does he expect me to talk about with his old lady?

I doubt we have anything in common, besides her husband.

Aargh, what do I do? If I don't reply to her creepy message then maybe she'll get the picture. I don't want another over the top fake friend, and especially a snob for that matter. I can't deal with her fake posh accent.

She tried to not think about this new friendship being forced on her, but two hours later it was still weighing on her mind.

God, I really don't have time for this. She hadn't even visited her mother's grave! Tim had prevented her from being at the

funeral, and the abortion hadn't helped the situation. Things had moved so fast that Treasure's ugly secret had been her burden for three months. Even now that Lintle knew, it didn't help at all. Treasure couldn't cope with being judged for something she had had no control over.

To ease her mind, she tried to distract herself. First she went into the laundry room next to the kitchen, unloaded clothes from the compact washer and stuffed them into the dryer. She opened a bottle of wine and put on her favourite band, The Soil. Then she switched on the TV, leaving it mute.

As she was flipping through the channels, her phone rang.

Treasure felt an unmistakable chill run down her spine. Somehow Daphne knew that she was up. And Treasure knew that Daphne wanted an answer. She quickly turned off the music.

"Mrs Morgan, is everything okay?"

"Treasure, I'm sorry to call you at this ungodly hour. I'm sure you want to be fast asleep."

"Oh no, that's alright; I'm just channel surfing."

"Fantastic, then you must've read my text about tomorrow. The hotel I've chosen is truly phenomenal."

"Yes...?"

"Of course; we'll be extremely pampered, and you have nothing to worry about. Get some sleep and we'll be in contact first thing in the morning. Ciao bella!"

Before she could add anything else, the line went dead. Treasure was left

gazing at the screen in disbelief.

Emotionally drained from a day of unforeseen events, she curled up into a foetal position for a peaceful sleep.

CHAPTER 38

Nothing is new under the Sun.

– Ecclesiastes 1: 4-11

A BENTLEY CONTINENTAL GTC in a Sunburst Gold Metallic colour arrived at her doorstep at seven thirty sharp. The luxurious monster was a beast in nature yet soothing on the eye.

The ever-so-stylish Daphne leaned against the car's passenger door in formfitting Roberto Cavalli jeans and a structured white David Tlale blouse.

Her Lugano Diamond shades gave her a Hollywood glow, also known as

'Sandton flamboyance'. She was glued to her Diamond & Platinum iPhone, chatting to someone cozily.

She acknowledged Treasure with a brief wave of her right hand and hugged the phone closer to her ear as warm laughter pealed out from the other side of the call. Treasure came closer and waited, giving Daphne space to conclude her conversation, but Daphne swiftly pulled her car keys out of her studded Valentino dome handbag and handed them to Treasure without a word.

Treasure grabbed the keys in surprise and silent exhilaration, but was momentarily distracted by Daphne's shoes. The Brian Atwood Temptation leather sandals were a beautiful metallic grey pair that Treasure had never seen before. In comparison, she felt dressed down in a red maxi dress and flat thongs. *Why did modesty knock on my door today of all days? I hope I don't look frumpy.* She waited near the driver's door, feeling frustrated but trying to stay calm.

Daphne briefly put her hand over the phone. "Get in, sweets, you're driving us."

"Me?" Treasure's entire face lit up like a street light.

"Yes, there are a couple of phone calls I need to make and I don't want to kill us, or even worse, be late." Then she was laughing back into the phone.

Treasure climbed into the right seat slowly, appreciating the exquisite red interior. It was to die for. But there were so many buttons that she didn't know where to start the car engine.

“Come dear, get us out of here.” Daphne slid into the left side and pointed at the ignition in mock impatience. Treasure started the car on her third try.

Daphne finally ended her call and carefully pointed out the essentials. Then they were off. It was exhilarating.

“Welcome, Mrs Morgan, we’ve been expecting you.”

“Thank you, Logan; please meet my good friend Treasure. She’s going to be a regular here. Please get her an access card and introduce her to the manager on duty today.” Daphne seemed very happy and blissful and everyone at the reception area seemed to like her.

“Will do.”

“Please ask the bar man to bring us two well shaken Martinis and fruit salads to get us started.”

“So, Mrs Morgan, how long is our treatment?” Treasure murmured.

“Oh darling, don’t worry. Tim knows where we are and we certainly deserve to be spoiled, and today’s just one of those days.”

“I just thought we were just having our nails done?”

“Actually, we’re shutting this place down for private time to indulge in champagne, an hour-long massage, an UMO 24-Carat facial, a little waxing, and a gold and diamond-studded manicure.”

“Ok, now I’m lost; what kind of facial is that?”

Daphne shook her head. “Where has Tim been hiding you? Stick with me my dear; your life will improve a lot. The UMO facial uses an intense hydrating compound inside sheets of pure gold. It reduces wrinkles and your skin cells will grow better. You’re going to love it.”

THREE HOURS INTO their treatments, Treasure wanted to spend some time by the Jacuzzi, and soon after Daphne joined her in a white bathing suit.

“The day is perfect; I haven’t had a day like this in ages,” murmured Treasure as she stared at her feet in the water. The fresh smell of salt was so comforting.

“I was going to ask; I know Tim and his outrageous ways. Doesn’t he take care of you?”

“Well, yes, in the beginning; that was three years ago. We would go on holidays, I had weekly spa treatments; but things just died down as soon as his business got bigger. And he said you wanted to see more of him, so I guess the spark died.” Treasure’s voice lowered and sounded a little gloomy.

“Well business comes and goes, but he shouldn’t disregard you. We all see you’re smart and attractive; he should be careful. A younger man will win your heart and I certainly don’t want to see that happen. Tim is very fond of you.”

“I don’t really follow, Mrs Morgan. The man you saw at the dinner is the man I got to meet years ago. But these days he’s usually different. I’m not certain how you know his true feelings for me, but you must know he loves you more. I guess I just provide some of the fun times.”

“Firstly, stop calling me Mrs Morgan. I’m Daphne to you. And don’t think so little of yourself Treasure; I may be the support structure and the family foundation, but you certainly have a special place in his heart. I saw the way he looked at you as you were dining with us. He has a soft spot for you.”

“Mrs Morgan, this conversation is a little hard for me. I’m your husband’s concubine, not your best friend or sister.”

Daphne laughed. “Treasure, we run deeper than that now, thanks to Tim! We’re both adults here; let’s not beat around the bush. You run in my husband’s DNA, and he runs in mine; therefore, your blood is in mine.”

Treasure’s eyes widened. *It’s true. Sex bonds people on many different levels.*

In some cultures, sex is like glue, joining people together like wedding rings.

“Don’t look so shocked; take me as your friend. You and I have a long way to go.”

Daphne called for a meal and ordered three more bottles of champagne.

“Logan, make sure that we have enough to drink; I don’t want these glasses dry. Keep the finger food coming too,” she called out cheerfully.

