



IBUTHO LAKHE by Nolwazi Mbuli

The clock hits the two hour mark and everyone puts their pens down. We are done. This is it. Our final year is over. If I pass here I officially graduate and I can call myself an Interior Designer. You would think with my history I would choose a course that will get me a job as soon as I'm done studying but if there is one thing I've learnt in life taking care of three kids do what makes you happy the world will adjust. Or something along those lines.

We file out of the hall some are anxious some are nervous and me well once that paper is handed in I forget about it its a little trick I taught myself in high school. Its helped me get this far. I'm hungry and rather tired I need a nap but before that I need some soul food. A pack of hot wings will do. I walk across campus and get to the gate and find Mohale standing there with his friends. His car is parked across the street lucky for me. He has a crush on me well he pretends he doesn't so he instead teases and makes fun of me everytime he sees me and he is with his friends. When he is alone however let's just say there is power in a pack.

As soon as I get out of the gate the whistles start and the the name calling follows. I put my headphones on and zone him out. I walk a short distance before I feel someone touch my shoulder. I hit his hand and take my headphones off. He laughs and lifts his hands up.

"Hey I dont mean any harm I've been trying to call you. Why are you ignoring me?" He asks.

"Me ignoring you should have been your clue. I dont want to talk to you." I try to take a step and he stops me. "Seriously Mohale leave me alone."

"Come on. I just want to get to know you better." He says a smirk plastered on his face. Mohale is one of those rich kids that get everything they want at home and then go out into the world thinking the world will treat them the same way they are treated at home. Unfortunately for him it doesnt work like that.

"Well I dont want to get to know you better. What I know about you is enough for me."

"Milani tell you what I am hosting a party tonight at my apartment come through and we will talk about this then." He takes a step back rubbing his hands together and running his tongue all over his lips. He really thinks he is all that. Well I blame the girls around here who scream and treat him like he is a god.

I shake my head and continue on my way. I have better things to do with my time than attend parties hosted by him. Sure they apparently are the shit around here but I dont go where I dont benefit. I stand by the corner and order my wings on Uber eats. When my order is placed I request an uber to my place I'm sure by the time I get there the food will be there too. My uber shows up just as Mohale and his friends pull up next to me.

"I can give you a lift. Let's go." He shouts over the the loud music. I just roll my eyes and get in the uber. Ten minutes later we are parked in front of my place. It's a student accommodation that I share

with my friend Snethemba. She still doesn't understand why we chose accommodation that's far from campus I tell her she's lazy. It's not that far plus we can still walk to campus for about thirty minutes or so. I call those thirty minutes my gym time. Not that I need it but I could do with some curves here and there. Unfortunately for me I inherited my mother's slender frame. Four kids later and she still looks like she could enter Miss SA and win. Her boobs are still perky you'd think she never breastfed her children. If I didn't see it myself I also wouldn't believe it.

My Uber Eats app tells me my food is five minutes away. I figure I might as well wait for it at the gate instead of going all the way in and then coming back. I take a seat on the concrete barrier next to the gate. I see a scooter driving up. It pulls up at the gate. I don't want to jump the gun so I wait until I get an 'I'm here' message. It's him. I stand up and go to him.

"Milani?" He asks getting off the scooter.

"Yes." He opens his little carrier and takes out my food. I take the food and give him a ten rand tip.

"Thank you." I say and get inside the gate. I haven't paid for Uber Eats in a while one of my 'bags' gave me his card and told me to order food and it's been in my phone since then. I'm not sure why he hasn't blocked the card yet but I'm glad he hasn't. Free food is nicer.

I get to the apartment I share with Snethemba and as usual she is not here probably with her good-for-nothing boyfriend. I put her wings on her desk. If she's not back by the time I finish mine I'm devouring hers. I take off my sneakers and the jeans follow. I'm left with just my t-shirt lucky for me I don't wear a bra so I throw myself on the bed with my wings in front of me. One goes in and boy my soul is at peace.

My phone rings and my sister's name flashes on the screen. Hlumile never calls unless it's really important and she needs something one thing I'll always be grateful for is how she stepped up when I had to come to Joburg to study. If it were up to me I would have stayed close to home but traveling from KwaMhlanga to Joburg everyday would have been a struggle. Although I go home every chance I get it's not the same as me being there.

"Hlumhlum." I hear her laughing she hates the nickname but for some reason when I call her that she always laughs. No one else is allowed to call her that though. Just me her big sister.

"Sesi unjani (how are you?)" She asks.

"I'm okay. I wrote my last paper today."

"That's good. Does that mean you'll be coming home soon?" I sigh and sit up on the bed.

"Hopefully. I need to find a place to stay first. Sne and I are going to share a place until I find a permanent job."

"Okay. Anyways I wanted to tell you Mum is doing good. Yesterday when we came back from school we found her cooking the house was clean and our clothes were on the line. It's exciting right?" She

says the happiness in her voice is clear as daylight. I wish she wouldn't get her hopes up. Mum is unpredictable I still don't understand why she was released from hospital and why her family felt the need for her to come and be taken care of by kids. Yes we are her children but the roles should be reversed

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she should be taking care of us not the other way around. But what do I know as far as her family is concerned I am old enough to take care of her heck they felt I was old enough at thirteen when I had to take care of my siblings myself.

"Right. How are the kids?" I ask her. I hate to have to burst her bubble but I'm not about to jump for joy just because mum decided to get off her bed and be an adult.

"They are fine. Siya is at soccer practice and Cebo is playing with the neighbors kids." I can feel her disappointment over the phone. "I thought you'd be happy about mum."

"I am. I just don't want to get my hopes up. How is school is matric doing you good."

"No. Ungbambe ngabhongwane (it has me by the throat)." She laments making me laugh.

"You'll be fine. You're smart I'm sure it will be fine. So vele no matric dance?"

"Nope."

"You do know I can get you a dress and some heels esmall street. You don't have to miss out on your matric dance just because you think we'll go hungry."

"It's not that. I know how hard you work and I just think the money should go to more important things and a matric dance is not one of them." I take a deep breath trying to take everything she just said in. A part of me doesn't want her to miss out on this day I know I would have given an arm and a leg to experience it. But I couldn't so I don't want her missing out on important milestones in her life because she had to grow up too quickly.

"Fine. No matric dance. Do you guys have enough food and toiletries?"

"Yeah. We are good. I'll let you know if we need anything. Oh wait Siyabonga needs shoes. His school shoes are starting to have a hole in the front."

"Okay I'll see what I can do. He is not playing soccer with the shoes is he?" She laughs and I get my answer. That boy will be the death of me. "I'll bring the shoes when I come home."

"Okay. We'll see you when you come back."

"Okay I love you and take care of yourself."

"I will. Bye."

"Bye Hlumhlum." She laughs and hangs up.

I finish my food and take a nap. I'm tired. When I wake up I head to the shower. It's hot and I'm a bit sticky. I take my shower and head back to our bedroom. I find Sne laying on the bed with the wings. I take a seat next to her and pick up a wing.

"You're getting my bed wet." She says.

"Its not like you've been using it lately. I'm sure Bongani is tired of you already." She throws her head back laughing. "Speaking of Bongani tonight we are ditching him we are going to celebrate the end of exams."

"Its Thursday." She tells me as if I've forgotten.

"I know. We are going. I miss my friend. Bongani will have to wait."

"And what am I supposed to tell him when he calls?"

"You're studying law make up a lie. You guys are good at that." She sticks her tongue out at me.

"You wont be saying that when you need me to defend you or read your employment contract."

"Speaking of contracts are we still going ahead with the apartment?" I ask her. I am done with student accommodation I'm done with my exams and all I want now is a bit of grown up independence.

"Oh yes my brother sent me some apartments to check out he has a client who is in real estate and she's agreed to give us a good deal." She takes out her laptop and shows me the email her brother sent with the apartments. They are beautiful no doubt but my budget will not allow me to rent in Sandton my budget since we will be sharing rent is atleast 4 thousand. These 11 and 12 thousand rands apartments she's showing me are rather steep for me.

"Babe these are great but they are pricey. My budget does not align with these apartments."

"Relax Scelo said he will pay the first six months rent."

"I dont like handouts Snethemba you know that." I put the laptop down and get up from the bed. I open my wardrobe trying to find something to wear.

"Its not a handout. Its help. Besides look at it this way you'll have six months to save some money and then on the seventh month we will be paying our own rent."

"Sne..."

"Milani getting help doesn't mean you're incapable of doing things yourself. Scelo will pay the rent for the first few months which will give you some air to breathe while you find a job." I sigh and turn around to look at her. She is right. This will go a long way in helping me but I hate being indebted to people. That's my main problem.

"And how are you planning on commuting from here to school?" I think this one forgets she still has to attend classes. Her lips curl up in a smile.

"He is giving me his car." She says excitedly. We scream all over the room jumping up and down. No more uber's to clubs.

"Wait I thought he said he'd buy you a car when you graduate?" I ask when we stop jumping around.

"He will. A brand new one. But for now he is letting me use his old car." She tells me. Okay that makes sense.

"Okay so we have more reason to celebrate. Exams done a new apartment a car we are definitely going out now." I turn back to my closet looking for something to wear. "Go take a shower Snethemba." I hear her sigh and get off her bed. She's only acting cranky right now but once we get to the club she will be dancing like a crazy person.

I pick out a short black bodycon dress with a corset bodice. It's perfect because it cups my tiny boobs tightly and gives me a bit of a cleavage. It holds my tiny waist and mini hips just right. Even my mini bum looks bigger in this dress. I open Sne's closet and find her an outfit. I find a short silk champagne coloured dress. It's soft and luxurious. I place it on the bed while looking for shoes. I pick out black strappy heels for her and my trusted strappy clear heels. She'll accessorize how she sees fit but I've got the basics for her.

I sit on my bed with my make up all over the bed. I get to work. I'm not that big a fan of makeup so the most minimal style will do. But I add red lipstick for dramatic effect. She comes back and sees the dress on the bed.

"I actually wanted to wear Jean's." She says throwing her toiletry bag on the bed.

"Dont bore me." She laughs and starts lotioning her body. It's quite weird how similar our bodies are. It's one of the reasons we became best friends. On our first day at school we were standing in line to register. I was at the back she was at the front. She was with her little sister in front and I was alone as usual. Her sister went somewhere and when she came back she came straight to me. She was shocked when I looked up and I wasn't her sister. She looked around till she saw her. She kept looking back at me and back at her sister before she told her about this girl who looks just like her. When I saw them coming towards me I could understand why she was confused. We were both wearing jeans sneakers and cropped denim jackets. We even had braids. We laughed about it and from that day I had a best friend.

"Stop daydreaming and tell me which necklace works with this outfit." She shouts holding up two necklaces.

"That one." She looks at it and smiles.

"Perfect." She puts it on then does her make up. I put on my small stud earrings and leave my neck bare. I leave my curly wig to flow all around my shoulders and back. A small bracelet finishes my

look. We stand before the mirror looking at each other. Sne takes out her iphone and snaps a few pictures.

"Let's go." We get our bags and head out while requesting an uber. I post some of the pictures on Instagram and before I know it I have a message from one of the guys who finances my life. He wants to see me after the club. I'll reply to him later. For now he will just have to stew a bit. Tonight we party

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We get to the club and it's already abuzz with patrons. I like this club because I've met most of my monied one night stands here. The bouncers know me and the waiters and waitresses are always ready to tell me if there is a party of deep pocketed men.

I pay the uber driver and get out of the car. I havent been in a club in almost two months exams and clubbing doesnt mix in my opinion but today I wrote my last paper so now i celebrate and get back to my hustle. It's been two months of living on my savings and now i need to replenish them.

We walk to the entrance of the club by passing the long line of people standing there as if they are about to enter heaven.

"Milani welcome back." Oscar the bouncer says. I give him a hug and we chat a bit before he let's us in. The perks of being nice to people they will always come through when you need a favour. We walk in and head to the bar. Its almost 11 PM and the place is packed. We find some space at the bar and place our order. Just a bottle of wine and a couple of cocktails and we are good to go. Now to find a table.

"Sne help me look for a table." We walk around a bit and then I find a table. It's filled with empty bottles and no bags or anything to show people are sitting there so I take it. Sne joins me as a waitress takes the bottles away and cleans the table.

"How long do we have to be here again?" Sne and her little tantrum.

"Where do you need to be Sne?" I take a sip of my cocktail and look at her.

"I have a boyfriend you know." She says and rolls her eyes. As if the heavens are on my side tonight I see a glimpse of her good for nothing boyfriend.

"What did you tell Bongani you would be doing tonight?" She cocks her eyebrows in surprise. She knows nothing about Bongani interests me. As beautiful as she is I dont know how she allows

herself to be played by that dickhead. But you know what they say the only person more stubborn than a woman in love is a Bushiri supporter.

"I didnt tell him anything. As far as he is concerned I am packing for my trip home."

"I guess that's why he is here right now with a woman gyrating on his lap."

"What?" I point my head towards his direction and she turns to look at him. Anger masks her face when she sees him. I know she is my friend and I should protect her but this is the only way to show her that Bongani is as useless as channel 100 on DSTV. Okay maybe channel 100 is not that useless. But Bongani definitely is.

"That son of a bitch." She shouts while marching towards his direction. I quickly get up and follow her. I hold her back just before she reaches him.

"Hey dont do anything stupid." She takes a couple of deep breaths then slowly walks to him.

"Bongani." She calls out to him but he is too focused on the ass sitting on his lap. She taps him on the shoulder and he jumps almost dropping the poor girl on the floor.

"Snethemba what are you doing here?" He asks her guilt written all over his face.

"I should be asking you that. Shouldn't you be at a study group?" He runs his hand on his head his guilt has now turned to fear. I guess the idea of losing your cash cow would be scary to anyone.

"Yeah we are just taking a break." He answers.

"Of course you are. Take all the time you need." She turns and walks back to the table. I'm not sure what that means but I know its not good. She is too calm. If she was angry and throwing tantrums then I would know she is probably going to forgive him for his little indiscretion. Her being calm might just mean she is over him. Which is good in my opinion.

We get back to the table and some girl is sitting there. Our bottle of wine is open. This girl is about to see Abraham himself.

"What do you think you're doing? That's our wine." She sips the wine and looks up at us.

"I'm sure you're lost. This is my wine." She answers. Sne and I look at each other and we chuckle. I grab my bag from the other chair.

"Then how did my bag get here?" She swallows our wine but I guess her little ego won't let her admit that she just fucked up.

"Beats me." She answers. I feel a rush of heat run through my body.

While I'm still contemplating what to do Sne takes the cocktail and throws it at her. She jumps of the chair shocked. Well I'm shocked too. Sne is not the fighting type. Her friends show up from God knows where and now it's two against five girls.

"What the fuck is happening here?" One of the girls asks.

"She threw a drink on me." The first girl answers close to tears. Her white dress is now decorated with blobs of orange juice and vodka mix and mint leaves. Her friends are fuming and if we are not careful this little altercation will become a full blown fight. I text Oscar and ask him to come in. Within seconds he is there standing between us.

"What's going on?" He asks. The girls start shouting together trying to come for us but thanks to Oscar and his big body is standing between us. "Milani?" He turns to me. I explain everything to him. "Okay ladies let's go." He says to the girls pushing them out. We sit back on our table. I order a new bottle of wine I don't know what those girls could have put in the bottle so I wont risk my life like that.

"Yoh so much drama." Sne says and we both burst out laughing.

"I cant believe she just did that."

"Well in her defense we did leave the table unattended." Sne says. The waitress comes back and instead of one bottle of wine there are three and a couple of bottles of Veuve. I know we like nice things but we did not order that.

"I'm sorry that's not our order. We did not order that." Sne tells the waitress. She smiles.

"Uhm I know. But he did." She points up to the VIP section and a man lifts his whiskey glass at us and smiles. The waitress turns and walks away. I look back at Sne and she has a smile on her face. The bottle of veuve is already open and making it's way into the champagne glass.

"Just like that. We havent even thanked the gentleman." I tell her as she hands me a glass of bubbly.

"Who cares we don't pray before we eat so what's the difference." I cant believe she is comparing God and this man. Sure he looks like one of those models on the GQ covers but he is not the God. I take the glass and introduce it to my lips. The bubbly liquid pours down my throat leaving tingling sensations on my tongue. This is the kind of life I aspire to and I will have. By fire by force.