“Treasure, you see this hotel, it’s owned by my dear husband. However, my name is nowhere on the title deed or any property that we own. He owns a string of clubs in the country, even in Bloemfontein.”

Treasure’s heart skipped a beat. Bloemfontein... Surely not?

“A club in Bloemfontein?”

“Yes, that’s what I said. He has many clubs; we just opened one in Camps Bay –”

“Um, this one in Bloem. What’s it called?”

“Whispers. That was our first club.”

This is impossible! How on earth? Treasure’s heart dropped. She felt herself go hot and cold. As the earth opened wide beneath her feet, she zoned out.

Daphne droned on, oblivious to Treasure’s shock. “We opened it in 2005 and it’s the best place in the Free State. It’s practically the only place there worth going to. Business is really good; that place has been a blessing to us.

We have loyal employees.”

Loyal employees? Your employees ruined my life!

Life had paused and hell clouded her reality. She realised she was gaping and coughed, managing to regain her composure.

“Yes, that’s what he enjoys; you could call it a dignified hobby. He plays hard and works ten times harder. What you see is far less than what he does.”

Treasure couldn’t bear the sneer on her face but she knew she couldn’t say a *word*! She picked up her glass and downed the champagne in one go.

“Wow, someone’s thirsty. This weekend I’ll take you around and treat you to some night life.”

“No thank you, Daphne, I prefer being at home. I hate clubs.” Treasure’s voice rose with her anger. “What’s a white woman like you doing in clubs

with strippers and prostitutes anyway? Don’t you know what ACTUALLY

goes on in those clubs? I thought you would have more sense than that!” she snapped, picking up the champagne bottle and throwing it in the water.

“Alright, calm down! I just oversee the business and I need to visit the places once in a while,” Daphne said coolly,

“It doesn’t matter, I don’t do clubs,” Treasure insisted.

“Clearly not, I see. Well, do whatever you do for fun. Young girls like you enjoy our clubs. Anyway, I know I’m white, but who said ‘white’ people don’t do ‘black’ men?” Daphne giggled; clearly the champagne was kicking in.

“That’s not what I meant.” Treasure was seething, but she could see Daphne was not going to admit to anything. *She might not even know...* She gave herself a while to calm down.

“WHY MARRY A black man?”

“It’s simple; we were in love. It was 1989; we were young and idealistic, fighting apartheid; I was a law student at Wits and he was studying Political Science. He was so smart, handsome and hardworking, and he took care of us. Well, I had two crazy friends that liked politics; they would join all the freedom marches in the Jo’burg CBD, and I would be in the middle of the crowd. Funny enough Tim always found me in the masses. We became good friends and the rest is history.”

“I bet your family wasn’t pleased that you were running around in the midst of black people,” Treasure prompted.

“My parents eventually disowned me... I started with my marriage plans in 1991 and I haven’t seen them since that year. Although I send money home to Krugersdorp every month

now, they think I abandoned them because I chose my husband.”

“So you haven’t gone back home ever since? That seems a bit drastic, for you to leave your family like that. You must have been desperate.”

“It wasn’t like that. We were fighting for all kinds of freedom, and they just didn’t understand. When we won the elections in 1994, things got better for

us as a couple. We formalised our marriage.”

“So if you were so in love, why did you agree to allow him to date me?”

“Look, that was over twenty years ago. He’s a man. I never finished my studies because my parents cut me off, and then I fell pregnant with Thoriso and three years later I had Nthabiseng. Those kids became my life and I had to be a wife like my husband wished.”

“You do take it very seriously,” muttered Treasure. “Is being a wife your profession?”

“Well, being a wife IS basically a full time job. I’ve had two more kids since then. A career is out of the question for me. I mastermind all our businesses and I maintain the stability in our family. I think that’s a profession.”

“And your kids have black names? I bet you had nothing to do with that...”

“My husband’s family gave us the names and he changed his surname to Morgan as a symbol that my family was part of us too. Yes, I know it’s a culture shock that the husband would take the wife’s surname but that’s our choice and we’re happy with it.”

“I guess he benefited from it at the time; a white surname still has a lot of weight in our twisted society. Aren’t you scared that he married you just for

‘social freedom?’”

“We all have our reasons for marriage and I believed that he loved me,”

Daphne was deep in thought for a second and Treasure pulled her back to reality.

“So, the surname change was your plan?”

“Yes and no; he made the choice and I supported the idea. He did love me but more importantly, it meant a lot to me at the time... I’d lost all I had and he saved me by making me his wife. So family is very important to both of us.”

“I guess that’s why you accepted me,” Treasure felt little emotion for Daphne’s personal story. The word *Whispers* lingered in her ear and formed a cloud over her head.

“Don’t get me wrong; my marriage is solid as a rock. If I have to accept you

for my family’s happiness so be it, but I know my husband comes through for my needs too.”

“What kind of needs exactly?” Treasure locked eyes with Daphne, trying to penetrate her thoughts, but Daphne broke the connection without skipping a beat.

“Come, it’s time to go. I need to pick the kids up from the airport. They were in Cape Town for a school tour.”

“Are you going to be driving in this state?” Treasure wished she didn’t sound like a concerned mother.

“Not at all, my driver is already waiting. We’ll drop you off and then get the kids.”

Daphne got out of the water, wrapping her body with a white towel.

Treasure sighed and followed her, heading to the change rooms where they got dressed. She put on her maxi dress while Daphne dressed in fresh clothes she had waiting; again Treasure felt the sting of inadequacy. What game was Daphne playing?

CHAPTER 39

*Humans adapt to things that seem to warm their hearts.
Money is one of those things...*

– Lintle Kente

DESPITE HER MISGIVINGS, over the winter months Treasure became captivated by Daphne's allure and elegance. She was well-spoken and had much to talk about. With each lunch date, spa session and champagne bottle, a little more history and gossip was shared. Daphne would reminisce about Tim's upbringing and his numerous wrong turns and business ventures that could easily have made him an infamous gangster.

Growing up in the dangerous Alexandra township, a mere ten kilometres from Sandton, Tim had survived on the streets by a combination of miracles, endless resilience and surprisingly, deep prayer. His mother had fled to Zambia for unclear reasons and his father died three months later from tuberculosis.

Living alone with no parents or guardians, he was a lost child in a one bedroom shack. Like any broken boy, he took to the streets to find something to replace his lost family. But the streets were scenes of fiery violence, part of the tangled web of South Africa's brutal history. Tim's childhood seemed far removed from the fairytale he was living now.

Gradually Treasure forgot her misgivings about Tim. She forgave him his angry outbursts, feeling he must have had good reasons, and fell in love with him again through her new connection with his past. Sometimes he shone like a mythical hero in her mind.