"I'll be right back." I take the glass of champagne and make my way up to the VIP lounge the bouncer tries to stop me but the man nods his head at the bouncer and he lets me through.

When Steve Harvey said act like a lady and think like a man he definitely wasn't joking. I can see the way this man is looking at me and I can already tell he is looking for someone to bang tonight and then forget about in the morning. My type of guy. His eyes don't stay too long on my eyes they keep going down to my yellow thighs well not yellow but they are quite light compared to my face or upper body. I'm not sure if it's wearing pants for too long or God ran out of the caramel ink when he was painting me. Either way I'm close to being a coat of three colors.

"May I?" He nods his head and I take a seat next to him making sure my thighs are in full display. "The waitress tells me I have you to thank for this glass of bubbly." He sips his whiskey and his eyes go from my face down to my boobs and further down probably imagining what is under this black little number. Not that it leaves anything to the imagination anyway.

"Well after the little scuffle you had I figured you deserve some bubbles to ease the tension." I must admit he looks good. It's easy to see that he is a catch. He is handsome well built I can't tell his height cause he is sitting down but I think he is not that tall but he is tall enough. His suit is well tailored and he smells divine. It's clear he takes care of himself. I'm not one to judge a person's face under club lights so I'll wait for the morning to do that that's if we end up spending the night together.

"Well thank you for being so considerate. My name is Milani by the way." I see his lips curve into a smile.

"Nice to meet you Milani. Nkazimulo." He answers extending his hand for a handshake I presume. I give him my hand and he lifts it up to his lips and gives me a kiss.

"Nice name."

"So would you and your friend like to join us?" Us? I don't see anyone else around here. I hope he is not seeing ghosts.

"Us?" I ask.

"My friends are on their way." Okay that's a relief.

"We'd like that. Let me get my friend." I stand up with my glass and sashay down the stairs. I can still feel his stare on me and I make sure to shake my little bum.

"Let me guess that's a relief."

"We'd like that. Let me get my friend." I stand up with my glass and sashay down the stairs. I can still feel his stare on me and I make sure to shake my little bum.

"Let me guess you just got a bag for the night?" She says when I get to her.

"I might have. He asked us to join him. His friends are on the way." She sips her drink and looks at me.

"If his friends are as hot as he is then I'm going to enjoy this." She stands up and fixes her dress.

"What do you mean enjoy this?"

"I'm single. And a girl needs to have some fun." She raises her hand up to get our waiters attention. I am happy she's planning on leaving idiot Bongani behind but I don't want her making rash decisions. Hopefully by the end of the night she will have changed her mind. The waiter comes over and helps us carry the drinks up to the VIP area. She sets the bucket down and leaves. We sit on either side of Nkazimulo.

"Nkazimulo this is my friend Snethemba." She extends her hand to him and he shakes it.

"Nice to meet you Snethemba." He says.

"Nice to meet you too. And thank you for the drinks."

"No problem. So what are you girls doing here?" He questions looking at me.

"Celebrating. We are done with exams so we need to let our hair down. You?" He sips his drink and sits back on the leather chair.

"I'm celebrating too. Well more like a farewell celebration. I am going overseas to get my masters." Impressive. This is what they mean when they say black child it's possible. One day is one day I'll be one of those saying that when I have my businesses flourishing.

Three guys walk up the steps and Nkazimulo stands up to welcome them. They shake hands and hug before settling down staring at us.

"Boys these are my new friends Snethemba and Milani. Girls these are my friends Smilo Langa and Kumkani." Nkazimulo announces. We shake their hands. Kumkani is sitting way too close to Snethemba and she is giggling way too much. A part of me is somehow regretting bringing her here. I feel like she is about to make a bad decision because of that asshole Bongani.

They order more drinks and the party continues. A group of girls come up and join us. We drink and dance. It's exactly what I needed. Sne is having the time of her life and I'm sure Bongani is no longer here. He's probably preparing a speech to try and fool Sne into forgiving him. But judging by her gyrating on Kumkani's lap that might be an uphill battle. Although Nkazimulo and I have been dancing it's not as explicit as Sne and Kumkani's dancing. I take a seat and sip my drink. Nkazimulo sits down next to me and puts his hand behind me bringing me close to him. He kisses my neck. I almost moan when he runs his tongue on the back of my ear.

"How about we get out of here." He speaks in my ear.

"Fine by me." He pulls away and talks to his friend for a second before coming back to me.

"We are just waiting for the bill then we'll go." I nod my head and sip my drink. "So you are coming with me right?" He asks nibbling on my ear. I swear if he is not careful we wont make it to wherever he is taking me.

"Of course." The bill comes and they settle it. We head out. Smilo leads us to a mercedes mini bus. We get in and Nkazimulo and I sit at the back. Sne is sittinb behind the driver with Kumkani.

I feel Nkazimulo's hand running up my thighs. I look up at him and he attacks me with a kiss. I hold on to his face as his hand digs deeper up my thigh. I feel his thumb rubbing on my clit through my lace thong. I let go of his face and run my hand down his chest and all the way down to his bulging erection. He feels thick and long. I just hope it's not an illusion that would be disappointing. He pulls away from the kiss and I can feel his smile on my lips.

"You like what you feel?" He asks.

"Oh yeah. But I think I'll need some food if I'm going to have to deal with that." I say squeezing his manhood a bit. I can feel him getting thicker with each stroke.

"Driver please find a McDonald's somewhere. We need food." He shouts. "McDonalds is Okay right?" He asks looking back at me.

"Perfect." I bring his face down and kiss him again. He is such a great kisser. My thong is wet already.

Ten minutes later we are going through a McDonald's drive through.

"What are we ordering?" Kumkani asks from the front.

"Everything." Smilo shouts and they laugh. I cant hear what Kumkani orders but I hope it's enough to fill me up. We proceed to the payment window and Kumkani pays. We collect the food and from the looks of it they might have just ordered everything. There's nuggets and burgers chips and drinks wraps and even ice cream. Oh well. We are hungry. They pass the food back to us. We eat while driving to our final destination I hope.

We pull up to a hotel and we all get out. These guys seem to be familiar with the security and staff. Sne and I go sit on the couches while the guys sort out accommodation. The two other girls join us. Sne takes out her phone and shows me a barrage of messages from Bongani.

"Block him mosi." I tell her. She chuckles and reads the messages but she doesn't reply.

"Anever girl. If I block him who is God going to set the table in front off. Phela I need a couple of enemies for that. Plus the girl he was with she's the girl we've been fighting about. He would tell me she was a nobody and I had nothing to worry about. So now he must burn. Let's see where he will get Mavuso to give that girl." I dont miss the hint of sadness in her voice. I knew there was a reason I didnt like Bongani but I had hoped that he would prove me wrong. But he didn't.

"So you and Kumkani are you sure you want to do this? I dont want you making hasty decisions. Especially with a broken heart."

"Relax I'll be fine. Plus they say in order to get over one dick you need to get under another one." We laugh and high five.

The guys come back and we go up the elevator. Kumkani Sne Langa and this other cute girl get off on the tenth floor. Nkazimulo Smilo the other girl and I continue onto the 15th floor. We get off and go different directions. Nkazimulo holds my hand and leads me to a room. He gets the key card out of his pocket and opens the door. The moment I walk in he has me pinned against the wall before I can take a few steps. He kisses me with lust filled lips and my body responds in kind. He brings his body close to me and I can feel his erection on my stomach. He lifts me up and I wrap my legs around his waist. My dress goes up leaving my behind bare. His lips go from my lips down to my neck. I know I'm slender by nature but the way his one hand slipped around my waist and held me tight made me question where all the food I've been eating has been going. His other hand cups my little titty as he walks to the bed. He gets on the bed with one knee while gently laying me down. His hand leaves my boob and zips the dress down. He gets off the bed and pulls the dress down and out of my legs then throws it on the couch.

He licks his lips while looking at me laying on the bed. I decide to fondle my boobs and play with my nipples while he unbuttons his shirt and throws it on the floor. He takes his watch off and throws it on the bed. He unbuckled his belt and unzips his pants. The pants go down with his briefs and when he stands up Lord Jesus.

"You like it?" He asks getting on the bed again. Like it?

"Just so we clear I dont have medical aid so make sure you dont rearrange my insides." I tell him. He chuckles as he plants kisses down my chest and all the way to my navel. He pulls down my lace thong and opens my legs to reveal my shaved pussy.

"Nice." He says with his lip between his teeth. He runs his two fingers on his tongue before rubbing them on my open slit. "You're so fucking wet." He says holding my clit between his fingers making me moan.

"Shit." I hold on to the other side of the bed as he continues his torment on my poor pussy. He inserts his long fingers into my dripping hole and I could have sworn I just saw heaven. He leans back down and takes my lips in his sucking them while his fingers continue to cause havoc between my legs. I twist and turn my waist trying to meet his fingers thrust for thrust but I'm failing cause he is going too fast. I feel his breath on my face he is looking at me I open my eyes and arch my back as I feel an orgasm coming.

"Let it go baby. Come on." He urges. As if my body no longer has a brain of it's own it releases all over his fingers.

"Oh shit. That was amazing." I tell him as soon as my convulsion has calmed down.

"Yeah." He says and pulls his fingers out leaving me empty. He looks down at his fingers dripping with my juices and he smiles to himself. He turns back to me and puts both fingers in his mouth sucking them. I'm sure I just had another orgasm just from watching him do that. He leans back down and kisses me. "You taste so fucken good." He says between kisses. Well I can attest to that I do taste good.

He reaches into the drawer and pulls out a box of condoms. He tears open the box and takes one out. I take the packet from him and open it. He watches me as I slide the latex onto his dick. He groans as I run my hand up and down his veiny meat. I rub the head onto my already wet slit before leading it into my hole. He pushes it in bit by bit. I'm no virgin but right now I feel like one. I let go of him and he unexpectedly shoves his whole dick in making me scream.

"Shhhhh." He says closing my mouth with his one hand. I move the hand out of my mouth feeling the fullness between my legs.

"Why would you do that?" He laughs and pulls out. "I swear to God if you do that again...."

"What?" He asks shoving himself back in again making me scream again. This time he doesnt close my mouth as he keeps thrusting in and out. When my body has adjusted to having him inside me the feeling is sweet. He is hitting all the right spots. My legs wrap around his waist pulling him deeper into me.

He lifts my body and wraps his arm around my waist before throwing himself on the bed swapping our positions. I sit up and I must say in this position he is deeply embedded in me. I start twerking

and twisting on his dick while he holds onto my tiny boobs. They fit so perfectly in his hands. His moans and groans fill the room as his other hand reaches between us and he starts rubbing my clit. After a while he wraps his arm around my waist pulling me down to him then he starts thrusting into me fast from under me. I hope they don't fine people for noise complaints here because he will have a problem tomorrow. His face contorts into something else and I know he is getting close to his peak. But so am I. He keeps going faster till i hear him groan and twitch his leg as his orgasmic moment comes. He keeps thrusting till I cum again.

I slump down onto his body as we try to catch our breath.

"You're good?" He asks looking up at me with a smirk on his face.

"I think my intestines just relocated." He laughs and pulls out leaving me laying on the bed like a Nandos chicken. He gets off the bed and opens the window letting in some much needed fresh air. He then heads to the bathroom and comes back with some wipes. He kneels on the floor bringing his face close to my pussy. He looks up at me and smiles before diving in head first and sucking the life out of me. Yep it's going to be a long night. Or is it morning?

3

Remind me again to never drink alcohol. My head hurts it's like there is someone hammering away inside my head. I need to quit alcohol ASAP if these will be the results. Oh heck who am I kidding I'll be drowning a bottle of wine before the weekend ends. Last night was amazing though except for the headache right now.

I reached out to get my phone from the side table and bring it back under the covers. The moment I power it up the light hitting my eyes almost blinds me. I turn the brightness down before fully opening my eyes again and looking at the time. I have a couple of missed calls from Sne. And it's almost noon. Shit. I'm pretty sure check out was at ten.

I throw the covers back and get up. Jesus Christ of Gqeberha why did the sun have to shine so bright today. I squint my eyes and head to the bathroom. I get a wash cloth and run it under the sink tap. I squeeze the water out and wipe my face my armpits and my private parts. Eew I know but I'm late already. And I dont think I can cover the extra day here should the hotel decide to charge me.

Nkazimulo left and stupid me slept like a log so I did not get to talk to him about payment

before he left. I don't consider myself a prostitute I'm a hustler. Although in the back of my mind I know I'm well a prostitute. I'm not naive about it I know what it's called when someone sleeps with a person for money but a girl has to do what a girl has to do. I have four mouths to feed and R1000 a week waiting tables wont cut it.

My sister Hlumile is in matric and next year she will need registration money and pocket money. My brother Siyabonga is obsessed with soccer and unfortunately for me I have to fund his little hobby. I'm not complaining though because it keeps him off the streets. My sweet little baby sister Cebolenkhosi has asthma and sometimes she suffers from severe attacks that land her in hospital. Her attacks have slowed down in recent years and I dont want to jinx it but I think she might be outgrowing it. I really pray she is. It would solve half my problems.

And then there's my mother when I was ten dad left us. No he didn't die he left like half the male population in this country he abandoned his family. My mother couldnt take it. For three years she tried to act tough until one night when she swallowed almost fifty pills. She survived but she had to be institutionalized because she was diagnosed with depression. And that is how I was left to take care of her three kids while she languished in a tiny room with padded walls.

My phone rings again and I quickly rush out to the bedroom. I pick it up and Sne's number pops up bringing a smile to my face.

"Hey babe."

"Bitch where the fuck are you. I've been waiting for you for hours. And why are you not picking up my calls?" She hisses through the line. I'm sure she's dying to scream at me but wherever she is she has to act nice and proper.

"I am still in Nkazimulo's room but I'm coming out now. I overslept and the mother fucker didnt pay me." I hear her chuckle. Does she really think this is funny? "SNE?"

"I'm sorry babe. Get down here now and we can talk about it."

"Okay." I hang up and find my dress. I pick it up from the floor and put it on. I find one shoe by the couch. I search around for the other one but I cant find it. This is the only time i would advocate for shoes to be chirped so we can use our smart phones to find them. That's a great business idea. Maybe I should copyright and patent the idea. I could make millions.

Before I become a millionaire though I need to find my shoe. I take a pillow and throw it on the ground. I kneel on it and search under the bed. Lucky for me I find it. And with it comes a rather expensive beautiful Hublot watch. I look at the watch and its engraved. N.M. The N must be for Nkazimulo and the M must be his surname.

I'm not sure if my ancestors are working overtime or what. But think about it Nkazimulo didnt pay me and now I find a watch over a 100 thousand just sitting under the bed. He probably forgot it. But if I sell it I'll make more than ten times my normal rate. To take the watch or not to take it? That is the question. I get off the floor and open the closet. Its empty. I guess the man is not coming back. A win for me.

I throw the watch in my bag and put my shoe on. I walk out and the nasty stare I get from the maid in the passage is enough to make me shrivel inside. It doesn't help that the dress I'm wearing is barely there. But then I remind myself that my name is Milani Mbokazi. I might be dying inside but I will not show it on the outside. I lift my head up and walk the hallway like it's my catwalk. I press the lift and in seconds it opens it's doors and I walk in. I turn around and see the maid still looking at me disgust all over her face. Yeah well she'll just have to deal. I'm also trying to make a living just like she is. Different industries same result. We put food on the table.

The doors open onto the foyer and I walk out with my head held high. I see Sne sitting on the couch and I head to her. I throw myself on the couch next to her.

"You look like you have the world on your shoulder." She says sipping on a mimosa. Where did she even get one of those? I take the glass and take a couple of sips.

"If I ever see Nkazimulo I'm going to punch him in the face." I tell her and she laughs.

"That bad huh?"

"Not even. The man gives me orgasm after orgasm and then ditches me. Not even a R200 nyana nje for uber. Mxm." She chuckles and opens her bag.

"Look here." I peek in her bag and there is a stack of cash in there. My mouth opens in shock.

"Sne! How much is that?" I whisper trying not to draw attention to us.

"I dont know. We will count it when we get back. Let's go. Our uber is on it's way." I have so

many questions right now but I'll ask those and tell her about the watch.

We get up and walk out the glass swinging doors with people starring at us. We stand outside waiting for the uber. I notice a black Mercedes pulling up with tinted windows. It parks a few meters away from us. The driver gets out and opens the backdoor. A lady gets out dressed like she runs the world. My type of inspiration.

The first thing out the car is a pair of black Christian Louboutin shoes and black palazzo pants before she fully gets out. She has on a black and red striped coat that hugs her curvaceous figure like nobody's business. I should take a picture because the day I get a BBL

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that's what I'm going to show the doctor. While I'm gawking at this gorgeous woman I notice a man get out of the car from the other side. When he turns around I see its Nkazimulo. Dear God I hope that is not his wife. I would die right here and now.

The woman walks into the hotel while the doorman gives her a slight bow.

"Nkazimulo." I call out just as he is about to go in. He turns around and stops when he sees me. "A moment please." He takes the couple of steps towards me while checking on the woman.

"What is it?" Okay no hello. No nothing.

"Why didnt you wake me up in the morning?" He frowns as if what happened last night was a figment of my imagination.

"I dont think this is the time to be talking about this. I have to go." He takes a step back and I remember the watch.

"I have something that belongs to you." I say trying to open my bag. He holds my hand stopping me from opening the bag.

"Whatever it is keep it." He says and walks away leaving me gobsmacked. Did he hear what he just said?

"Lani our uber is here." Sne says tapping me on the shoulder and getting me out of my little trance. I absentmindedly follow her to the car and we get in the back.

"What was that about?" Sne asks as soon as the car drives away from the hotel.

"I have no idea what just happened."

We get back to our place and my mind is still reeling from what happened. I know it might not seem like much but I've never been treated like that before. Most people I pick up at clubs and spend the night with have never treated me like some dirty little secret that is only allowed to flourish in the night and then hidden in the daylight. It hurts that much I can admit.

We walk up the stairs in silence till we get to our room.

"Zangena iyfebe madoda. (The hoes are here.)" Zola our next door neighbor says. She and her friends throw their heads back laughing. Any other day I would have been happy to go back and forth with words with her but not today. I open the door and throw myself on the bed. Sne sits next to me.

"Okay what's going on? What did Nkazimulo say?" I sigh and open the bag. I show her the watch.

"I wanted to give him his watch back and he told me to keep it." She takes the watch from me with her mouth wide open.

"Milani this is a Hublot watch." She tells me like I didn't know.

"I know that. And when I first got it I figured the universe was paying me since he couldn't but then I saw him and I figured he deserves to have it back. It's an expensive watch. Instead he treats me like I'm some hobo begging him for a R2 coin. I tell him I have something that belongs to him and you know what he says? He says keep it. Whatever it is keep it." A smile forms on Sne's lips as she twirls the watch around her slim fingers.

"I know someone who can buy it." She announces. "I'm pretty sure we can get at least a hundred thousand for it. This is an original Hublot. This specific one is close to half a million. See the diamonds those are real." She adds excitement all over her face.

"It's still his watch Sne it's even engraved." She turns it around and looks at the two letters.

"That's not a problem. It's just N and M. It could be Nelson Mandela's watch for all we know." I'm still sceptical about selling the watch. I know if Nkazimulo brings the cops here I can always say he gave me the watch and if we can sell it for a good price I could be 100k richer. I'd be able to get Hlumile her matric dance outfit Siya would have soccer boots and Cebo would have a good supply of asthma sprays and whatever else she'll need. This could

save me. Literally.

"Fine. Let's sell it." Sne jumps on me giggling like she just won the lotto.

"Good choice. Let me call someone." She takes her phone and makes a call. She puts it on loudspeaker and places it on the bed. The person picks up.

"Snethemba fancy hearing from you." His husky voice comes through on the phone. He sounds like a good looking guy. But voices can be deceiving. His accent is foreign though West African perhaps.

"Hey Sammy. Can you talk?" I hear him chuckle before a door closes somewhere.

"For you I make time." He answers. Okay now I'm curious as to how they know each other.

"So what do you need?"

"I have a hublot big bang 38mm 361 something something. Its expensive and I know you can get me a great price for it."

"Where did you get it?"

"That is none of your business. Just tell me if you can get a good price for it or not?" He chuckles before there is some clicking sounds probably on a keyboard.

"Snethemba I'm not selling anything stolen."

"Its not stolen. It was a gift. Someone failed to pay a friend of mine so they gave her the watch." Well technically speaking she's not lying.

"Mhmm. Okay. I can get you fifty thousand for it." Sne laughs her lungs out.

"Sammy make it 350 and we have a deal. This watch is almost half a million diamond encrusted fifty thousand is a joke and you know it."

"Let's make it 150 then." He counters.

"325." I wonder how long this game will go on. As long as I get atleast 100k I'm good.

"Sne don't be stubborn. You want to get rid of the watch I have a client who wants it. 200."

"What's your clients initials?" Sne asks. The engraving will be the death of us for sure.

"What's that got to do with anything?" Sammy asks.

"Just tell me the initials Sammy."

"O.M." Shit. There goes my breakthrough. "Why?" Sne sighs and closes her eyes in defeat.

"The watch has the initials N.M on it. Your clients initials is O.M. It wont work." Sne tells him.

"Actually it could work. His English name is Nathaniel. So it could work." I swear my ancestors are really busy today.

"Okay then. 300 and we have a deal."

"You drive a hard bargain Sne. But we have a deal. You'll have to come pick up the money though cause I dont do wire transfers."

"Fine by me. Give me the time and place and I'll be there."

"Let's meet later tonight. I'll send you my location."

"No problem. It's a pleasure doing business with you Sammy." He chuckles before the line goes dead.

I look at my friend and honestly I feel pity for whoever will be up against her in court. This girl can be savage.

"See I told you we'd get a good price for it." She says still looking at the watch.

"Yeah. I hope by the time Nkazimulo realizes his watch is not there it will be too late."

"He wont. Let's go take a shower and rest a bit before we have to meet up with Sammy."

I follow her lead and get undressed. We wrap our towels around us and head to the shower. We get in the shower together yes we shower together that's what all vest friends do right? Or is it just us?

"Have you spoken to Bongani since last night?" I ask her when we get out of the shower.

"Nope. I blocked him." I dont want to count my chickens before they hatch but inside I'm doing a little dance in celebration. Sne deserves better and Bongani is not it.

"So it's over between you or is this just a break?" She shrugs her shoulders and wipes her face.

"I dont know. Chances are it's really over. I love him yes but sometimes it gets tiring being the one who finds the relationship all the time. For a while there I was beginning to think he is just using me. And every gjme I'd ask him about it he'd make it seem like I'm insecure and selfish. And then the girls and him locking his phone and keeping it on flight mode when he remembered. Last night just confirmed I wasnt crazy." I can sense a but of hurt in her voice. Maybe I should hold up on the celebration.

"I'm sorry babe." I wrap my arms around her and she chuckles.

"Its okay Milani you can say I told you so." I laugh and we walk back to our room. I put on an oversized tshirt and get in bed. I set the alarm for 4 PM and off we go to lala land.

"How long are we going to wait for this person. It's like we are waiting for the president."

"Relax. He is coming." Sne has been saying that for the past thirty minutes now. This Sammy person is acting like a big shot for no reason. Sure we need the money but right now he is starting to piss me off. "Milani. Come on. He will be here." Sne adds trying to calm me down. That's not happening anytime soon. Especially with those two goons who've been watching us since we got here.

Call me paranoid but my sixth sense is telling me there is something wrong with this Sammy person taking so long to show up. Something fishy is happening here.

"He is here." Sne says and stands up. I turn my eye to the door and a tall dark man with dark shades on walks in like he owns the place. He is wearing a suit but with a turtleneck instead of a shirt. I'm not sure who told him that whole outfit looks good on him because.... you know what never mind. Let me not say something that will get me in trouble. But he seriously needs a stylist.

"Sammy." Sne says and gives him a hug. Somehow she gets lost under his huge embrace. "Snethemba. How are you." He says with his thick Nigerian accent.

"I'm good. This is my friend Milani." I stand up and extend my hand to him for a handshake. Instead he pulls me to him and gives me a hug. I swear he took a shower with his cologne. Its strong and musky and mix that with body odour and I swear it's a disaster. My sinuses are already flaring up. But I suck it in and smile when I pull out of the hug.

"Nice to meet you Milani. I'm Sammy." He pulls out a chair and sits down.

"Nice to meet you two."

"So Sammy let's get down to business." Sne says and he turns his head back to her. He pulls his shades out and looks at her.

"Straight to business. I like. Let me see the watch." Sne turns to me and then Sammy follows her stare back to me. He has nice eyes. I open my bag and take out the watch. I place it on the table and he picks it up. He turns it around in his hand for a good two minutes before he puts it down again. "Okay. It looks legit."

"It is legit Sammy. Now payment." He pulls out an envelope from the inside of his blazer and puts it on the table. He pushes it to Sne who opens it and looks inside for a moment. "Okay. It looks like all is in order. But of course we will make sure to count it when we get

home. And if even a rand is missing trouble will follow you." He chuckles and picks up the watch and puts it in his pocket.

"You know me better than that Sne. Besides I wouldnt want to cross your brother."

"I'm glad we get each other." He stands up and puts his shades back on.

Sne hands me the money and I throw it into my bag. When I look up I see the two guys walk out. And yes my sixth sense just went up again.

"Okay we can go." Sne says and pays the bill.

"We can't go." Her eyes shoot up and she looks at me confused. "The guys that just left now I think they will rob us."

"Milani."

"Sne I'm not being paranoid. The guys were here watching us since we got here and now they just walked out. What if they are waiting for us outside?" I'm definitely not paranoid. And I dont trust this Sammy guy. Not to be ungrateful but something is off about him.

"Fine. Let's ask the waitress if we can't use their back door. If they have one." She signals for the waitress to come over.

"What if they dont have a backdoor?" I ask slowly getting nervous. We could be stuck here for hours and when they close we will have no choice but to leave.

"I'll call Scelo. He'll come pick us up." The waitress comes over and looks at us. "Hi. Do you guys have a backdoor? There are some guys that have been following us and right now we are scared to go out and take a taxi. Please help us." Sne should consider acting as a side hustle. The waitress now looks afraid too.

"Uhm yeah let me speak to my manager." She quickly rushes off and before long we see her talking to another woman. They both walk over to us and Sne tells her the same story again.

"Okay come with me." We get up and follow her while the waitress picks up the money for the bill. We go past the kitchen and she opens a door that opens up to an alleyway. There is a short fence with a hole in it between the restaurant and the road. "Use that hole. Request an uber now and wait here. When it shows up then you'll be able to leave." I take my phone out and request an uber. It says five minutes away. A lot can happen in five minutes. We wait there with the manager waiting with us. As soon as we see the uber we say our goodbyes and quickly go through the fence. We dont stop till we get in the uber. As soon as

it drives off we heave sighs of relief.

The uber takes a turn towards the front of the restaurant. The two men are still there standing outside.

"See. There they are. They are waiting for us." I tell Sne. When we pass by one of them goes into the restaurant before running out panicking. The traffic makes it hard for them to even notice us in the uber. We see them through the back window looking up and down the street. As if the heavens are smiling on us Sammy gets out of a car and walks towards them. The further we go the harder it becomes to see what's happening. I'm just glad we got away.

"I cant believe Sammy tried to set us up." Sne is shell shocked. I dont know how long she's known this man but if she's going to continue having him around her she better watch her back.

"Tell me about it. Watch your back with him." She sighs and faces the front.

"Yeah. Now I'm glad you're a paranoid person."

"I'm not paranoid." I defend myself before we burst out laughing I'm sure the uber driver thinks we are nuts. We came in here scared as hell and now we are laughing.

As soon as we get out of the uber at our residence we rush up to our room and lock the door behind us.

"That was a close call." Sne says throwing herself on the bed. I stand behind the door for a hot minute before my legs can carry me to the bed too. I take out the envelope from my bag and empty the money onto my bed. I've never seen that much money in my entire life. The two hundred rand notes smell like alcohol and cigarettes probably from a club.

"Help me count it." She comes over on my side of the room and we count the money. And sure enough it's the full 300k. I wonder why Sammy would give us the entire money and then turn around and try to rob us. Or maybe he wasnt counting on us actually getting away. I look at the 30 piles of 10k each and heave out a sigh. I'm not sure yet if it's of relief or fear. What if Nkazimulo comes searching for his watch and it's gone already? What if Sammy comes for his money? I need to go home for a couple of weeks.

"Earth to Lani." Sne says snapping her fingers in my face. I blink and look at her. God alone knows why He brought this woman into my life but when I say my prayers giving thanks for

all my blessings little as they might be I count her twice. No matter how hard school has been and no matter how hard things got at home I've never went to bed hungry or struggled with money for transport. Everytime she buys herself clothes or something at the back of her mind there is always Milani. I dont know how I would have survived this place without her.

I feel tears sting the back of my eyes just thinking about it.

"Milani are you okay?" Instead of answering her I close the space between us and wrapped my arms around her and give her a tight hug. "Babe. Are you dying?" I chuckle and pull away from her. I wipe my tears.

"I'm sorry I'm just I dont know what I did to deserve you but besides my degree you're the best thing I ever got from this town." She pouts her lips and wipes my tears.

"This is not the time to be making me cry. But I'm glad I met you too. You my dear friend

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are one of a kind. And I wouldn't have it any other way."

"Okay. Enough crying. Take your share." She looks at me like I've grown horns for a second.

"Share of what? Milani this is yours. All yours. You need it more than I do."

"Sne. Please just take the money."

"Fine. I'll take 10k. Let's call it my commission."

"Atleast make it 30k. 10% is the standard commission in most deals." She shakes her head and takes the money.

"Fine. Happy now." You have no idea. I nod my head with a grin on my face. Then I remember something.

"Hey. Remember you didnt tell me where you got that stash of money earlier." She laughs.

"Kumkani gave it to me. He said it's for an uber since he couldnt drop me off." Okay makes sense.

"How much is it?"

"I dont know. I stopped counting at 10k. Speaking of are we ordering food or you're cooking?"

"I'm definitely not cooking." She laughs and picks up her phone.

"I'll order something." She looks at her phone and frowns. "I have a message from Sammy.

He wants to know if we arrived safe and if we are home." She tells me before I can even ask.

"Tell him we are at your brothers place. We went straight there." She types and before long there is another ping.

"This one thinks I'm stupid. One moment he tries to rob us and the next he is acting concerned. I should tell Scelo about his little scheme."

"Okay hold on. You can't do that. How are you going to explain to Scelo what we were doing with Sammy anyway."

"Okay you have a point. Sammy better stay away." I hope he does.

I need to think of a place to hide all this money. I take 10k and put it aside. I'll need it to buy Hlumile's dress tomorrow. I take the rest and put it in a plastic bag before shoving it into a small handbag. I look around the room trying to find a good hiding spot. I cant deposit it all in my bank account because it will draw some unnecessary attention. So I'll have to find a good hiding spot and then deposit it little by little.

"I dont know where to put it. I cant just leave it lying around." I'm frustrated right now because the idea of this much money just sitting around is scary for me. Sne helps me look around. Eventually I find a little hiding spot behind the fridge. I stick the bag in and it fits like a glove.

"So where are you hiding yours?"

"I'm thinking of going to the mall. Then we can get some food there since I haven't ordered." Works for me.

"Okay let's go. But are you certain that much money wont draw attention to you?"

"No. I'll be fine. Let's go." We walk back out and I request an uber as we take the stairs. We get to the gate and wait for a hot minute before the car arrives. We get to the mall and head straight for the ATM machines. She deposits the money. When we walk down to Spur for some ribs we run into Sammy and the same goons that were at that restaurant. I knew there was something shady about this guy. He immediately greets Sne and gives her a hug.

"Ladies spending money already." He says laughing. He is a good actor this one. Nollywood is missing one of their stars.

"I wish. We just here to buy food." Sne answers.

"Oh I get it. You girls are stashing the money for a rainy day huh?" Call me crazy but I think

this one is fishing for information.

"Nope. All the money went back to the owner of the watch." I tell him and his mouth opens in shock and confusion.

"What do you mean? I thought the watch was yours?" His accent is slowly becoming thicker.

"Oh no that was just a front. We were selling it for someone who needs the money. Unfortunately they are high profile so it would look some type of way if they found out he is selling his priced belongings because he has hit hard times." Sne answers catching on to my lie.