And then there was Daphne. For a white woman, she seemed to know black history better than the many that lived it. She was like a cynical walking history book. Her dialogue rolled smartly yet wickedly off her tongue, leaving Treasure in stitches. She had an eye sharp as a falcon with admirable vision for business. These were more than just skills. She was wise and

cunning; not even a snake could outsmart her. Treasure realised she needed to make a friend of this woman, at least for now. She certainly didn't want her as an enemy.

She hoped things would stay as promising as they were. She was getting closer to Daphne and simultaneously, Tim was her

lap dog again. However, he was also more forthright with his crazy demands, and Treasure felt she needed to give him whatever Daphne couldn't provide. So she agreed to play out his fantasies, even though the sex was tougher than ever before, and even toxic on some days.

She wanted to outmanoeuvre her charming opponent with ease, and smile at her with the knowledge that she had won the game, fulfilled Tim's desire and provided complete satisfaction. *I'm not letting life play its old tricks on me again. It's time to claim what's mine. I'm not bending over or submitting anymore. I'm going to play the game and win it. This is the rising of a phoenix.*

CHAPTER 40

Don't hate the game ... play smarter.

"I'LL TAKE THREE OF THESE and four of those; goodness, I don't know their names... Excuse me, I'm a little flustered today!" she said candidly.

"Don't worry, madam; clearly you've had a long day, but you still have great taste. The ones on your right are All-over Lace Brief panties, and these are our gorgeous French-Cut Panties," the Victoria's Secret teller pointed out.

She placed Treasure's basket on top of the counter and rang up the items.

"Well, I have a big night planned and it has to be perfect. Underwear is as important as breathing!"

"I must agree, ma'am; I spoil myself once in a while with the sexy Cheeky Brazilian Briefs. They are so comfy! And you can never go wrong with some G-Strings too. May I ask, what's the occasion?"

"You know how men are; let me just say it's time to spice up the menu..."

Treasure said coyly and lifted her bags. The two women shared a laugh and then Treasure dashed out of the store. As she hurried away, the teller studied her from head to toe.

A twenty-inch Brazilian weave...

Black New York Cap...

Cartier necklace...

Cartier slim watch...

White Loose vest...

Pink Issey Miyake classic buckle belt...

Black Palesa Mokubung skinny jeans...

And all she could say was... *mxm!*

TREASURE POPPED THE boot of the car, but it was full of an assortment of clothes from the previous day's clear-out. She dumped her bags inside the car instead. A couple of message alerts flickered on her phone screen. She sat quickly and closed the door. The first one was an email from Lintle.

Ola, just for courtesy's sake I'm letting you know I'll be leaving tonight. I'm going to Zastron and I won't be back for a while. Take care of yourself. I truly wish you had been able to keep your baby. Maybe that would have opened your mind a little more. I remember the day you came to this city, full of hopes and dreams. You were determined and genuine, loving and truthful... that made me jealous, but honestly, you've just become an evil version of me.

I hope you realise that I loved you and would've done anything to help you.

Please push that 'man' of yours to send you to school; it's the only way you'll be freed from this twilight of a life. If you need to get off that roller-coaster, my apartment keys will be at our favourite spot. See you in the next life, Cherie.

PS. You don't owe me anything.

Xoxo

Lintle

Treasure sat completely still, wounded by the weight of the news the email bore; she read it over and over and her anxiety grew. Something in her had always simply longed for true friendship, love and care, and the one person that still gave her that had just thrown in the towel. She raised her head. Her

smile had vanished. She pulled the car roughly out of the street parking space and raced into West Street.

God! Why do you take them all away? They're all I have!

She needed comfort; with one hand on the wheel she used the other to search her phone's contacts, desperately looking for someone to call.

Dial, stupid phone, please goddammit.

"Paul speaking."

"Hi, it's Treasure."

"Hello stranger!" Paul responded with suave excitement.

"Paul, are you aware that your girlfriend is leaving town?"
Treasure panicked.

"LITTLE? Yes, I know; she sent me a long e-mail. I read most of it! Anyway, it's so nice speaking to you!" He was not concerned in the least. "I'm surprised that you called. Are you up for tea some time when that old eagle gives you a breather?"

"Paul, don't you get it? She's really leaving!" Treasure shouted over the speaker.

"Well, that's her choice. What do you want me to do? The ink has dried out on our love story." Paul had lost hope in his relationship; his voice said it all.

"I gave her all I could! I sold myself for her comfort... Things were never the same after you spat all your venom out on her."

"That was a mistake. Please don't let her go like this; I'm begging you!

Paul!" Treasure was crying, struggling to speak over the phone and drive at the same time. A taxi hooted urgently behind her.

"Hey, are you DRIVING?" Paul could hear her fear and frenzy over the phone. Her short breaths hitting the speaker sounded like an angry boxer hitting a punching bag, trying to rip it apart.

"Stop that car Treasure!" he demanded.

She slammed on the brakes; the car veered from side to side, swerving into oncoming traffic, almost colliding with a petrol truck. And the phone went dead.

The red BMW stood dead still in the middle of the road. Treasure's head was on the steering wheel with her hands covering her eyes. "I'm dead, I'm dead," she whispered to herself, breathing heavily.

WHAT HAVE I DONE, Lord, why do they all leave me? Am I that bad of a human that I don't deserve a blessing? I pray but I can't hear my own words; I ask in your name but I see no results. I didn't ask for this life! I know your word,

Lord. Hear me!

You say: "Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." –

Hebrews 4:16

Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you." – Matthew 7:7

Oh Lord, you say: "My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth." – Psalm 121:2

Oh Father I am your seed, your ash I beg for grace! "Casting all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you." –1 Peter 5:7

Treasure raised her teary eyes towards the heavens.

Oh Father I heard the word; please free me from this life! For you say: "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." – 1 John 1:9

A calm voice inside her head said: *So close to freedom, yet so far, my beloved; why do you cry when you know my ways? Rise child, and live for My Kingdom.*

THE RESOLVE IN Treasure rose like a stallion ready for war. Her face pale and strained, she struggled through the

gridlocked cars.

“Get out of the road, girly!” a man screamed at her. Her heart lurched.

Somehow she found her way back to her lane. It took all of her focus to get back to her apartment.

CHAPTER 41

Your life is a blessing; your success is your responsibility. No one owes you your happiness. CREATE IT!

– Molemo Gladwin Kalaka

“I’VE BEEN WAITING for you for hours! I thought you had been arrested or run off with somebody. Do you know what that would do to my husband?”

Treasure kept still as Daphne stood near her car window in her parking bay.

“Hello Daphne, WHAT a surprise. What are you doing here?” She stared straight ahead; she didn’t really want an answer.

“I’m here to help you make Tim dinner for tonight. It’s high time you eat sophisticated food instead of this takeaway nonsense.” Daphne pulled her door open. She spotted Treasure’s shopping haul on the seats and beamed.

“Well, someone has been taking my advice; there’s nothing like a credit card that’s finally found its purpose!”