"Oh okay. Makes sense. Anyways ladies let me get going. I'll see you around Sne." He says and quickly disappears with his friends.

"Do you think he believed us?" I whisper as we walk away.

"I doubt it. But if he knows what's good for him he will stay away from us." As much as I know Scelo is overprotective when it comes to Sne and by proximity me too but it's a lot of money for Sammy to just give up. We get to Spur and place our orders.

"Friend I've been thinking. Maybe I should go home. Tomorrow I think I'll go shop for Hlumile's matric dance outfit then I'll go home. And I think you should go stay with Scelo for a while just so we are sure that Sammy won't be coming after us."

"I guess. But I'll miss you." She pouts making me laugh.

"We will talk all day everyday and I'll stay for a week or two."

"Okay. Also this will give me an opportunity to get our new place set up."

"See you wont be too bored without me." She rolls her eyes. "And I can also give you my share of the rent now since I can afford it."

"Ucalile. (You've started.)"

"Sne...."

"Milani we talked about this. If you want to use your money for anything use it to register the company you've been talking about." One thing I hate is being too dependent on anyone but I've also learnt that Sne is too stubborn for her own good. But she is right. I need to focus on what I'm going to do now that I'm done with school.

We get our food and we walk out of the restaurant. I feel someone wrap their arm around me and when I look up I see Scelo.

"Girls. Why are you roaming around so late?" He asks looking from one to the other.

"We are hungry. We wanted to buy food." Sne tells him. Shem if wasn't Sne's big brother me and him would get along.

"Okay let me take you back to your place." He leads us to the parking lot and we get in his car. Sne takes the front seat and I sit in the back.

"I'm still waiting for your decision on the apartments." He says when we drive out of the mall. Sne turns to look at me and all I can do is shrug my shoulders. She chuckles and turns back to the road ahead.

"I'm not sure about Sne but mina I like the apartment in Fourways. It's big enough I think." I tell him.

"Okay atleast someone has thought about it. Sne wena what do you think?"

"I agree. It's big enough and it's close to shops."

"Wena even if it was a shack as long as it's close to a mall you'd be happy." He says and we laugh. He is right though Sne loves shopping.

We get to our place and Scelo decides to walk us in. We go up to our room and my heart just went to a hundred beats a second seeing Nkazimulo and his friends here. Sne quickly snatches my hand and holds it tight. My brain is telling me to run but my body is stuck. More than anything I'm more afraid of having to explain to Scelo who these people are and what they are doing here. Scelo is like a big brother to me and I'd hate for him to see me as anything but a good friend to Sne.

Scelo walks to the door after greeting them. He turns back to us when we cant seem to move our muscles. I say a little prayer asking the powers that be to please whisper in these men's ears to take a hint and not say shit with Scelo around.

"Are we not going in?" Scelo asks looking at us.

"Yeah it would be best if we all went in." Nkazimulo says eyes glued to me. Yes my ancestors have forsaken me.

world and if you're not careful the world will swallow you whole and spit you to hell. Since I was thirteen I've learnt how to survive. Well more like since I was ten watching my mother slowly dissipate into herself after my father left her and ran off with another woman I slowly learnt how to survive. And when I was thirteen I had no choice but to stand up and fight. And I've been fighting ever since. Not just for my own survival but for my siblings too. They needed me and I needed to be the sacrificial lamb I had to enter the forest that is life and clear the path making sure they have it easier than I did. And in some way I'd say I did it.

I did do it. Hard as it may be my siblings understand the need for us to stay on the same page. Education first and everything comes second. But at the top of the list is us each other and no one else. They have been the push I need everytime I get to a club and set my mark whether I like it or not I have to see it through. Every night I strip a part of myself away to make sure they have food on the table and clothes on their back. Last night was no different or maybe it was. I didnt set my mark I wasnt there for that. I went to celebrate a milestone in my life he saw me and somehow I got drawn to him.

His demeanor was relaxed but the power exuding from his pores was unmistakable. It drew me in made me forget who I am and what I do. I never get in bed with a mark before payment has been deposited into my account. But not last night last night I lost my bearings and right now it looks like I'm about to pay for it.

Sne and I are sitting on the bed with our hands clasped together watching the five men hovering over us like we are ants ready to be stepped on. Nkazimulo's eyes are breathing fire Scelo's eyes have disappointment written all over them. I have way too much respect for him and seeing that look kind of hurts a bit.

"No one is telling me what's going on!" Scelo says looking between Sne and I. I'm trying so hard to not look in his eyes or make the mistake of looking at Nkazimulo. If Scelo wasnt here this whole thing would be easy. Right now the most crippling thing is disappointing him. "Speak." He snaps.

"We dont know what's going on either." Sne says with a voice laced with an attitude. Nkazimulo and his friends chuckle a bit.

"Someone please explain to me what's going on here!" Scelo says clearly getting tired of the silence.

"I'll explain what's going on." Nkazimulo starts taking his eyes off of me and looking at Scelo. "I met these two girls last night at the club and this morning I am missing a watch. Put two and two together and you'll know why I'm here."

"So you think they stole your watch?" Scelo asks.

"I don't think. I know. And it's not them it's her." He points at me like he's pointing out a murderer in a police line up. Dramatic much. Scelo turns to look at me.

"Milani. Did you steal his watch?" He questions.

"No."

"There's your answer then." Scelo says. Nkazimulo chuckles and crosses his arms on his chest. I'm pretty sure if Scelo wasn't here I would have been pinned against the wall right now.

"No one went into that room besides you. The staff wouldn't have taken the watch. So tell me where it could have went then?" Denying isn't helping matters right now. If I'm not careful I'll end up in more trouble.

"I didn't take your watch you gave it to me." Silence engulfs the room as ten eyes bore holes in my skin. Everyone is looking at me like I just lost my mind.

"Excuse me!" Nkazimulo mutters I can see the anger pouring out of his pores. I stand up and face him.

"You gave me the watch I didn't steal it."

"And why in God's name would I give you a half a million rands worth watch? Are you hearing yourself right now? Last night was good but you need to remember your pussy is not made of diamonds and gold for me to give you an expensive watch like that." Ouch. He clearly came here guns blazing and ready to fire.

Scelo takes the space between us with his back to me and facing Nkazimulo the testosterone in the room is overflowing. But I don't know why he thinks he can take on four men all by himself.

"Don't ever talk to my sister like that. If you have nothing better to say get out." Scelo tells him. I feel little butterflies in my stomach dancing. I've never had anyone defend me like that before except Sne.

"Bafo angkwazi ukuthi usimbonyo saliphi ibhodo kodwa ngyakucela phuma endabeni zami. Mine ngfuno iwashi lami uzochubeka kewena umbhebhe sengiytholile lento engize ngayo la. (Brother. I dont know who you are but please stay out of my affairs. All I want is my watch then you can fuck her as soon as I get what I came here for.)" I told you he came here guns blazing. He tries to push Scelo aside so he can face me but Scelo doesn't budge. Instead he sends a punch and it lands on Nkazimulo's jawline sending him tumbling a few steps back. He is shocked because just like everyone here he wasn't expecting that.

"I said respect my sister especially in front of me. She says you gave her the watch so it means you gave her the watch." Nkazimulo takes a step forward but his friends hold him back.

"I want my watch." He hisses with his jaws clenched.

"Milani where is his watch?" Scelo asks his eyes still glued to Nkazimulo. And now the moment of truth. If Nkazimulo had come a few hours earlier I would gladly give him his watch his eyes still glued to Nkazimulo. And now the moment of truth. If Nkazimulo had come a few hours earlier I would gladly give him his watch but right now he is a few hours too late.

"I sold it." Again everyone turns to look at me like I just grew horns in my forehead. But I'm not backing down now. He has insulted me and it's enough. I know for a fact I didn't steal his watch and that's my truth.

"WHAT?" Nkazimulo bellows through the small room.

"When I tried to give you the watch this afternoon you said I should keep it." I tell him and suddenly eyes turn back to him.

"Are you out of your mind? I would never give you that watch. You of all people." A moment ago I was feeling guilty for selling the watch but now I'm glad I did. If he is going to spew insults at me like I'm some trash.

"You actually did. When you got out of the car I called you and told you we needed to talk. You said not then I guess you were rushing somewhere. I stopped you again and told you I have something that belongs to you. You held my hand and told me and I quote 'whatever it is keep it.' That was your answer. So yes you gave it to me." His brow creases as realization sets in. He remembers what he said and his little pride just deflated a bit. But I know he won't admit defeat just like that.

"You didn't say it was my watch." He says his anger slowly fading away. Or maybe its just wishful thinking.

"So she did give you back your watch and you told her to keep it." Scelo says standing back between us with a smirk on his face and his arms crossed on his broad chest. "Then we have nothing more to talk about."

"That's my watch and I want it back. I dont care what I said or didnt say. It's still my watch." He huffs trying to look intimidating but Scelo doesn't seem fazed.

"You gifted her the watch." Sne says standing next to me.

"And now I want it back."

"Yeah that's not happening. Like she said she sold it."

"Fine maybe she'll tell the cops then." He takes out his phone dialing.

"Perfect. I'm sure they will be able to explain the term gift to you easily and you'll understand." Its quite weird how now the conversation is just between the two of them. The rest of us are watching them size each other up.

"You do know I'm a lawyer right?" Nkazimulo says as if that will automatically make him superior.

"Cute. But I studied law too. I know what needs to be known. And a gift will not hold up as a theft. And you just admitted that you did say she should keep the watch. So this little harrassment has to stop. The watch is gone. Live with it."

"Fine. Then I want the money for it. Where is it?" There is one way to end this.

I open my closet and take out the 10k I was going to use to buy Hlumile her outfit and hand it over to Nkazimulo. He looks at the money like I just spit on his hand. He turns the money around in his hand before he bursts out laughing.

"Okay you got me. Where are the cameras?" He looks around the room and his friends hide their laughter. When he realizes everyone is staring at him he stops and looks at me again. His anger seems to have multiplied tenfold. "You sold a half a million watch for 10 thousand?" He hisses taking calculated steps towards me. His friends hold him back and Kumkani whispers something in his ear that only the two of them can hear. "I'm not leaving without my watch." He tells him but his eyes are still glued to me.

"If we dont leave now you're going to miss your flight." He looks at the money in his hand

probably contemplating what's more important right now. The watch or his flight. He brings his head up and his eyes meet mine. A glimpse of anger mixed with pain run through his eyes before coldness seeps in. He throws the cash on the bed before making an exit with his friends behind him. I heave a sigh of relief as soon as the door closes. I hope the door closing is in some way also closing on this. There was no way I was going to give up all that money. ***Maybe you're a thief afterall.*** My conscience taunts me.

"Okay then. Explain yourselves." Scelo says and my heart starts racing again. "So you pick men up at clubs now?" His eyes dart from me to Sne.

"It was a once off thing. And Sne had nothing to do with it. It was me. All me."

"I dont believe you." He crosses his arms on his chest and looks me dead in the eye. I try to hold his stare but I fail.

"I promise you. It's all my fault."

"Okay. Why?"

"It was a spur of the moment thing. We went out to celebrate and I got a bit drunk." He lowers his eyebrows and squints his eyes. He turns to Sne.

"And wena where were you when she got drunk and left with some strange man? Arent you supposed to protect each other? What if something bad happened to her? Answer me." He shouts trying to get close to Sne but I stand between them.

"Please. This is all my fault. Sne is innocent. And she made sure i wasn't too drunk and i knew exactly what i was doing. She came here and we were both safe. I promise." He sighs and runs his hand on his face.

"Its a good thing you're moving to Fourways atleast I'll be able to keep an eye on you." He clicks his tongue and walks out. I slowly slump down on the bed taking in short deep breaths.

"Wow. That was a close call." Sne says opening the cold takeaways. How is she so calm.

"You're weirdly calm." She laughs and throws a potato chip in her mouth.

"Why wouldn't I be? I knew the moment Scelo opened his mouth that nothing would happen." She says cool as a cucumber. So much faith in big brother. That's one thing I envy about her the ability to trust in the people she calls family. No matter what happens she knows they will always come through for her. She knows the will always be there to protect her from the world. Me well I learnt to survive every single day. My family consists of four people myself my two sisters and my brother. And the past four years its expanded to

include Sne. Sne doesn't just exist she lives. Me I survive. Although thanks to Nkazimulo the next few weeks or months I can breathe a little easier knowing my family will be taken care of. But that doesn't mean I stop surviving I still have three siblings I need to make sure are set before I can breathe again.

6

Home. Not the most pleasant of places I want to be at if it wasn't for my siblings I'd never set foot back here again. But after an hour and 45 minutes of travel I made it home. I got off the taxi and took the five minutes walk to my mother's three bedroom house. I'm excited to see my siblings but I'm also not sure about seeing my mother especially now that Hlumile says she is lucid. I don't know how long that will last and to be fair I'm not holding my breath for it to last.

Cebo is the first one to see me. She comes running out of the neighbors house and makes her way to me. Dusty as hell and she's barefoot too. She wraps her tiny arms around my waist and thanks to my slender frame they actually fit around me.

"You came." She whispers with her face buried in my stomach.

"Of course I did. I missed you." She looks up at me with her toothless smile. Hlumile told me she lost her canine a week ago.

"We missed you too. What did you bring me? Did you bring me a burger?" Her favourite thing in the world.

"No. But we will go to the mall and I'll buy you a burger. I didn't get time to go to the shops." She nods her head and we walk up to the gate. I see mum sitting on the stoep eating a banana. Well she seems better. I guess.

"Mama missed you too. She asked about you." Cebo tells me as we get closer to the woman who brought us into this world.

"Did she now?" I'm still as sceptical about her sudden miraculous recovery but the next week I'll spend here will tell me whether she really is on the mend or she'll slip back into the darkness the moment something triggers her.

"Sawubona ma." I greet. She looks up at me and smiles. For a moment I see her the woman I lost when I was ten. Somewhere deep in her dark brown eyes I see a glimpse of who she used to be. Strong brave and fearless.

"Lani. Unjani? (How are you?)" She's weirdly calm. At the back of my mind I want to believe she really is recovering but I've seen her fade in and out of the dark pit my father left her in many a times in the past ten years so this is hard to believe.

"I'm good. Just tired."

"I made some food. Go in and relax. Hlumi will dish up for you." She tells me and I must say she's on a roll. She's really determined to surprise me.

"Thanks." I walk into the house with Cebo still glued to me. The house does smell nice. Its clean add the aroma of spices and meat and it reminds me of a time long time ago when things were simple and easy. Cebo and I head to the bedroom. I open the door and Hlumi jumps from the bed and throws herself on me. She forgets she's twice my size.

"You came." She says as soon as she pulls out of the hug.

"I did say I'd come." We get back on the bed. I open my bag and take out a large packet of lays and give them to Cebo. She shouts a thank you as she runs out the door back to wherever she was.

"I know. But I thought you'd come later."

"Yeah well my luck changed somewhat so I decided to come home."

"Your luck changed? How?" She asks pushing up her glasses. She's had these for almost six years now I'm sure they are also causing damage on her beautiful hazel eyes. One more thing I need to take care off.

"Let's just say tomorrow I'm getting you new glasses and we're going shopping for your matric dance outfit." She looks at me in disbelief and her eyes bulging out.

"I'll take the glasses but like I said we can forget the matric dance. I promise you there's no need for it." I know she's trying to be considerate but thanks to big bad Nkazimulo she's going to the matric dance.

"Look I know you think we will go hungry if you get a dress and shoes but I promise you we will be fine. And now that I'm done with school I'll get a job and we will be fine."

"Are you sure? Lani I dont want you overworking yourself for me. Besides I've been doing laundry and cleaning people's houses around just to save up for registration next year." She didnt tell me that. A part of me is proud of her for taking initiative but the other part if me is angry that she even has to do this. Kids her age are thinking about boys and being adults and here she is working. Another thing that makes me angry at the woman sitting out on the stoep.

"What about your studies Hlumile? You know you can't afford to slack." She laughs and pulls out a file with all her test papers and mock exams. She lays them out on the bed and I must say I'm impressed. As always.

"Does that look like I'm slacking?" She asks her arms crossed on her chest. Talk about being cocky.