She stretched out her hand so she could help with the bags.

“Well? Get out.

Come, we don’t have all night. Where’s your head at?”

“I really don’t need help. I’ve ordered food from Michelangelo Hotel, and they will deliver in no time. So you see, you’re not needed here,” Treasure groaned.

“Well YOU look exhausted, so actually I think I am needed. Sort yourself out with warm water and some foam bath and salt. I’ll get things started in the kitchen.” Daphne took some of Treasure’s shopping bags and rushed inside.

Treasure stood there, completely drained and out of words.

“So you came prepared, I see,” Treasure said sarcastically. She stood by the kitchen door and watched Daphne with concerned eyes.

“There’s dead wood under your eyes; please do something about your face.

Or maybe work on the things you’re actually going to treat my husband to.”

Daphne was jolly and full of energy.

“You do know that you can’t be here when he gets here right?”

“Don’t worry Treasure; I checked on him and he’ll be here at seven sharp.

I’ll be long gone by then, so stop fussing.”

“So what are you cooking my lady chef?”

“Ah, wouldn’t you like to know? I have this under control.”

“Just let me see the ingredients then, I’ll figure it out.”

Treasure tried to swing her arm but the Iron Lady wasn’t budging.

“What do you have up your sleeve? Why cook for us, really?”

“My husband likes certain things and it’s about time I showed you how to hock in well.”

“Don’t you think I’ve been doing a good job over the years?”

“Honey, hotel food doesn’t make you a good wife...or mistress! You want to be someone’s wife in the future right?”

“You sound like you’re preparing me to leave your husband...”

“All you need to know is that I take care of loose ends everywhere! Don’t stress; if you can’t leave him, that’s your choice, honey.”

“I’m just surprised with all your redundant efforts, Daphne!”

“Well, tell me, since we’re being honest, are you planning to play house with my husband forever? He’s going to get tired

of this game with you and he'll refocus on his family. Like any older man, his wife always comes first!"

"Now the truth comes out. You want to sabotage my night with him right!"

"Not at all; I just want him to be happy. It doesn't matter where he is."

"And where are your kids when you're playing house here?"

"My kids don't need my time right now and please don't mention them; that's my private life and none of your concern."

"Excuse me? You come into my home and invade my space and make demands and talk about privacy?! Rich people and their tendencies!"

Treasure stood firm near the table and watched Daphne closely. For some reason Daphne remained composed.

"Let's not spoil the evening. I'll get the pots going; do you mind pouring us a glass of wine? Relax, I won't poison you; calm down and have a glass."

Daphne continued chopping veggies as if nothing had happened.

Treasure did as she was told and the wine did the trick to ease the tension.

"I need that bath, so I'll join you later. It looks good, so I'll trust you on this one."

"I trust you with many things, so just let this evening play out as it should."

Daphne sipped quickly from her glass.

Treasure was sceptical but left as ordered.

"YOU PROMISED TO be gone! He just pulled up in the driveway. What are we going to do?"

"Help me come up with a plan and stop complaining! Don't you have a back door?" Daphne and Treasure ran around the house like two mischievous teens.

“Are you kidding? This is a townhouse; what back door! How are we going to explain why you’re here? Where’s your car anyway? He’s going to see it.

No one else here drives a Bentley!”

Daphne ran into Treasure’s room. “My driver dropped me off, so don’t worry about my car. I just need to hide in your closet or somewhere.”

The next thing she knew, Daphne had crawled under the bed. Treasure looked on in shock but there was no time to reject the outrageous idea.

CHAPTER 42

Think like a queen. A queen is not afraid to fail. Failure is another stepping stone to greatness.

– Oprah Gail Winfrey

“HELLO, COME IN,” she greeted Tim. “How was your day? Sorry to keep you waiting; what happened to your key? You always let yourself in.” She was babbling; her heart racing uncontrollably. The thought of Daphne under her bed was freaking her out. The anxiety building up within her ribcage felt larger than the Titanic iceberg.

Tim didn’t seem to notice. “Something smells good. Don’t tell me you cooked? I just thought that tonight I would let you do the hosting, so opening your door didn’t seem right.”

He was casually dressed in jeans and a white T-shirt. He smelled so good that Treasure’s focus shifted from the “rat” under her bed to the man she had become so fond of. She couldn’t resist his familiar scent.

“I had a fight with Daphne this morning and she left the office like a bat out of hell; you women keep me on my toes! There are no gloomy days in my life. The perfectionist in her is like a ball of fire. I felt like she wanted space so I didn’t try looking for her. It would’ve spoiled my day and I wanted everything to be perfect for you.”

Tim pulled Treasure close into his arms and kissed her gently. It was a little taste from heaven.

“I missed you, Tim,” Treasure whispered in his ear. She didn’t want Daphne to hear anything.

“I’ve been waiting to see you all week; with being stuck at the office... work has pushed me to the edge. I want you...” he kissed her passionately.

“Um, you should eat first,” Treasure squirmed a bit.

“No, that can wait. I’ve been starved and I won’t last another minute without

you.” He tipped her back onto the kitchen table and lifted her leg up with one hand.

DAPHNE LAY UNDER the bed, so cramped that even shifting her leg was impossible. Her curiosity was killing her. She could hear them but she saw nothing. She wanted a glimpse of her husband in this situation; she missed his touch, but it wasn’t her time. She didn’t know how to feel or how to accept this reality. The room suddenly felt ten times smaller and every breath counted against her. She wanted to be quiet but her heartbeat pounded like a drum, loud enough to punch her sweat right off her chest.

Things unfolded quickly in the kitchen; Tim was more than ready... He had been patient and this was his moment. He heard each word that came out of Treasure’s mouth but had a totally different picture of what she meant.

He gently kissed her leg and rubbed her waist as he made his way up her body. The new lingerie made him wild.

“This I like,” he whispered. “My Treasure, I want to adore you this night.

You make my days so blissful...” He gazed at her with great yearning. He always wanted more out of every moment...

AFTER EATING, THEY sat on the couch with Tim’s arm around her.

Treasure kept trying to get a glimpse of Daphne hiding under the bed but her eyes couldn’t see through the bedroom darkness.

“You seem a little distant, Treasure,” Tim asked with concern. He placed his hand on Treasure’s décolletage and spoke softly but with more firmness.

“Wouldn’t it help you to sort your thoughts and feelings out if you started writing? It would be easy for you to keep a diary; you’re a good writer.”

“Me write? You’re joking,” Treasure was taken aback.

“You just seem a little... troubled. I know having Daphne in your life must have come with some adjustments. But don’t let that rip you away from who we are outside of her.”

“It’s not about her really; I want to go back to school and get a degree... you promised I could, as soon as things settled down.”

They tried to iron out their issues but there was something left unsaid in the air. Like the moon, a part of Treasure was always hidden; her soul wasn’t one with her body, yet she had to soldier on.