"Fine. I'll let you do this. But Hlumile if this gets in the way of your school work there will be trouble."

"I know. But so far so good." Speaking of good. I get up and close the door before sitting back on the bed.

"Your mum says she cooked." I whisper to her and she laughs.

"She did. The past couple of weeks she's been getting up early helping with the kids and when we come home the house is clean the laundry will be hanging on the washing line and food will be on the stove. Maybe she's really trying to turn over a new leaf." She shrugs her shoulders and puts away her file. "I know it's hard to believe but just give her the benefit of the doubt. She's trying."

"I dont know Hlumile you know this is not the first time she's 'tried'. A few days later she'll go back to her dark hole she'll lock herself in her room and we'll have to beg and plead with her to even eat or take a bath. I'm personally not getting my hopes up. But if she is really on the way to recovery then I'll be happy." She heaves our a sigh probably of defeat. I dont know why she expects me to jump for joy at this. We've seen it plenty of times before she gives us a glimpse into what life could be with a mother and then when we get used to it she disappears back into her cold dark shell and we are left to pick up the pieces.

"If no one is out by the time I get to ten I'm leaving all of you behind." I shout from the lounge. I dont know what these three are doing in the bedrooms. You'd think we are going to some fancy dinner but it's just the mall. I woke them up at 7 o'clock and told them to get ready. Ita almost midday and they are still not ready. By the time I get to ten they are still not out. I figure I might as well make a list of all the things we will need to buy. I take a notebook out of my pocket and go into the kitchen.

Until two years ago the kitchen used to consist of an old cupboard mum bought at Lewis when she still cared a bunch of buckets filled with water that filled one of the four walls. It was peeling and falling apart. A year prior to that I'd met a man in a club I was working at who offered me two thousand rands to spend the night with him. For some strange reason I told him I'm not that cheap if he really wanted me he'd make it five. In my head I was hoping he'd be discouraged and let the idea go but I was wrong. He said he'd give me the 5k. I was shocked and disgusted with myself. I went to the bathroom during my break and looked at myself in the mirror wondering if I can do this. I mean it was just sex but you know how judgemental people can be. A little voice in my head was quick to remind me that people wont feed my siblings or provide for them the life they deserve. That night I put my pride aside and ended up in a hotel room with a man old enough to be my father. He had a big tummy and a dick smaller than my middle finger. I had to remind myself with every stroke he tried to give me why I was punishing myself like that. It worked and the next morning he handed me a stack of 100 rand notes. He'd even added a thousand extra. I guess he was satisfied.

A couple of days later another guy showed up he said he'd come to me because his friend recommended me. I knew who the friend was again I was disgusted and shocked. How many man would I have to do this with? But as always I'd remind myself what the money could do. So it happened. In just one week I'd made 20k through this man's recommendation. After that it became easier. My sister never called me again to tell me there was no food in the old beat up fridge we had. Our old cupboard always had food and they never ran out of electricity. Every weekend I'd go to the club find a target make sure he notices me and then go home with him and get paid in the morning. But I had also garnered regular clients who'd call me in the middle of the week and I'd be there.

One thing I'm grateful for is that Sne never judged me. She knew what I was doing and not once did she ever pass judgment or make me feel like I'm a horrible person. Instead she'd make sure I send her all the guys information so that if God forbid something were to happen to me she'd know which direction to point the cops at. After about three months I'd saved up enough to renovate the house. I installed burglar bars on all windows and doors the roof was fixed and I even had them install a ceiling. The house was painted and a year later the kitchen was renovated new built in cabinets were installed. I bought a huge TV and

paid for dstv. For once my brother would invite his friends over to watch the pirates and chiefs derby right in his home. Little minute thing but for me it was something I was proud of. I am proud of. My pussy works for me. If I had a choice maybe I would have done things different but I have four mouths to feed and at some point pride has to take a backseat.

When I'm done making my list the kids are done. We go out and take a taxi to the optometrists. I found one close to home and that's our first stop. Hlumile goes through the tests and the doctor makes a recommendation for the glasses. I pay for them and when we leave she's already walking like she sees in 3D. One thing I can check off my list. We take another taxi to the mall. We go to truworths and find a few options that Hlumi likes. She tries them on and they look good. Every single one of them accentuates her curves. I envy her body even though we are the same height her body shape is different. She has curves in all the right places her waist is nonexistent and her boobs are perky and fit her frame perfectly. My mother's side of the family all have the same shape you'd think they undergo some sort of surgery and the theres me why did I have to take after my father again? Life is unfair.

"So which one are you taking?" I ask when she comes out of the dressing room with all three dresses she picked.

"Eish I dont know. They are all nice but..." she trails off like she is thinking of something.

"But what?"

"Can I try on a suit? I saw a red one by the entrance." She seems nervous but now I'm beginning to think she knew what she wanted all along but she was trying to hold herself back just to make me happy.

"Okay. Go get it." She half runs half walks away. A minute later she comes back with a red suit and a black camisole and shows it to me. "Okay go try it on." She goes into the dressing room again.

"How long do we have to be here again?" Siyabonga asks looking bored as hell. He's been complaining since we got here.

"Go find yourself a pair of sneakers and stop complaining." His face lights up and a huge smile curves his lips.

"Really? Any sneaker?" I nod my head and he runs off with Cebo trailing behind him. I'm sure she'll come back with her own.

Hlumile walks out with the biggest smile on her face. She was right the suit looks a hundred

times better than the dresses.

"What do you think?"

"You look amazing." She turns to a mirror and looks at herself a smile still plastered on her face.

"Right. Can I take the suit?"

"Of course you can. Now we need to find shoes to go with it." She heads back to the dressing room and changes back to her clothes. We find Siya and Cebo and then find shoes for Hlumile. She picks a pair of animal print stilettos and a gold clutch bag. We pay and then head to Ackerman's to get more clothes before going to pick n pay to buy groceries.

By the time we are done my feet hurt but I still need to take them to eat. We go to KFC and make our orders. I pay and sit down.

"Sisi Lani did you get another job?" Siya asks looking at the two trolleys sitting next to us. He is not the only one neighbors and people who know us keep looking our way for once in their lives they are not looking at us disgusted because our clothes are torn or our lips are dry from hunger.

"Yes. I got a new job Sne helped me find another job so now I'm working at the club in the evening and I work as her brothers PA during the day." I see the worry wash away from their faces and relief takes over. Hlumile and Siya get our food and we eat. One day maybe not today or tomorrow but one day I will have to pay back Nkazimulo for his watch. I dont know how long it will take me but it has to happen.

I decide a taxi will not work with all the things we have so I hire a meter taxi to get us home. When the car pulls up to the gate neighbors are already staring at us like we are aliens. It takes a few trips for us to get everything inside the house. There's been plenty of times when people wondered how our house went from having peeling paint and broken windows to what it is now but they'll just have to get used to it. I'm not going to rest till my siblings are successful and thriving.

7

I forgot how hard it is getting kids up and ready for school. Besides the grumbling and them wanting to spend five more minutes in bed it's cold today. I dont know who pissed off God but whoever it is needs to apologize. Angeke phela. I've woken

Siyabonga up twice already and he keeps asking for five more minutes. Good thing he still has an hour to prepare himself before his transport gets here. Cebo is almost done and Hlumile is leaving in a few minutes because she has early classes. Matric is no joke.

She walks into the kitchen with her bag hanging next to her and her jersey in the other hand.

"Your brother is still sleeping?" I ask her and hand her her lunch box.

"No. He is in the bathroom taking a bath. I've switched off the geyser already." She packs her lunchbox in her bag and puts on her jersey. I take out a twenty rand note from my gown pocket and hand it to her. "What did I do right?" She asks with a smile on her face.

"I'll take it back if you don't want it." I tease and she quickly puts the money in her shirt pocket.

"I'll never say no to money." Her phone rings and then stops. She looks at it before putting it in her bag. "I have to go. Are you sure you'll be okay with Cebo?"

"Girl I've been doing this before you. Go you'll be late." She gives me a hug and runs out of the house.

When I'm done with lunchboxes I make breakfast for the two. Cornflakes will do. Cebo comes into the kitchen already dressed and ready for school. She's really grown she can even get herself ready for school. When I started varsity she was just six years old and starting grade 1. And now she can dress herself and make sure her homework is done in time. When mum had her 10 years ago we were all shocked. It had been two years since dad left. She didn't even tell us she was pregnant we just saw her with a protruding tummy. Till this day we don't know who her father is. A few weeks after she was born that's when mum tried to kill herself. I've been raising her since she was a baby. That's why I never argue when people say she's my child.

I hand her the bowl of cereal and she heads straight to the lounge and turns the tv on and watches cartoons. Siya comes into the kitchen dressed and ready. I hand him his food and he joins Cebo in the lounge. I pack their lunch boxes and clean up in the kitchen. Mum wakes up just as Siya leaves for school. His transport is already waiting for him. When Cebo is done with her food I walk her to school. When I walk back to the house I decide to go past the supermarket and get myself some snacks. I end up buying some vetkoeks and

slap chips with some chillies on them. Just the way I like them.

On my way back home I see one of my old high school mates coming down the street. If there was a different path leading home I'd take it right about now. But I'm a couple of houses away from home so I'll just have to suck it up and face her and whatever bullshit she'll come with. I'm not being presumptuous I know her. If you need gossip on anyone she's the first call you make.

"Milani. Hi." She says waving at me before she can get to me. I smile back at her hoping this will be the end of it. But my luck is not that lucky. As soon as she gets close to me she pulls me to her for an awkward hug. I don't think she even realizes I'm not hugging her back or maybe she just doesn't care.

"Hlengiwe sawubona." I see her eyes moving all over my body. Thank God the tracksuit I'm wearing is baggy enough to not show anything.

"Its been a while. I saw you yesterday in town. I wanted to say hi but you seemed occupied. Two trolleys ntombi it must be nice. (Girl.)" And now she's fishing for gossip to spread around.

"Argh just making sure my siblings are fed." She nods her head and I can almost see the questions choking her.

"Where do you work? Last I heard you were studying. Are you done yet?"

"I dropped out. You know the situation at home I had to make some sacrifices." Liar liar pants on fire. As long as ugogo wakho ephila (your grandmother is alive) you'll never know for sure what's happening in my life. First rule of avoiding abathakathi (witches) and gossip mongers give them different scenarios and watch them go crazy.

"Oh I'm sorry to hear that. Work must be going well though. Speaking of work where do you work? Sbongile's sister Ayanda said she saw you with some blessers at a club. Is it true?" The audacity to even ask me that. Straight to my face. Some people are brave.

"What do you think?" Her mouth shoots open clearly taken aback by my comment. I don't know what she wants me to say. I've already faced enough criticism and gossip from people around here so I'm not about to give her what she wants a whole load of gossip.

"It doesn't matter what I think. I just think you should be careful you know blessers are a bad idea. Those men use snakes and muti to lure girls like you who just want the high life and

not actually work for it. You should be setting an example for Hlumile and Cebo you don't want them turning into prostitutes like you. They deserve better." A whole mouthful with a sprinkle of an insult thrown in. I'm impressed. I chuckle and take out a vetkoek from the bag and take a bite.

"You're right. I mean I've seen enough dicks in my life to last a lifetime. And this one time I..." I take a couple of deep breaths pretending to be emotional and sad. "One time

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i.... i ended up at at some man's mansion..... andandhe made me..... he made me.....sleep with his snake....." I tell her tears running down my face. I see her gasp and figure why stop now. The show must go on. "Imagine a whole..... a whole python's head in my vagina..... it felt good though I dont know how many times I had orgasms..... he told me..... if I ever told anyone..... anyone at all..... the person would end up rotten with margot's and they will die a slow painful death." I wipe my fake tears and take deep breaths. "Thank you for reminding me of what's important. I've never told this to anyone you're the first person I've opened up to." The way her face just went from curious shocked to panic in less than a minute should be made into a study. She'd make a great actress.

"What do you mean you've never told this to anyone?" Her voice breaks a I could laugh right now. But I keep my laughter in.

"Well I was too afraid to tell anyone about it because the man said....."

"Yeah yeah if you tell anyone the person will die." She finishes.

"Yes."

"And you thought it was okay to tell me. ME Milani! Why?" I see tears welling up in her eyes. Man this is amazing.

"I'm sorry I had no one else to talk to."

"God you're evil. No wonder your father left you and your mother is crazy. You probably bewitched them." I clasp my imaginary pearl's acting shocked.

"I thought you wanted me to talk to you?"

"Talk not kill me." She screams and runs off. I burst out laughing as she runs down the street. I dont know how long this lie will go on but I hope it tortures her for a long time. I know how I make money is not the most 'honorable' way in the world but dont throw it back in my face like I dont know about it.

When I get home I find mum already mopping the house.

"Milani you're back." She stands aside and let's me walk into the house. I boil the kettle to make tea. When she's done she comes into the kitchen and takes a seat. I take two plates and dish up the chips and vetkoeks. I hand her a container of artchar and a cup of tea then sit down. We eat in silence and it's quite weird and awkward. We used to be close when I was little we'd talk about anything and everything. My favourite thing to do with her was when she'd do my hair. She was good at it I had the best hairstyles all through primary school. And after my dad left and she slipped into her darkness I cut my hair off. It was easier not to remember those times when I had short hair. I only started growing it after matric.

"So how is school going?" I look up from my phone and find her staring at me. I'm surprised she even knows I'm at school.

"Its fine. I'm done with my exams. I'll be graduating in a few moths." Her face lights up with pride maybe. And for a moment my heart swells up. Maybe deep down in her heart she sees all that I do and maybe she really is proud of me.

"You did great. I'm proud of you."

"Thanks." I stand up and clear up the table. I put everything in the sink. "I'm going to take out the laundry."

"I did the laundry yesterday. It just needs ironing. Unfortunately I hate ironing." She shrugs her shoulders laughing. If my dad didnt iron her clothes when he was still around she'd probably would have ended up wearing wrinkled shirts to work. But he was always there to make sure she is presentable. It was always amazing to watch them together. They loved each other. There was never a moment where I saw them shouting at each other or fighting. When they were together it was always laughter and teasing each other. I dont know where everything went wrong. Their love was always on high. Or maybe they never allowed us to see the lows so my opinion of them is biased.

I nod my head and go to the bedroom. Sure enough the laundry basket is full of washed clothes. After so much time of us taking care of her she's decided to come to the party and be a parent. I'm still uncertain of how long it will last but I'm also angry at her right now. My phone rings from my pocket and I take it out. I sit on the bed and answer it.

"Baby."

"Hey you. How's home?"

"Good. So far. Mum just told me she is proud of me." There is a bit of silence before I hear Sne sniffing on the other end. This is why we can never watch an emotional movie at the cinema together. She'll bawl as soon as someone dies.

"How are you feeling about it?" She asks after collecting her emotions.

"I dont know. It felt weird hearing it. Maybe it will sink in after a while but for now it's just weird."

"I understand. But the good thing is that inspite of whatever she's going through she sees your efforts. She knows you do the best you can. That's all we can ask for right?"

"I guess. How is the move coming along?"

"Good. I've packed all the important things including the parcel you left the rest of the stuff will be packed by the movers. And I have good news." Her voice goes up and I can feel the excitement.

"Please dont tell me you're back with Bongani." She laughs and I know she's not. If she was she would have been quieter.

"Heck no. However Kumkani and I went out on a date yesterday. I'll explain everything when you get back. But I wanted to tell you that Luxe Home Goods is hiring and I sent your CV so expect a call or an email." If anything can bring tears to my eyes is being taken care of. To most people this might seem like nothing but having someone watch out for me even when I'm not there is my love language.

"Sne I dont know what to say."

"Dont say anything. When you get hired you're taking me out for dinner. Deal?"

"Deal."

"Cool. I have to go the movers are here. We'll talk later. I love you. Mncwaa." She hangs up.

"I love you too." I say to the silent phone.

Getting a job at Luxe would be great. It's a huge end furniture shop with a showroom. Every week they change the showrooms and it would be perfect for an entry level job. I'd practice my decor and see what I like and what I'm good at. And it will give me great experience before I start my business. I'm crossing my fingers they actually call me.

"Milani Hlengiwe is at the gate with her mother." Hlumile whispers to me as if they can hear her. I heard them shouting a while back but the gate is closed so theres no forcing their way in. Its hilarious how a little white lie has turned into a whole circus. Atleast I'm not the clown.

"Let them shout until their throats run dry. I'm busy." I dont know how long this little circus is going to last but I hope it's not long. Its almost dark outside and they are already drawing a crowd.

"Milani they are shouting outside like crazy people. Can't we let them in and find out what they want." I switch the stove off and turn to look at Hlumile.

"I know what they want. I'll go talk to them." Hlumile follows me out to the gate.

"Yewena mthakathi. (Hey you witch.) What did you say to my child?" No greeting no nothing I know where Hlenghleng gets it.

"Aunty. Sawubona." Oh did I forget to mention Hlengiwe is my cousin? Her mum and my dad are siblings blood siblings not the ones you meet on the street and then become thick as thieves with. No. Aunty Sbongile and my father laid in the same womb for nine months but their hatred for my mother boiled over to include us. When my dad left none of them ever bothered to find out how we were doing or how we were holding up even when my mum was admitted to hospital for a whole year and every other time after that they didnt care.

"Ngklawbona ngklawbona woknuka. (Hello my foot.) Utheni ku Hlengiwe? (What did you say to Hlengiwe?)" I look at my dear cousin hiding behind her mother sniffing her eyes are red and puffy oh poor Hlenghleng she was probably crying the whole day. I take out the key from my pocket and open the gate.

"Come on in." I turn and walk away with her shouting behind me telling me to come back. I'm not about to discuss this in front of the audience she has gathered. If she seriously wants to talk she'll come in the house.

"Why are you inviting her into the house Milani? What if she beats you up in here." Hlumile is too scared for her own good. She doesnt know I've dealt with worse devils than aunt Sbongile.

"She wouldn't dare and you know it." We get into the house and sit down on the couches.

Good thing mum is taking a bath. I just hope this doesn't set her back.

"She's coming." Hlumile whispers. She's been standing by the window watching her rant and rave outside. I hear her voice get closer and closer till she bounces into the house. Her voice slowly falters when she looks around her. It's not the same house she last saw when her brother was here. I see her eyes roam around the room in awe.

"Ungahlala aunty. (You can sit.)" I know pride is one of the seven cardinal sins but God will have to forgive me seeing the look of awe and shock on her face makes me so happy and so proud of all I've done. The path might not have been easy or morally right but I'd do it all over again for this moment right now. After scanning the house she slowly takes a seat. The big screen TV in front of her catches her attention and she swallows.

"What..... what uhm..... what did you say to Hlengiwe?" She stutters trying so hard to get her mind back to the present.

"I don't know what you mean."

"You don't know what she means? Are you crazy! You told me I was going to die." Hlengiwe shouts getting off the couch.

"I didn't say you'd die."

"Then what did you say?" Aunt Sbhongile asks trying so hard to pay attention.

"She called me a prostitute....."

"Are you not a prostitute? We've heard the stories Milani we know what you do. And right now seeing all this..." she motions her hand pointing around the house. "They weren't lying."

"I'm not a prostitute aunty I work. I've been working since I was thirteen years old and you know it. Heck I worked for you too doing your laundry and washing your dirty underwear for a loaf of bread if I was lucky. I fetched water for people and babysat their kids for a lousy R20 while you and your family chose to watch your brother's kids suffer." I feel a lump rise up on my chest I blink a few times willing my tears back. I'm not going to cry in front of her. Not today. "I told you once when you poured a bucket of dirty water all over me because your panties weren't clean enough for you I told you God will hear my prayers one day and I'll never come to you for anything not even a slice of bread. Now look around you. Did you think we'd stay buried in poverty forever? Did you think you and your family held the keys to our lives? And now you're here calling me a prostitute just like your stupid daughter did. Instead of worrying about her repeating matric for the third time I mean Hlumile was three

classes behind her just a few years ago and now she'll be writing the same exam with her. Instead of worrying about her you're here judging me for something you know nothing about." I stand up and stand by the door. "Please leave. Oh and that little story I told you it was a lie. But I'm glad it tortured you maybe now you'll learn to stay out of people's business. Now please get out." They slowly walk out of the house with their tails between their legs.

"Wow. That was epic." Hlumile squeals as soon as I close the door. "Did you see the look on their faces I've never seen aunt Sbongile that shell shocked before."

"Go lock the gate." She runs out of the house and I heave a sigh of relief before heading back to the kitchen. I take a seat on the kitchen table. Hlumile comes back and joins me.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I didnt think everything that I said would hit so deep."

"Well i think you should be proud of yourself. And she deserved to hear that. You and i both know how hard things were when dad left. And when mum went to that hospital none of them ever thought to come help us. You did that all by yourself. And if it wasnt for you I don't know where we would be. That's why I'm so determined to finish school go to medical school and then become a neurosurgeon and then build you a double story house."

"I'll only accept that if you build mine after you build your own first."

"You know it." We fist bump and burst into a fit of laughter. She's been promising me a double story house since I can remember. Maybe one day we will own one no maybe's. We will definitely own one.

My buzzing phone wakes me up from a rather nice nap. I have way too much time on my hands sometimes I dont know what to do with myself. After helping the kids and getting them out the door I come back and clean the house I come back and clean the house make breakfast for mum and I send out some CVs and then make lunch. I'm not a big fan of tv so the only thing I can do is nap.

I take the phone out from under the pillow. It's a landline number. Those are not to be

ignored not right now.

"Milani Mbokazi hello." I try to answer as calmly and professionally as I can despite my sleepy voice.

"Hi Miss Mbokazi my name is Christine Myers from Luxe Home Goods. We've reviewed your CV and we think you'd be perfect for the job. We will email you your contract read it and send it back to us. You can start on the first of next month." I pull the phone away from my ear and look at it before putting it back. This must be a prank. I know Sne said she sent my CV there but this cant be happening.

"I'm sorry is this a prank? Because if it is its cruel. And hell is waiting for you." I hear her chuckle and even though she hasnt said it I'm certain this is a prank.

"Its not a prank Miss Mbokazi. It's real."

"Cool burning you forgot something an interview short list assessments and whatever else is needed. You cant just offer someone a job based on a CV and not meeting them in person. What if I'm a serial killer and I show up and butcher everyone there?" She laughs again. This woman is determined to make a mockery of me.

"You're right we dont normally do things this way but we got a recommendation letter with your CV as well as your portfolio. Its impressive doing work for the likes of Mr Cebekhulu is an impressive fit so we would definitely love to work with you." This woman is too jolly and determined maybe this isnt a prank. I can bet my last penny that Mr Scelo Cebekhulu is the one who wrote that recommendation letter.

"Oh okay. Uhm thank you. I'll be expecting your email."

"Perfect. We look forward to working with you. Have a nice day." I look at the phone for a while even after her voice has been cut off.

A few minutes later I hear a ping on my phone. I see my email notification and my heart starts beating. If this is a prank I swear I'll kill whoever Catherine Myers is. I take a deep breath and switch on my laptop. I go to my emails and open the email. It takes a couple of seconds for the document to download. I open it and sure enough it's an employment contract. But it's not the one I was expecting. I applied to Luxe Home Goods before I started writing my exams for an apprenticeship but i was rejected. But now they are hiring me for an apprenticeship and I will be paid. I wonder what kind of strings Scelo pulled. I figured working at their shop would be great because if i got an opportunity to work in the

showrooms I'd show off what i can do and that would get me the attention I need to get my apprenticeship. But now here it is. Miracles I tell you.

I take my phone and dial Sne's number.

"Hey babe." Another one who seems too jolly.

"Snethemba Cebekhulu."

"Milani Mbokazi."

"When you said you handed in my CV for me what was it for exactly?" She laughs. A sneaky suspicious laugh. "And tell me the truth and stop laughing." Instead of listening to me she laughs harder.

"Ok. The truth. I handed in your CV for the apprenticeship. Usually they take people who've already graduated but with a letter of recommendation from Scelo and a few tweaks on your portfolio and you were set."

"What kind of tweaks. Miss Attorney in training fo you know fraud is a real crime?" She laughs. I swear this girl doesn't take me seriously.

"Relax its not anything illegal. I just included the pictures of the work you did with Scelo's house and his office."

"Sne I did not work on Scelo's office."

"I know. But remember when I kept asking you about colors and furniture? It was all for his office so technically speaking you did. What happened? Did they call you." I sigh and lay back on the bed facing the ceiling.

"They just sent me an employment contract." She starts screaming in my ear so hard I have to move the phone away from my ear to protect my eardrum.

"Babe. That's great." I know she is genuinely happy for me and her Hello comes from a sincere place but I'm not used to just having things handed to me I have to work for all I have even if I have to lay on my back for it.

"I know. And I have you to thank for that."

"Lani are you okay?" I sigh and close my eyes praying for my tears not to fall.

"I'm fine. I just I dont know how to thank you. You know I'm used to doing things for myself and then you show up and help me carry a burden that's been so heavy on me I dont know how to thank you."

"That's what sisters are for. You taught me that remember. I know I dont say this enough but I'm proud of you Milani. I thank God every day that I met you. If it wasn't for you I

probably would have traded school for partying a long time ago. You're my twin remember and I'll always be here for you. Besties....."

"For life." I answer with tears running down my face. Our little slogan has got us through the most. But that's a story for another day.

"Thank you friend. I love you."

"I love you too babe. Now send me that contract so I can read it. Bye babe."

"Okay. Bye."

I hang up and wipe my tears away. I was right when I told aunt Sbongile that God does answer prayers.

9

I dont think there is another city more buzzing and alive like Joburg. It's the city of gold for a reason. If you're not quick enough it will swallow you whole but if you're smart well it can be your oyster. Who am I kidding this city has toyed with us to some extent. But we all come out on the other side stronger right? Well for me it's offered its struggles but it's made up for it in ways I never expected. And right now I am about to walk into a new blessing.

"Do you think this skirt is fine?" I ask Sne when she walks into my room. She has a bowl in her hand and I see the shock on her face when she sees my outfit. Maybe it's too bad.

"What happened to the red dress?" She hands me the bowl and its cereal. I'm not sure I can stomach anything right now but for her I'll take a couple of spoonfuls.

"Its too loud man. Its drawing too much attention."

"Okay. Although I think it was better. But the black does look professional and like you're ready to take on the world." I look at myself in the mirror and Yeah I look good. But the nerves are also making themselves known.

I sit down next to her on the bed and eat my cereal. My phone rings from the side table. Sne takes it and hands it to me. Hlumile and video calls. The moment I accept the call I see three faces with wide smiles and hands waving around.

"Hey. Arent you going to be late for school."

"No. We wanted to say good luck on your first day. How are you feeling?" Hlumile asks.

"Nervous. But I'm better now that I've see you guys. How is mum?"

"She's good. She's still sleeping though." Cebo's loud squeaky voice echoes through the phone. "When are you coming back? We miss you already." She adds.

"Soon. Let me settle in at work and we'll see."

"Okay. We should get going. Greet sis Sne for us." Hlumi says. I turn the phone over to Sne and they start screaming at each other.

"I'll come see you guys soon Okay." Sne tells them. "What should I bring you?"

"We will write you a list." Cebo screams over the others. This one loves attention. Sne just laughs. She's been to my home a few times since I've known her. And she fit right in. Anyone who doesn't know her wouldn't think for a second she grew up in the suburbs with a maid at her beck and call. Not all suburban kids are stuck up and snobs after all.

"Okay. I'll make sure to get you everything you want." She assures them then blows kisses to them. I turn the phone back to me.

"We have to go. Good luck sisi. We love you." Hlumile tells me.

"Yes we love you more than the moon and the stars." Cebo adds. Siya just gives me a thumbs up before they cut the call. I sigh and put the empty bowl aside.

"I should get going."

"You still have three hours before work starts." Sne reminds me.

"Traffic Snethemba. I have to beat the traffic." My nerves are slowly creeping in again.

"Relax. I'll take you. Remember the girl is mobile now. Besides you can't arrive on your first day in a taxi. I'll be your uber. And then I'll come back to sleep."

"Thanks friend. Are you sure my outfit is fine."

"You are fine. Let me go change maybe we can have breakfast before work." For someone who never gains weight Sne eats a lot.

She leaves and I stand up to look at myself in the mirror. *I look good. I deserve this job and this is where I belong. This is where i belong.* My inner self reminds me. Maybe that's all I needed because my nerves seem to be making way for a bit of calmness and confidence. I deserve this just as anyone else does. I've worked hard and I've earned it. Yes I have earned this. I'm not about to let some nerves get the best of me.

I change back into the red dress. It has a cowl neck which makes my boobs existent thank God. And it hugs my petite body just right. I add a pair of nude heels and a light nude double breasted blazer.

"Yessss. Now that's the Milani I know. Bold and or so gorgeous." She says as soon as she walks back in the room making me smile.

"You approve?" I twirl and she claps her hands. My cheerleader.

"Definitely. You look amazing. Are you sure you not going there to take over the CEO position?"

"Maybe one day."

"That's the spirit." We high five and I grab my bag. My make up is not too bold and my lips only have gloss. My curly weave lays on my shoulders. I look good. And maybe one day that CEO position will be mine.

"Break a leg baby." She says before hugging me. I get off the car and she drives off. I stand in front of the building. Its huge and intimidating but I've been giving myself internal pep talks since I left our apartment so my heart is not beating as fast as it was. I take one step after the other and walk into the building. I walk straight to the receptionist.

"Good morning. Can I help you." She looks at me with a warm friendly smile. I think I like her. She doesnt seem like one of those receptionists who act like they own the entire company.

"Hi. I'd like to see Christine Myers."

"And you are?"

"Milani Mbokazi. I'm supposed to start"

"Your apprenticeship. Oh yes she's expecting you. Take the lift and go up to the fifth floor. Go down the hallway Christine's office is on your right." She says with the smile still plastered on her face. I think I'll love working with this girl.

"Thank you."

I head to the lift and hit the button and wait. Someone comes behind me and hits the button again. Before I can even see who it is the smell of his cologne announces his presence. I look up and see him impatiently looking at his watch and tapping his foot on the marble floor. The lift arrives just in time. He cuts in front of me and gets in the lift and presses a

button. I walk in just before the door closes. I press number five and notice he is going to the eighth floor. His cologne fills the small space and if he wasn't so rude I'd like it. But right now it's irritating.

The lift stops on the fifth floor and I get out. I feel his eyes on my back but by the time I look back the lift doors have closed. I shake my head and refocus my attention back to what I need to do. I go down the hallway until I find an office with C Myers on the door. I knock and wait for a reply. I hear a faint come in and I open the door and walk in. I find her sitting on her chair with eyes stuck on her computer. Her office is bright and bold. On one side there is a beautiful black and white office space and on the other side I'm guessing is her creative corner. There is a large table with different samples and colour palletes.

"Christine. Hi. I'm Milani." She smiles and takes off her glasses. She extended her hand with a wide smile on her face. I take her hand and shake it.

"It's nice to finally meet you. Are you nervous?" She asks and points to the chair. I take a seat and so does she.

"A bit."

"I can imagine. But there is no need to be nervous. Everyone around here is nice and sweet. Come let me show you your desk." She gets up and I follow her out. With every office we pass through she tells me whose office it is and what they do. We get on the lift and go down to the fourth floor.

The lift doors open revealing a huge open space with bold

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let me show you your desk." She gets up and I follow her out. With every office we pass through she tells me whose office it is and what they do. We get on the lift and go down to the fourth floor.

The lift doors open revealing a huge open space with bold bright colors on the wall and cubicles all over the place. She leads me to a huge desk that's been divided into four cubicles just like most of the desks around here. She shows me to an empty cubicle.

"This will be your space you can decorate it however you want you'll meet the other apprentices when they come in. Put your bag down let me show you to the coffee area." I do as instructed and follow her to another area of the office. "This is where you'll get your

coffee or tea. There are cups in the cupboard but if you don't like to share you can bring your own. Every Friday there will be a shopping list posted on the notice board if you don't drink any of the coffee or tea available you can write down your preferred coffee and it will be provided. Muffins sandwiches and all other foods can be found in the cafeteria its on the first floor. Anyways I think that's all you need to know for now. Any questions?"

"Just one workwise what will I be doing?"

"Anything that the designers ask you to do. Sometimes they will ask you to go to view houses and offices and you will help them whenever they need your help."

"Okay. I can do that."