“Your ink-stained fingers could do real work if you just gave me what I wanted.” Suddenly Tim spoke completely out of context as if he had not a care in the world about how she felt. It was a cold and brutal moment. The look in his eyes was heartless and distant.

“What do you want?” She was peeved by his remark, but it didn’t seem to bother him at all. Angered, she continued, “I do as you say all the time! In the four years I’ve devoted myself to you, all I wanted was to study, but you blocked me each time. I could have registered without your knowledge, but there was no point. You double-check my statements for everything, even my receipts for bread and milk!”

Her fever reached boiling point. “I don’t know why you’re trying so hard to keep me from being educated. I don’t mean to disrespect you, but I’m more than a BODY! What do you want to do with me? I won’t be young forever, and who wants a stupid illiterate woman in their lives?”

Bitterness covered her heart with a cold blanket. She was in desperate need of hope, but hope had been a fickle taskmaster!

Her desire for education had grown in magnitude but she had kept silent for the sake of peace.

The darkness in Treasure rose to its full height as she grasped how the men in her life had affected her fate. She gazed down at her hands; reflections of blood and tears rained down onto them from the images in her head. Tim was talking, but she had zoned out to the point where she couldn't hear a word he said. She closed her eyes and wished everything away so that she could have peace again but her reality was too complex to just walk away from. *Can I ever dwell on the past without being undone by it? I regret this life,*

Lord; I regret the wasted years and the line of men in my life.

She was existing on the edge of a breakdown held together with makeup and Daphne's expensive excursions. Weary and out of hope, her dreams sailed away on Tim's ridicule and controlling nature.

His words were around her like a pregnant cyclone. They plagued her conscience and tore at her heart. He had turned the foundations of her mind into rubble. Her gaze stayed glued to the floor. *The heart of the Law is mercy...*

She couldn't even bring herself to pray. Her heart trembled at the thought of not putting God first. Gloom crushed her spirit on all counts.

Eventually she snapped back to reality, into the life she knew, the life that had made her empty, the life she had chosen. It was a life that so many women desired but couldn't live in long enough to say *I DO*.

CHAPTER 43

Life is beautiful with or without pain.

– Yaa Gyasi

THE LIVING ROOM was dark and silent. Treasure's heart beat heavily. She felt like something had perished in the air.

She drowned her worries with wine and stood away from the couch. She felt safer away from him. If a thousand miles were

placed between them, it wouldn't be far enough from all the bad memories.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"It's a little late and I'm sure Daphne must be looking for you."

"So you want me to leave?"

"No, I just want you to be safe and in a good place with your wife." Tim smiled bleakly at Treasure's discomfort. He waited for her to change her mind, but the mood in the house had been tainted. He clenched and unclenched his fists. He let out a sharp breath and stared at her long legs.

Then he stood and made his way out, slamming the door.

A flash of memory came to Treasure: her dad standing at the kitchen door of the old house on Oak Street, pointing a gun at her mother. That house had been cold most days, but the life she wanted would have played out so much better if her parents had just loved each other. The memories of her childhood played back like an old film in black and white.

She thought of Alex, and her fear to express what she really wanted from him. What could have been if she chose a life with him instead? He had been so close, yet somehow always too far for her to convey the depth of her feelings. Life had taken them in different directions and it seemed like no road would ever lead her back to him. Years had gone by and her lifestyle had changed the way she appeared, even to herself.

Life in Sandton was far too different from Westonaria. Her world had caved

in on her and she was different to those outside it.

Does anyone else ever feel the way I do about someone that doesn't love them back equally?

Treasure stood helplessly still in the kitchen and waited for her mind to stop analysing her life like a brutal game of chess. No matter what she did, she always ended up checkmated. She felt so helpless and broken that she had forgotten about her other guest. A noise from her bedroom startled her.

“I’d better leave; I’m sorry, Treasure.” Daphne barely glanced at her, looking preoccupied as she rushed out after Tim.

HER BED SEEMED a little bigger and off centre. Treasure turned off all the lights in the house, stripped naked and tossed herself on the mattress.

She wasn’t afraid to sleep most nights, but tonight her soul was looking over her body from above, full of disgrace and distress. Her dreams seemed crushed; her goal of modelling had been reached only to be swallowed again by the shark she called her lover. Her thirst for a proper tertiary education had been squelched by fast cars, big city lights and the expensive make up she wore daily.

All night, she thought about how she could possibly make her first love Alex come back to her and fit inside her heart the way he used to, but she knew it was impossible. They were not two halves of one anymore. Their roller coaster of feelings had ended nowhere. It used to be that when Alex spoke he would fill up the sky over her; she couldn’t see anything else around him whether good or bad or wise or stupid! He was the only thing that mattered.

In those moments of pure love she felt herself waking up from one dream into another, not knowing where one left off and the other began.

And what of marriage and family? I don’t want to get married like this, living in a rented townhouse, to a man mixed up with so many lovers, and with adult kids. Her prospects of getting married grew bleaker by the day.

Marriage in her eyes was a peaceful life blessed by God; she saw herself with beautiful children walking her down the aisle, and a husband that would move mountains to protect her from the world’s cruelty and illusions. But her past reminded her of how strenuous and cumbersome it could be. All the fights, and the possibility of not being able to have kids; especially after losing her baby. Her heart bled when she thought of her mother seeing how her life had turned out.

Suddenly she began questioning exactly how her child was taken away from her; what exactly was done to her body? *Was it more than abortion?*

What if I was 'fixed', like an animal? Why hadn't she thought of that before?

So many questions clouded her mind. She felt that she was worse as a person than any part of her past. She stared through her fingers as if she could see her bones.

The wind blew nonstop through the window, keeping the curtain floating against the wall. She tossed and turned all night trying to find peace and block out the voices, but they wouldn't stop. The truth kept confronting her; the voices in her head kept punishing her. *Your mother was obedient to The Lord, but you cannot see that the Holy Spirit has left your presence.*

She questioned all that she was: a victim of greed, or illusions? Was love an illusion? Was life a test? She desperately needed the truth, but the room was bare of answers. She needed comfort but no one was near. She was just another sheep lost in Sandton.

The next day, Treasure sat at home with a heart-warming glass of white wine.

A heavy armchair draped with an iconic Basotho *Seanamarena* blanket safeguarded the apartment door. It made her feel safe; the warmth of it reminded her of home. It gave her a sense of peace and belonging. She regarded it with sudden insight.

A man called Mr Howell had first presented a similar blanket to Lesotho's King Moshoeshe the First in 1860. The king of the mountainous kingdom had previously worn a large but supple cloak of leopard skin, and was well aware of the status assigned by clothing. Yet he had traded his traditional leopard-skin karosses for a woollen blanket, described as a railway wrapper of light blue cloth, heavy and hairy.