"Perfect. I have an early meeting but if you need anything my door is always open."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome. Have fun." She says and leaves.

I go back to the coffee spot and take a cup out of the cupboard. It's clear and has no name on it so I'm hoping it doesn't belong to anyone. I pour myself a cup of coffee. Christine was right about the shopping list and it looks like people here make use of it. There is every type of tea and coffee. I take a sachet of sugar and pour it in my coffee. I add milk and sip on it while standing there.

"New meat. Nice." Someone says behind me. I turn around to find a girl and a guy sizing me up.

"Hi."

"Hello. I'm Sebastian." The guy says.

"His name is Bhekisisa and I'm Sizakele." The guy clasps his imaginary Pearl's and looks at Sizakele with his mouth wide open.

"Girl. Sebastian is my creative name." He defends himself. I want to ask him why his creative name has to be an English name. What's wrong with Bhekisisa being creative? I swallow my words however can't be starting trouble on the first day.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Milani."

"One of the new first year apprentices." Sizakele asks. I nod my head and she smiles.

"Cool. Bheki and I are on our third year. You'll love it here."

"Not unless she encounters ice cold Dave. That man makes me want to bang him both figuratively and literally." I've concluded Bheki/ Sebastian is the one I'll go to for gossip.

"Is he that bad?" I ask hoping he will spill some more tea.

"Girl you have no idea. That man's heart is probably the iceberg that sank the Titanic."
"Really now? Please do go on." The rude guy from the lift says standing behind Bheki. I look at Bheki and he is frozen in place. Sizakele is staring at the floor like she's hoping it will open and swallow her alive. I guess rude guy is actually Dave. "Go on Bhekisisa dont let me stop you."

Bheki turns to Dave in slow motion. I can see drops of perspiration on his forehead its almost funny to watch.

"Dave. I..... I have a meeting." He stutters and quickly walks past Dave and runs literally he runs away. Dave stares at Siza and I. Siza quickly follows Bheki leaving me standing there. I figure I might as well follow the two cowards. I walk out and head to my cubicle. Before I sit down I look around expecting to see the two culprits but they are nowhere in sight. Day one is already proving that I might just be in for a good time around here. I haven't been here for an hour and already there is trouble. And since I seem to be attracted to trouble I think I'll love it here.

10

The past few days I've been nervous about starting work but now that I'm here sitting in my cubicle I can fully say I feel like a proud independent girl. The only down side is that I've been printing copies and getting coffee for people. The second and third year apprentices think we are their personal maids. But it's okay as long as I'm learning something new.

I've also met the other first year apprentices Jayden Dimakatso and Zothile. Each of them have a superiority complex I dont know who told them that this is a competition. Everytime a the other apprentices need anything they are quick to get up and run. I'm sure they think that alone will score them brownie points. Me on the other hand my strategy is different. I've decided to befriend Sizakele and Sebastian and let them guide me through this journey. Mentors come in all shapes and craziness.

I see the two cowards during lunch time sitting in the cafeteria tucked away in a corner. I'm sure they are hiding from Ice cold Dave. I walk over to them and they are startled when I

drop my lunchbox on the table.

"Hhay man wena are you trying to give me a heart attack?" Sebastian says holding on to his chest.

"Sorry actually Dave asked me to call you two. He wants to see you in his office." I see panic and fear wash over them. I want to laugh but I have to keep my composure they did leave me with that man after all.

"Why? What does he want? Oh my God we are screwed." Sizakele says close to tears. I even feel sorry for them.

"You wont know until you go up and talk to him." They stand up ready to face their fate. Its almost funny how scared they are. I burst out laughing and sit down.

"You should see your faces. You'd think it's the end of the world."

"Sweety you've been here for five hours give yourself time you'll find out why he the man is called ice cold Dave. Let's go." Sebastian says.

"I'm joking. He didn't call you."

"Are you serious?" They sit back down staring at me.

"I'm serious. I was joking. That's what you get for leaving me with the iceberg in the morning."

"You're an idiot. But I think I like you." Sebastian says and takes a sip of his juice. I see his hand still shaking and I laugh.

"You know for someone who seems to know all about other people's business you also scare easily." Sebastian clicks his fingers and Jayden comes running.

"Yes." He says with his body slightly bowed. His blonde hair falls over his pale white face.

"Listen Jay sorry to disturb you can you get me an all bran muffin from mamKhabo." Jayden nods his head and quickly runs off. He returns a minute later and puts the muffin in front of Sebastian. "Thank you boo you're a star." Jay smiles and goes back to his table.

"Why are you abusing the poor boy? You could have asked me to get you the muffin." I tell him and Sizakele laughs.

"Would you have done it?" She asks between chuckles.

"Probably not." I wasnt going to leave my lunch for someone with two hands and two feet.

"See I told you she's too hard headed. I saw it the moment she looked at Icy Dave straight in the eyes." Sebastian adds. Sizakele looks at her watch.

"We have to go. If we are going to avoid Dave we need to make sure we get to our hiding spot now.

We clear the table and I pack away my empty lunchbox. We walk to the lift but it seems to be taking too long.

"Let's take the stairs." I suggest. "Its just two floors up." They agree and we go up the stairs. Just when we are about to take the last set of stairs to the fourth floor we find Dave sitting at the top of the stairs with a cigarette in his hand. And there is a sign right on the wall next to him that clearly says no smoking. The two voices that were talking behind me suddenly go quiet. And then as if they've been struck by lightning they run back down the stairs. They just left me with Dave. Again. I look down at the stairs and then look back up at him.

"Yeah I would run too but..." I show him my heels. "I'm not going back down the stairs in these. Anyways. Excuse me." I try to walk past him but he extends his arm and holds the railing blocking my way.

"Why would you need to run? You didnt do anything right?" Why is it that we women seem to find the rudest men attractive. Dave is definitely a good looking man. A rude idiot but a good looking one nonetheless.

"Nope. But I'm a black person

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blocking my way.

"Why would you need to run? You didnt do anything right?" Why is it that we women seem to find the rudest men attractive. Dave is definitely a good looking man. A rude idiot but a good looking one nonetheless.

"Nope. But I'm a black person when people run we run too. We dont ask why we just run." He chuckles. Okay maybe his iceberg heart melts when the sun is scorching hot outside. "Tell them I don't forget easily." He says and removes his arm. I go up and stand at the top of the stairs and look back at him.

"You did see the no smoking sign right?" Instead of answering me he blows the smoke up onto the sign. Okay then. Let me take my tiny butt back to work.

Five o'clock comes too soon. I guess it's true what they say time flies when you're having fun. Not work fun but watching Sizakele and Sebastian squirm everytime the lift pings and they think it might be Dave. But now it's time to go home. I pack my things and follow the exiting crowd. Sebastian and Sizakele catch up to me just before I get in the lift and they hold me back.

"Hold on we will take the next one." Sizakele says.

"So vele vele Dave said he won't forget what I said?" Sebastian asks.

"Nope." I shake my head and Sizakele laughs. I don't know why she is laughing cause she's also in trouble.

The lift pings and we get in. Instead of going down it goes up. A part of me thinks it might be going to the fifth floor but when it goes further up with these two not paying attention to the numbers I have a bad feeling. Sure enough the lift stops on the eight floor. The doors slide open and Sebastian is about to walk out thinking it's the first floor when he is pushed back by Dave.

"Are you here to see me?" He asks and walks into the lift. He presses the button and I see these two holding hands like they are in the middle of a tornado and they are afraid they will lose each other in the storm. "No one will speak." He adds looking at each of us. I don't know why he is looking at me. He knows I'm innocent. "No one. Really? Sebastian?" Its cute that he knows Bheki's preferred name. The lift reaches the first floor and he gets out leaving us inside. The door closes again with us inside the lift. Sebastian slides down the side of the lift and sits butt flat on the floor.

"That man is going to be the death of me." He says. Are first days at work supposed to be this fun?

The lift goes back up to get other workers with us still inside. Of course they are shocked when they see Sebastian sitting there like someone died. Sizakele and I help him stand up.

"I should just write my resignation letter." He says.

"Don't be ridiculous. All you have to do is go and apologize for what you said and everything will be fine. Dave doesn't seem that difficult." One of the third year apprentices turns to look at me like what I just said is intriguing for her. Her name is Mapaseka I think. She's prim and proper and she has a few big clients under her belt.

"You dont know Dave wena. That man is evil." Sebastian says.

"Tell you what how about this I'll go with you guys and we will apologize together."
Mapaseka chuckles and faces forward. Maybe she knows something I dont.

When we get to the first floor she gets off first. Her heel announcing every step she makes.
"Why was she looking at me like that?" I ask Sizakele.

"Oh rumours has it she gets her clients by laying on her back. And Dave has seen her naked." I'm the last person to judge anyone on how they make their money but I still dont understand the shady look I got.

"You know that song that says you can tell when a person who has seen the boss naked. She's the perfect example." Sebastian adds. We walk out of the building and my bestie is here to pick me up.

"Guys my ride is here. I will see you tomorrow."

"Can we get a lift? Where are you guys going?" Sebastian asks.

"Fourways. Let me ask Sne. Where are you guys going?"

"We are going to catch a taxi there by Fourways." Sebastian adds. I walk over to the car and knock on the window. Sne rolls the window down.

"Hey babe."

"Hey so the guys I'm with are asking for a lift. They are going to Fourways."

"Are they nice?"

"Yes they are."

"Okay. Let's go." I call them over and we get in the car.

"Guys this is my bestie Snethemba babe these are my new friends Sizakele and Sebastian slash Bhekisisa."

"Its just Sebastian please." Sebastian says shaking Sne's hand.

"Nice to meet you guys. Have you been taking care of my friend."

"Nope. She got us into trouble." Sizakele says and I laugh. How am I the one who got them into trouble when the loudmouth is right next to her.

"How? What did she do?" Sne asks. Sebastian explains everything to her and by the time he is done Sne is laughing with tears in her eyes.

"Wow friend on your first day and already you have trouble following you."

"Its not me its Sebastian. And now he wants to resign." We drop the two off at the taxi rank

then we drive off to our apartment.

"Seems like you had an eventful first day."

"Yep. I think I'll love it there. Except for the other first years who are okay with running around getting coffee and making copies." She laughs as we pull up to the parking lot.

"That's how everyone starts babe."

"I'm not about to be anyone's skivvy. I'm hoping I can help out Sizakele and Sebastian with their clients. It will help me learn and get ideas on some things. And then when I get my own clients I'll be ready and prepared."

"Smart move. I'm glad you're enjoying it. Let's go inside. I cooked."

"YOU COOKED?" She laughs. She doesn't cook. I can count the number of times she's cooked a meal for us.

"Yes I cooked. I was bored so I cooked." We go into the apartment and it smells rather nice. Its surprising.

"Okay it smells nice. But do I need to keep medication ready?"

"Tsek. Go freshen up. I'll dish up and get you some wine."

"Thanks babe."

I leave her in the lounge and go to my room. I take off my clothes and walk naked to the bathroom. I take a quick shower then go back to my room. I put on my pyjamas then join Sne in the lounge. I grab my glass of wine and my plate of food and join her on the couch. The food tastes nice actually. And that's all I need to end my day a good home cooked meal and a glass of wine. Perfect.

11

One week down many more to go. I must say I'm enjoying working here. It's been amazing. Befriending Sizakele and Sebastian has been the best thing in the world. While the other first years are stuck making tea and coffee I've been tagging along with Sebastian and Sizakele to see clients and see how they design a space. Right now they are busy with a client's house in Ruimsig and we've been going there almost every day just to make sure things are coming alright.

"Girl get ready we are about to leave." Sizakele taps me on the shoulder and heads to her desk. I pack my things in my bag. Its Friday today and we knock off early so I doubt we will

be coming back here today so I get all my things.

"Must be nice." Zothile says peeking out of her cubicle. I look up at her expecting her to keep going but she doesn't. Instead she looks at me like I'm supposed to read her mind. After a while I finally give in.

"What must be nice Zo?" I ask.

"Being you. Working with third year apprentices and being out of the office most of the time." She says sounding sad maybe. Or jealous innit sure yet.

"Well I came here to work so I'm working." She takes a smile and disappears behind the Acrylic cubicle partition. Yep its jealousy.

I see Dave walking into the office and heading to the coffee station. I wonder why because he has a PA who makes tea and coffee for him. And he has his own coffee station in his office. But now it makes sense why these two want us to leave this early. Usually we leave around 11 or 12 but right now we are far from that. I wonder how long they are going to keep running. I was supposed to take them to Dave so they can apologize but he hasn't been in the office the past few days. Rumor has it he had a family emergency.

I get off my chair and follow him to the coffee station with my travel mug. I find him staring at his coffee.

"Good morning." I greet and rinse my cup. Before pouring the hot brown liquid on to it.

"Hi." He sounds down. If he wasn't my boss I'd prove until I find the truth but I have to respect boundaries. I pour sugar into my coffee while he keeps staring at his. I'm sure by now the sugar granules have dissipated into nothing and that coffee is slowly getting cold.

"Are you Okay?" Boundaries I know. But empathy is needed too. He looks up and smiles at me. He actually smiles not a fake one too. I must have the magic touch. He sighs and sips his coffee.

"I'm fine. I hear you've been working with the trouble makers." He says matter of factly. It's not a question he is telling me. I wonder who has been playing messenger around here.

"How would you know you haven't been here the past few days?" He chuckles. Okay give me my own statue in the middle of the town square. I seem to be melting the iceberg. First it was a smile now a chuckle. What's next a belly aching laughter? I can only hope.

"I know everything that goes on around here. It's my job to keep up to date with work and all your shenanigans." Mhmm. Okay he's been keeping tabs on us. As a boss that's good but

I'm wondering how much more he knows.

"That's good. Well to corroborate your statement yes I have been working with Sizakele and Sebastian. I'm not sure about the troublemaker part." He laughs. Okay I need angel's to bow down to me now. The man is laughing. Ice cold Dave is laughing.

"Of course you wouldn't. You're just as much of a troublemaker." I act shocked and open my mouth as if what he said isn't true. It might be but I'm not a troublemaker. Trouble just loves my company.

"You don't know me like that. I'm a saint. Ask anyone who knows me." He arches his eyebrows in amusement.

"You know what they say about birds of the same feathers." He says. Mapaseka walks in clicking her heels. Her smile when she looks at Dave reaches her ears. Yep these two have been snagging.

"Hey Dave." She says in a squeaky flirty voice. The smile he had suddenly disappears. She turns to me with an icy stare. There's too much icy looks around here you'd think we are in Antarctica. "Milani." What a cold greeting on such a beautiful day.

"Maps." I say coldly. I can be cold too. She mustn't think she is the only person who can be Elsa around here. Plus I know she hates it when I call her Maps. I told you trouble loves me. I see the irritation in her face and I know if Dave wasn't here she'd rain fire on me.

"It's Mapaseka or Pasi please." She says so politely I almost believe she's genuine. But I know better. "Anyways I need a few samples of backsplash tiles from the shop. Will you please kindly get it for me?" I should be recording this. Mapaseka being nice. It's a miracle. Or a once of performance on front of Dave. Either way it's a bit too much. Ever since that day on the lift when she looked at me funny for mentioning Dave's name she's been giving me ugly looks and I found out she requested my CV and portfolio. I don't know why because she's not part of management.

"I'd love to help Pasi but Sebastian and Sizakele asked me to go with them to see a client's project. Maybe ask one of the other first years I'm sure they would love to help." Before she can answer me Dave's phone rings. I'd even forgotten he was there watching this whole interaction. He picks up his phone and leaves. And then the icy queen returns.

"I'm not sure if your little friends told you anything about the procedures around here but I will school you nonetheless. I Mapaseka Mokoena

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as a senior apprentice I have the right to ask anything of the first year apprentices and they cannot say no. Now I need those samples in thirty minutes. Please get on with it." She says and turns around to leave.

"I dont remember reading that in my employment contract." She stops and turns back to me. She chuckles and takes slow calculated steps towards me. If she's trying to instill fear in me then she is failing dismally.

"Would you like me to report you for insubordination?" She asks expecting me to shiver. But I'm not that girl.

"Dala what you must." She chuckles again.