After that, Western blankets in several different styles gradually became an integral part of Lesotho culture and

tradition. Most of the population now owns at least one, and different blankets are used for different ceremonies.

And yet, a South African company has the exclusive rights to manufacture them... Treasure sighed at the irony.

They adopted an alien item into their culture that they don't even make themselves. It keeps them warm and it looks good, but they can't earn a living from it... Why does this sound familiar? Because... I twist my life to fit around Tim, taking whatever he offers to make myself look and feel good temporarily... but not really enriching myself or my future at all.

It was the kind of epiphany she had had before. She turned her attention outside.

Spring had arrived early and the yard greeted her with a burst of freshness and aromas, like a corner of the Walter Sisulu Botanical Gardens. The roses were blooming in the small orchard; the fruit trees provided shade to earth's tiniest beings. The small water well in the right hand corner of the garden kept everything cool and calm.

The fresh air cleared the bitter memories from Treasure's trove of hope and sorrow. She sat quietly on the swing that Tim had built for her on her last birthday in April. All she could ask from the day was for pure love to finally arrive on her doorstep in the new season.

CHAPTER 44

Pain is the only thing that can wake you up from the deception of a perfect life.

– Khosi Mankosi Mpele

WITH TOP GROWLING in her ears, Treasure sang along as she jogged down the path that cut through the park behind her apartment, not caring that she was hopelessly off key. Nobody was around to hear her this early except other runners. *They should be wearing earphones like I am...*

She detoured off the path, jogging to the green where she and Lintle had spent so many hours chatting and watching hot

guys run by. Those days were long gone. *Not even a call from my deathbed could bring her back.*

The pre-sunrise chill rose goose-bumps on her arms. She cupped her hands to her mouth to blow into them and then rubbed her skin vigorously.

Her bare minimum outfit – Nike Aeroloft vest, Lululemon running shorts and Vivobarefoot shoes – offered scant protection, but she expected to get much warmer as she ran.

Leaving the green, she rounded the curve at the end of the path and almost skidded to a stop, her sense of serenity lost.

Oh no, that looks like Tim's car. A street lamp illuminated the blue Porsche Cayenne. *That can't be right. Why would he be here this early?*

She stared at the car in worry. Were her eyes playing tricks on her? Her breath hitched in her lungs and she forced herself to inhale.

Well, I can't read the registration from here.

SHE APPROACHED THE CAR quietly, slowing her pace as she drew closer.

It was well positioned so that joggers didn't run too close. The registration plate confirmed her fears. Frowning and confused, she pulled back, pausing

to rethink what was going on.

What's he doing here at this hour? Is he stalking me? Is this one of his weird surprises?

She bent over and ran the last few metres towards the boot. She crouched next to the car in silence and tried to peek carefully through the back window, but it was misted up. All the windows were misted up.

Maybe he's having a nap. She didn't want to startle him. This was a time to wait and absorb. *He'll have to come out eventually.* But she was getting colder, and something felt very wrong.

Then she heard a moan.

Treasure cleared her throat. She forced her voice to steady.

“Tim?”

No answer.

Her hands were shaking; she couldn't speak, couldn't breathe. There was a fragility to her palpable tension, as if she was barely holding on for dear life.

She stood and wiped frantically at the left side window, holding her breath and focusing inside until she could see movement.

Time stopped as she stood motionless.

She fought back a grimace, her expression almost unreadable, but the devastated grief in her eyes could have killed a running bull. She cradled her frosted hands to her mouth, shielding the shock. *Oh God, no, am I not enough? Do I deserve this?*

Her eyes were dry, but her face was extremely pale.

Whoever was in the car hadn't seen the scene unfolding outside the car door.

Do something.

Treasure's lips barely moved as her jaw tightened. *I'll show him!* There was a desperate fury in her voice. Her head jerked a nod as if she was agreeing with herself. She punched the back window with her right fist.

“Tim, get out! What the hell is this?” She hit the window over and over in rage and confusion. “Get out of this damn car, Tim!” She screamed louder each time she repeated the words.

Slowly Tim's eyes rose towards the voice. To his shock, Treasure was there, practically foaming at the mouth.

He jerked up and pulled away from his acquaintance in the car. His eyes were red with his face full of sweat and confusion – a look not easily forgotten.

Slowly he reached up to unlock the door, then climbed backwards out of the car while blocking the identity of his passenger. “You're out early this morning,” he murmured, inanely composed. He shut the car door behind him.

“In my own backyard you do this?” Treasure fumed. “Who the HELL is that?”

“Would you have preferred to join us?”

“What the hell, Tim?” she cried. “I can’t believe you! On top of everything, you insult me! Where is your wife? Or is that her you’re screwing in your car like a prostitute?”

“Don’t be so vile and dramatic.”

“Just ANSWER me!”

“Look. I know this is difficult, but please calm down.” His jaw clenched.

“That’s REALLY not the point! Just answer the question.”

He sighed. “I told you to stop running before dawn. It’s not safe.”

“Are you serious? This has nothing to do with when I run!” Treasure tried to pull him away from the door.

“For God’s sake!” Tim pushed her off. “Calm down! This will go away; just turn around and go home. I’ll come by later.”

“I’m not leaving, Tim!”

“Fine.” As he threw his hands up in the air, Treasure used all her rage to push her way past him to the door and open it.

“Oh, MY GOD!”

Her old friend gazed up at her, wild panic in his eyes. He shrank into the back seat, arms vainly trying to conceal his naked chest.

“Paul!” The disbelief in Treasure’s eyes flickered as everything suddenly made sense. “So it was never about making Lintle happy? This, this is you!

You love what you do! Is he paying you well? Tell me, is he FUCKING you right, Paul? I trusted you! You loved her, not this life! What the hell?” She shook her head.

“You seem angry; I can’t speak to you like this, not now,” Paul mumbled.

“No,” she interrupted, fury giving her voice authority. Something had clicked and she was no longer numb. The air hummed around her. Colour came back to her cheeks. Her stare was sharp and invading. “You’re being eaten alive by greed, and your love for money from ONE MAN. He controls you, but Lintle loved you!”

“No, she didn’t,” Paul snapped back at her. “She loved what my money could buy her, not me!”

“You know that’s not true; she waited for you for days to visit, and forgave you when you didn’t pitch! But you never called or even said goodbye!”

Treasure stared right into his eyes.

“I just needed some space. Your friend was like a lost piece of glass in this city of gold, and you know what? So are you! You’re just a walking dead body,

Treasure; you might as well jog your way to the morgue. You’re hollow inside; you paint your life with material things, and Tim feeds your broken soul with money and expensive champagne. You don’t see that in this life, those who pay your bills OWN YOU. I would be careful if I were you.”

“You know nothing about me or what I know, Paul.” She moved her shoulders a little uncomfortably as she stared at Tim, who had moved a few metres away. He puffed at a cigar as though he was just a bystander. The disconnect in his arrogance took her back to the night at Whispers – her blood on the stony floor, the men over her stark-naked body, the smell of

beer and sweat, all the memories too real to forget. She hesitated and bit her lower lip.

“Are you just going to stand there and listen to this shit, Tim?”

“What do you want? You have a choice. Just like you decided to go jogging, you can easily continue – I’m sure that no one will bother you – or you can sit here and watch the sunrise with Paul and me. Our mornings usually start with a little of this and then breakfast at Vilamoura. You could go home and shower and join us there in an hour.”

Tim wasn't concerned about Treasure's findings or reaction at all. He was just enjoying his Cuban cigar and the sight of morning joggers. Both men seemed entirely confident and unconcerned, while Treasure stood there losing her mind and her self-worth.

"So, what are you going to do?" Tim asked carelessly.

Treasure glared at him and rolled her eyes, then turned her attention back to Paul.

"You know that money comes and goes, right? Do you honestly think you can just walk away when he's done with you? I hope you've saved up for a new identity; you're probably going to need it sooner than you think."

"Dollface," Paul snorted, "don't worry about me; this man here needs me..."

"No, THIS man is Daphne's and mine. Play your games elsewhere Paul.

I mean it!" Her lips twitched angrily.

"Just go home Treasure. Pretend you never saw this, and I'm certain Tim here will reward you well for keeping your mouth shut. Didn't I hear somewhere that your mother needs a tombstone? Go focus on that rather."

"Now you've gone too far," Treasure growled at him.

It was a macabre scene. Ugliness was everywhere. A lifeless expression came over Treasure's face. It was as if her brain switched off and something else possessed her. She narrowed her eyes and focused on Paul, cutting Tim out of her mind.

Just do it, do it good.

She looked deep into her soul and dragged out a dead piece of herself to prepare for what was to come.

CHAPTER 45

When power and hate collide, there is no room for love, and certainly not for the Lord.

MOVE! Treasure jumped into the Porsche, pulled Paul closer, and kissed him fervently. Tim stood by in a mixture of wry

amusement and uncertainty.

“You’ve wanted me, now have me!” she breathed into Paul’s ear. Her sudden warmth oozed sex appeal.

With no doubt, question or hesitation, Paul fell right in with her play. In that moment, drawn by her scent, the touch of her body against his, all was forgotten. No sense of morality could halt what had begun.

“Are you willing to submit?”

“I am if you are,” Treasure said seductively, not moving her eyes from his.

“I remember the first time I saw you; you glowed... you had to be mine,” he whispered in her ear. He pulled her closer and ripped her top off her body.

His eyes met Tim’s over her shoulder. For in that moment, he had the power.

The pleasure and perplexing pain in Treasure’s expression made both men severely lustful. Their locked gaze was all he needed to continue. Tim and Paul became as one.

“Close your eyes.” His attention back on his prize, a gift that Tim had put up for bait, Paul ripped off Treasure’s pants, shifted her underwear and sealed off her thoughts with erotic kisses. “Let go, let me take you into the zone.”

He played with her body and confused her mind with desire.

TIM CLIMBED IN and closed the car door. He sat quietly next to them, looking at every inch of what was his, following every breath, movement, stroke, touch and sound. His two lambs were neck and neck, tongue to cheek; like animals they tossed and turned, cried and begged. He owned the two beasts.

He had broken them and made them again.

Fed them, but now they ate each other.

He clouded them with his dense shadow. The smirk on his face was mixed with sudden disgust and jealousy. He hated both of them and neither of them knew. The power shift had come full circle. They had taken a part of him bigger than his wallet—

his ego! Paul made him feel worthless as he thrust himself deeper into his woman, pushing her to tears and a silent screech.

Tim leapt into the front seat and drove, heading straight to Treasure's apartment. He raced down the road, full of evil and rage. The ones he had lifted had fallen in vain. Their use was done. Like dust in the desert, all was the same and worthless.

TREASURE TRIED TO BREAK her mind's control over her body. Paul was feeding on her like a hungry lion, but nothing seemed to keep her in the moment with desire; her thoughts cut through her situation with a sudden intense clarity. Her desperate need to entertain Tim's overgrown fantasies had come to a brink. She had wanted to be his and his alone. She had done everything to hold his attention and keep him, but the pain of sharing him with every other body was beyond her. She had wanted to please him so that he wouldn't go astray, but clearly, his appetite was greater than she was. She couldn't control him or who he slept with.

She cried not what Paul thought were tears of joy and pleasure, but for her soul to be free and her body to be at peace. Time had stopped, and all she could see was her life stained in sin. The agony and distress in her soul were excruciating. The guilt of trashing her standards and morals left her shaken to her core, broken and imprisoned.

Her tears were more than salty water; they were boiling feelings spilling out of a life of horror and grief, her loss of identity and her broken dreams; they were a calling for HOPE and HELP. They formed deep directionless puddles for lost leadership and a lost generation that was doomed from the day Mandela signed the freedom charter.

TIM STOPPED AT her doorstep, leaving the car's engine running. Paul and Treasure were still busy with each other in the back seat, unaware of their surroundings. Tim opened the back door and seized Treasure's naked body.

He dragged her out roughly. Paul didn't even bother resisting.

"Tim, please stop! My clothes! Please... don't do this," Treasure begged as she clung to Paul, but Tim held her firmly

as a Roman soldier, solid and lethal.

He dumped her on her feet and pulled her up roughly by her shoulders.

His gaze bore deep into her eyes, his face contorted in wrath and disgust, as he searched for the words to define this moment. At last he drew himself up to deliver a dramatic final verdict.

“You,” he hissed, “belong in the ash, and so you should face the sun and dress yourself with the earth’s soil. You are not one with me!” Then he threw her to the ground, her life laid bare for all to see, just as she was.

Doors slammed, and the Porsche roared away into the distance.

AS THE SUN SHONE on her naked body, her neighbours walked by in shock and disbelief. What had been painted as an empress and star, had fallen. What was once whole was now shattered!

Her innocence stolen by the city,

Her heart lost to unavailable men,

Her love given to money,

Her truth stolen by greed,

Her life wasted in hope,

Her dreams eroded by illusions,

Her passion in the hands of those with false power, Her inner voice silenced by the world’s perceptions, Her sweet tooth sinking in the luxuries of a rotten society, Her faith in God misplaced by fear!

POSTSCRIPT:

THE LOVE THAT LOVE FAILED TO LOVE

You’ve got to learn to leave the table when love’s no longer being served.

Nina Simone

Do we live in a world of red roses and beautiful daffodils but no true love?

This is what French author Francois de La Rochefoucauld is talking about when he describes true love as being like a ghost which everybody talks about but few have seen.

Everyone in this world, young and old, is looking and longing for love but at the end of the day, most of our young women have become victims of love –

some of them abused, tortured, raped and killed in the name of love.

Why does searching for something so pure yield such horrific results? Are we looking for it in the wrong atmosphere? Or even in the wrong spiritual dimension?

We need to ask ourselves some serious questions. What makes a man, many of them educated professionals, resort to harm and sexual abuse of their partners? What makes love, which is supposed to be unadulterated and a bond between two people, turn toxic and extremely dangerous?

Perhaps we need to go back to the scriptures to find the right answers.

Consider the following passages from the Bible:

1 Corinthians 13. Verse 4 reads: ‘Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.’ Verse 5: ‘It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, and it keeps no record of wrongs.’ Verse 6: ‘Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.’

Verse 7: ‘It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, and always perseveres.’ Verse 8: ‘Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away.’

Let’s start from the beginning again, we have to ask ourselves more questions and do some soul searching. If the Bible tells us that ‘love is patient and kind’

what kind of love are we engaged in that ends up leaving some of us battered

and bruised? Is it love or lust? Perhaps most young women's love for the finer things in life have made them more vulnerable and victims of their own passion for beauty and stability. Perhaps they have forgotten their power, their strength – and their maker. They have lost their inner core and self-awareness. Even in the jungle a lion will never eat grass when the season is bad, yet humans are so easily taken in by life's seasons that they don't know what they stand for in the end. Can hunger and poverty change a person's moral DNA? Can the desire for materialism create ogres out of people? Are we that separated from our values that expensive handbags and fast cars can derail us from our source?

Designer clothes and accessories cost an arm and a leg. But even as unemployment grows, young women who want to own such items frequently pay for their bills with sex, most of the time unprotected yet consensual.

Sometimes it takes more than three men to maintain a 'rich and famous'

lifestyle. Every day there are young women in Johannesburg who are selling their souls to the devil. Who will teach the next generation the right way?

Who will remind them of the freedom struggle our parents engaged in to free their children and their children's children from slavery? Will we bury the democracy we have bequeathed by re-enslaving ourselves – perhaps not to political tyrants this time but to our own moral degeneration?

This toxic and reckless lifestyle brings me to a statement once made by award-winning investigative journalist Mzilikazi wa Afrika. 'Some lost their identity,' he said, 'and some their virginity. Some lost their integrity and others lost their morality in their pursuit of fortune and of fame.'

Young women need to know that Blessers might give a good life today but HIV and Aids tomorrow. Decisions made by young women to sleep around with different men to finance their lavish lifestyles, might come back to haunt them in the

future. Maybe all these things are happening because the end is near. Are they signs of the times? Is the bubble of our self-indulgent immorality about to burst?

We return to the Bible, this time to 2 Timothy: 3. We read in verse 1: ‘This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come.’ Verse

2: ‘For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy...’ Verse 3:

‘Without natural affection, trucebreakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good...’ Verse 4: ‘Traitors, heady, highminded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God.’ Verse 5: ‘Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away.’

Verse 6: ‘For of this sort are they which creep into houses, and lead captive silly women laden with sins, led away with divers’ lusts.’

Our young women are looking for a good time and a good life. Many men, on the other hand, are taking a daily overdose of Viagra and Cialis to be ever ready to give any young woman ‘a good time’ any time of the day or night.

Men with deep pockets are forever hunting for vulnerable girls. Their prey sometimes have no option but to become a sexual plaything so that they can put food on the table for their siblings. Others fall victim to the offers of a dream lifestyle they have been hoping for all their young lives.

Not of few of these girls are forced into all sorts of orgies and subjected to all kinds of sexual activities just to keep up with ‘the latest trends’

But when the men have trapped them, even when the men have moved on to their next victim, some still want to keep dominance and control over how the young women should live their lives. They want the young women to remain their sexual slaves and forbid them to date other men. Yet they sleep around with any woman they fancy. But this selective morality – what is good for the gander is not acceptable from the geese

– can be the cause of serious dangers for the women involved, Jealousy breeds rage and rage becomes physical abuse and, in the darkest cases, even death.

Many young women lost their lives while looking for love but love failed to love them back. They were abused, tortured and killed by men they gave their hearts to and all that they had. If you read newspapers from all over the world and follow news on your favourite radio station and television channel, even on social media, you might have heard of the sad and horrific story of a 22-year-old Karabo Mokoena who was allegedly killed by her ex-boyfriend, Sandile Mantsoe. Newspaper reports also revealed that

Mantsoe allegedly burnt Mokoena's body after killing her, using tyres and petrol; she was burnt beyond recognition. The gruesome murders of these young and beautiful women might have made national news headlines, but they aren't the only ones and neither will they be the last.

The following victims will not be forgotten.

Anelisa Dulaze from Khayelitsha, South Africa “Magician confesses to killing 21 year old on her birthday”

Reeva Steenkamp, from Port Elizabeth, South Africa “Oscar Pistorius kills model girlfriend on Valentine's Day”

Annelene Pillay, KwaZulu Natal, South Africa ‘ ‘ Mummy, I am scared: Chilling moment a woman is shot five times by her ex-lover, after calling her mother begging for help”

Zestah September, from Soweto, South Africa “I killed Zestah, she provoked me, the killer insists. I took her body into the open veld and lit her body and left”

Nosipho Mandleleni, from South Africa, “ ‘ANCYL man sjambokked his girlfriend to death” Anna Matseliso Molise, from Maseru, Lesotho “ The wife of a Danish man who is accused by South African police of mutilating women and keeping genitalia parts in a freezer has been shot dead in Lesotho”

Karen Smith, from San Bernardino California, USA “Vigil Held for victims of San Bernardino school shooting”

Mumtahina Jannat, from London.

“Killed by her abusive husband” Samantha Sykes, from Wakefield, England.

“stabbed to death by jealous

boyfriend” Joanna Simpson, from Ascot, England. “Buried in a pre-dug grave, killed for love” Stephanie Moseley, from

USA, “Rapper Husband kills dancer wife on face time and kills himself. American boxing champion watch the entire killing on Face Time” Elsie Lie lek Chee, from Singapore.

“Sick Singaporean Man Brutally

Mutilated and murdered his girlfriend”

Judith Mlauzi, from Zimbabwe “Man brutally kills girlfriend for cheating,

buries her in shallow grave”

Tammy Jo Blanton, from Indiana, USA “Man accused of brutally murdering his ex-girlfriend and eating her body parts”

To the many families who have lost their daughters in the name of LOVE, be brave enough to tell their stories and teach the new generation differently. No form of abusive behaviour is okay. Equally, women should guard themselves against the lure of materialism for its own sake. And, most importantly, South Africans should take stock of the dark side of the freedom their parents fought for with such tenacity. Freedom without a moral sense is no freedom at all. It is a dark and deadly cul-de-sac.

WOMEN, FIND YOUR VOICE AND LIVE WITHIN YOUR POWER!

You are enough.

Jackie Phamotse

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