"I read your CV and I saw your portfolio. Mediocre to say the least. And I also know you didn't get an interview like everyone else. You were handed this job on a silver platter. So my question is whose bed did you have to warm ti get this job? Because the way you're carrying on its clear you know something the rest of us dont. So who is your plug? Is it Dave?" She asks. So that's why she requested my CV. Cute.

"Mapaseka some of us dont need to warm people's beds to get jobs. And you can relax Dave's bed is yours alone." I walk out of there leaving her shocked. I'm sure right now her mind is running in all directions. Well she can stew for a while. When I get back to my desk I find Sebastian and Sizakele sitting there.

"Why didnt you guys call me?" I ask and they use their heads to point at Mapaseka who is walking out of tje coffee station fuming. We watch her walk to the lift and only after she gets in and the lift doors close do we relax.

"We need to go now." Sebastian says standing up. "Our cab is outside." I grab my bag and we literally run out of the office. Instead of taking the lift we run down the stairs. By the time we get to the ground floor my chest is closing up. I stop and lean on my knees trying to catch my breath. I dont even know why we are running.

"Milani let's go." Sizakele calls out holding the door open. I take one last deep breath and follow them out to the lobby. It's a good thing I wore sneakers today those stairs would have

killed me in heels.

We get in the cab and drive off.

"Why are we running?" I ask after catching my breath.

"Whatever you said to her she's going to report it. And we don't have time to deal with her drama today. We'll see all that on Monday." Sizakele says. Okay I didn't think she'd actually report me.

"What if I lose my job." I feel my chest closing up again. Why do I have to be such a loud mouth. I love my job and I don't want to lose it.

"Relax. You won't." Sebastian assures me. But I'm not convinced. I need divine intervention. I need God himself to enter that woman's heart and make her realise she started this.

"God. I know I don't pray as much as I should and I don't go to church as much but please don't make me lose my job. I promise I'll speak less and be invisible. Although I know you like it when I shine bright like a star but just this once I'm willing to be in the shadows. Please and Amen." I hear these two erupt in laughter together with the driver. Am I a joke to them? "It's not funny."

"You have absolutely no idea how funny it is. You are not going to lose your job. Mapaseka is just dramatic everyone knows that. If she goes to HR trust me they already know her theatrics. And if she goes to Dave well you seem to have him in your pocket so you're good." Sizakele says. I'm still not convinced. I think I have to pray every thirty minutes till Monday.

"What did you say to her anyways?" Sebastian asks looking at me through the rearview mirror.

"She asked me if I slept with Dave to get the job and I told her she should relax Dave's bed is hers alone." Sebastian turns on his seat and faces the back with his mouth wide open.

"No you did not." I shrug my shoulders and he bursts out laughing.

"You are my new favourite person. Sorry Sebastian you've been dethroned." Sizakele says. Sebastian mock bows and we laugh.

"For that I'll gladly give up the crown. I cannot believe you said that to her." I'd like to pat myself on the shoulder but the fear of what will happen if Mapaseka does report me cripples me. I just pray God hears my prayer.

When we get to the house we find a few of the workers busy with the landscaping. I have to give it to these two crazy as they might be they know what they are doing. This house will look amazing when it's done. Sebastian heads off to find the contractor and Sizakele and I go up the stairs to check on the bedrooms. I follow her to the main bedroom. Its almost done. Right now they are installing the free standing bathtub and the toilet. Everything else is done. Only the downstairs and the outside is left. Its amazing honestly.

One of the workers follows us into the bedroom.

"Sisters." He says and elbows Sizakele then moves to me. "Ni early. (You're early.)" He says looking at her. He has a crush on her. I've seen him steal glances at her when we are busy working. He is cute though.

"Besfuna kuphuma eoffice. (We wanted to get out of the office.)" Sizakele tells him. "So did you bring the thing we agreed on?" She asks. He smiles and goes to the walk in closet. We follow him in and he takes out a cooler box from one of the cupboards.

"As requested." He says with a proud smile on his face. Sizakele opens the cooler box and there is alcohol. I hope they are not about to make me drink on the job.

"Perfect." Sizakele says taking out some money from her wallet. She hands it to him. "What about the meat?"

"It will be delivered. I figured you'd get here late and it would be cold by then plus there's no microwave here. So they will bring it."

"Okay. Thank you brother." She really is family zoning him. Poor guy. They shake hands and he leaves.

She takes out a bottle of Savannah and hands it to me. Reluctantly I take it.

"Why are we drinking on the job?"

"Consider it a welcome aboard gift. All you have to do is empty your travel mug and throw that baby in there. No one will suspect a thing." They've clearly thought about this. I do as instructed and hope to God we dont get caught. Maybe Dave was right these two really are troublemakers. But I love them. Here's to surviving my first week. On to the next.

me or not but I refuse to stress about that today. I stressed enough yesterday and Friday today I am going to enjoy myself and leave tomorrow's things to tomorrow.

Item number 1 on my to do list is a massage. Yep I need it after last night. On Friday as soon as the clock hit 3pm I sent a text to Sne with a location pin and told her to show up. She did and we drank like no one's business. We left the clients house at around 8pm. We went back to our apartment changed and then drove Sizakele and Sebastian all the way to Lonehill so they can change at their apartment. Then we drove to Bryanston to a club and partied like no one's business. It was the first time in a long time I'd gone to a club just for fun and not for scouting and it felt good. Although we did end up having our bill paid by one big bellied guy who was sitting with a bunch of other big bellied guys and a few girls. If you ask me they are politicians and the one who paid the bill is a minister of something. So technically we paid our own bill because we pay tax and we all know those guys live off of our taxes. If it's not tenders.

Yesterday we met up for lunch at Sandton mall did a bit of shopping and then went clubbing later. It was actually fun. Except I'm tired. Today however it will be just me and Sne. I'm glad she gets along easily with Sebastian and Sizakele but today is about me and her. I booked us into a nice spa for some massages manicures and pedicures sponsored by Nkazimulo's watch.

"Wake up Snethemba if we don't leave in 30 minutes we will be late for our appointment." She groans under the covers. I try to pull them back but she holds them tight. "You do know I'm stronger than you right." I warn her before pulling back the covers. She holds on and we get into a mini scuffle. I slip on her rug and fall on the floor. She follows still holding on to the covers and we end up laughing on the floor.

"You're an idiot." She says standing up and holding out her hand for me to stand up too. "I know. And you love me anyway. Go take a shower I'm going to make breakfast."

I leave her in the room making the bed and go to the kitchen. I make a quick omelette with mushrooms cheese and tomato and we are good to go. By the time she comes out of the shower her plate is already waiting for her. She takes her plate and we sit in front of the TV.

"When is Hlumile's matrix dance. I have a gift for her." She asks.

"What gift?" I want a gift too.

"It's a surprise. So when is it?" I wonder what surprise she is talking about. I would probe but she has mastered keeping things to herself. Especially 'surprises'. She'll tell you she has a surprise for you then go on to keep quiet knowing your mind is going around in circles.

"It will be a week after she finishes her exam. She said they postponed it because they want to let loose properly without stressing about exams." I tell her.

"Makes sense. And that will give me plenty of time to prepare my gift." She announces and stands up with her plate. I'm not going to let her get under my skin about this. I hate surprises I want to know what a person is planning so I can tell them what I like or don't like. Surprises in my book are just asking for trouble. But I'll let her have this one. And I'm sure Hlumile will like it.

Thirty minutes later we get into her car. I put in the spa's address and we drive off singing along to Rihanna. She's another one of our favourite musicians. We get to the spa and we are welcomed with mimosas and warm hand towels. They lead us to a dressing room where we change into robes. Soft fluffy robes that feel like they were weaved from a rabbit's skin. We start with the massage. We get into the massage room and lay on the bed with our faces stuck inside the tiny hole of the bed allowing full relaxation. Soft life who dis? Your girl is living life. If only Nkazimulo knew where his money is being spent. I hope to God I never run into him again. Me and my big mouth might just end up telling him how amazing it was spending his money. Although there is still a ping of guilt for what I did. I can't help feeling like the watch was sentimental to him. Maybe one day when I become a billionaire I will buy him a new one.

I hear soft snoring coming from Sne's bed the girl is really tired. The room has an amazing scent of vanilla and lavender. There are candles with different scents on a table in front of us making the room calm and relaxing. I need to take pictures before I get out of here. There is something that looks like a divider that's made out of bamboo separating our room from the next one. The ladies put hot stones on our backs and continue their massage.

I hear voices in the other room and the one voice sounds familiar. I just can't put my finger on it. And their conversation is interesting. Of course my big ears stretch out to listen to them.

"I'm still not sure about this plan. What if it backfires on you?" The other one I don't

recognize asks her friend.

"It won't. You need to relax. It's not like he is going to just accept things as they are but he will want proof. And that's where you come in." The other voice says. I know that voice from somewhere. I just can't figure out where.

"I know you've gone over this a hundred times. I know my part and you know I'll play it well. I just hope this doesn't come back to bite us." The other one continues.

"Relax. Today is a good day and if our plan goes according to plan we will be home free by the end of month. And my son will be the future heir to the Luxe Home Goods empire." The other one adds so confidently before they click their glasses and giggle like school girls.

I'm not sure if this is a coincidence or the universe sending me a message but hearing the Luxe name makes me wonder who those women are. I hope I see them in the passage when we leave. But how will I know its them? Ita not like I can stand in the passage and wait for them

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that would just be creepy and weird. On second thought I need to get my nose out of people's business. Whatever they are planning I just hope it doesn't ruin the company.

After our massages we head to the salon to get our nails done. I'm not a big fan of long nails so I opt for short gel coffin shaped nails in blush pink. Sne on the other hand if she could have Cardi B's nails she would. But she's careful of those because of her chosen career. No person would want to be represented by someone wearing cardi B nails. Not that there is anything wrong with them. She decides on the same clour and shape of nails I chose except hers are longer. I want to tell her about the conversation I heard but this is not the time I dont want to be thrown out of here for eavesdropping.

"Babe. I need a favour." She starts. I bet you the favour involves a man.

"Yeah." I reply.

"I need you to cover for me next weekend. Kumkani is taking me on a weekend away." I told you a man is involved in this little favour. Kumkani might be Nkazimulo's friend but I can't deny how good he's been to Sne. I've seen her giggle and blush while on the phone with him. I've seen the flowers and chocolates he sends. On the outside he looks like he is a good guy. For his sake I hope he is because if he hurts my friend I will rearrange his face

then feed him to the Jukskei river.

"Where are you going?"

"Durban. I dont want Scelo to know." She's almost begging as if I'd let her brother find out she will be esfubeni sendoda (on a man's chest) the whole weekend. But she deserves to breathe too so Scelo will just have to deal.

"Relax I got you. I'll cover for you. Just dont get pregnant." We burst out laughing and sip on our champagne. At some point Scelo needs to understand that his sister is a grown woman. It wont be next weekend though. We will need to come up with a proper believable story.

Monday comes like a thief in the night. I'm not ready for it but I still need to go to work.

Usually I wake up in the morning chirpy and ready to tackle the day but today the possibility of me being called in for what happened between Mapaseka and I is a little scary. But I'm a big and big girls carry their loud mouths that get them in trouble to work so they can face the consequences of their actions.

Sne drops me off in front of the building. It feels like my first day all over again. Except this time I am not sure what awaits me. I take a deep breath and walk through the glass doors. I greet the receptionist and head up to my desk. I take a seat at my desk and await my fate. Mapaseka walks in at ten to eight. She gives me a side eye and walks to her desk. Sizakele and Sebastian walk in at eight on the dot. Behind them are Dave and Catherine. The two stand in the middle of the office and silence fills the room. Well except for my galloping heart. I hope no one else can hear it.

"Good morning ladies and gentlemen." Dave begins. He gets weak hi's back. Either people are hungover or maybe they are surprised at this early invading of their space. Most of us haven't even had coffee. "Last week I was away on a business trip." Business trip? Didnt someone say he had some family issues? Gossiping is dangerous. "I was in Durban and in talks with a potential client. She is a woman who has made great strides in the banking industry. Her name is Lakhiwe Biyela. I'm sure most of you have heard of her." We all nod our heads in agreement.

Who doesn't know Lakhiwe Biyela. Her grandparents started Biyela holdings almost fifty years ago from their two bedroom house in Soweto. When we talk of generational wealth we are talking about the Biyela's. Her father took over the company years back and he ran it with her mother by his side. And now there are rumours that Theo Biyela her big brother is being groomed to take over. Her husband went from being a hot shot lawyer to being the premier of Gauteng. Of course most people credit Lakhiwe for his rise to the top so quickly but she doesn't. She gives credit to him. Their political party the South African Youth Leaders Movement has been gaining traction all over the country. What he did in Gauteng is something that hadn't been done before. He made sure the provincial government was filled with youth under the age of 40. Groundbreaking if you ask me.

"Lakhiwe Biyela is in the process of opening the country's first black woman owned bank. They are planning on opening branches in Durban Joburg Cape Town and Polokwane. Our job is to design those branches and make them welcoming and ready for the public. But the big announcement is that we will be designing their headquarters as well. Catherine and I have decided to make this a competition. There are 20 of you here you will be divided into groups of four. So there will be five groups. You have two weeks to deliberate and create a design that will be the final one which will be presented to Lakhiwe for the headquarters." My phone beeps and it's a message from Sebastian.

"I swear if you go to any other group I will hate you for all eternity." The message reads. I guess I have a group already.

"Any questions?" Dave asks. Mapaseka is the first one to lift up her hand.

"Uhm boss does that mean the first years will be competing with the second and third years?"

"No. You will be mixed up." Catherine tells her. "The team that wins this challenge will also be getting the ten percent commission from this project. And we all know the budget is huge. So good luck everyone." They follow each other back out and I quickly rush over to Sebastian and Sizakele. I am relieved I wasn't called in to be disciplined but now I am nervous about this project.

"So who will be our fourth wheel?" Sizakele asks. We look around and I see Zothile looking like a lost puppy. All the other teams have been formed.

"Her." I point her out and Sebastian calls her over. She rushes to us with excitement all over

her.

"Hey guys. Thank you for choosing me." She says almost jumping off the floor.

"Okay do we strategize now or after coffee?" I ask ready to tackle this challenge. Yes I'm nervous but it would be nice to beat Mapaseka and her team.

"Not yet." Sebastian says. "We need to meet after work and plan properly how we are going to do this. The walls around here have ears. So we need to be careful what we discuss before our ideas get stolen. Let's get coffee first."

We follow each other to the coffee station. One week in and we have a huge project to do with a huge budget which means a huge commission. Soft life really is coming for me.

13

"This is perfect guys. I cant believe we are almost done with this project." Zothile says looking at the mock up of our design. She's way too excited for this.

"Right. So we can go home and relax for the weekend. We will see this on Monday. Mine I am tired as fuck." Sebastian says and throws himself on the chair. We've been working in the small boardroom since we started this project. And when we leave in the evening we take the keys with us. You'd think we are planning some world takeover.

"Guys let's go. I need sleep." Sizakele says packing up her things. I follow her lead and pack my things. This weekend will be boring. Sne is going on a weekend away with Kumkani. Their relationship seems to be really taking off. To think they met the same night she broke up with Bongani. If 'to get over one man you must get under another one' was a person it would be Sne. But as long as she's happy I will always cheer her on.

By the time I get to the apartment the girl is packed and ready to go. Her luggage is already waiting by the door. She comes rushing out from her bedroom.

"Oh hey you're here already." She says looking around the room.

"What are you looking for?"

"My charger." She answers in a panic. That time the charger is actually hanging off her one hand. I'm tempted to let her run around the house but I let Jesus lead me this time. I pull the charger from her hand.

"You mean this one?" I dangle it in front of her. Her mouth opens in shock before she bursts out

laughing.

"Why are you acting like this will be your first time with a man?" She grabs the charger and throws it into her handbag.

"I'm nervous. This is our first weekend away. What if something goes bad?" You'd swear she is a virgin.

"Sne you'll be fine. Besides you'll still be having the sameness you've been having except this time it will be in a Bush somewhere. But maybe you're right while you two are busy chowing each other the mosquitoes will also be chowing on you."

"You're not funny." Her phone rings and she picks it up. Ten seconds later she hangs up. I guess Kumkani is here.

"Do I look okay?" She asks turning around for me to look at her outfit. She looks good dramatically good for a trip to the bushes. For me trackpants with sneakers and a tshirt would have been fine. But not for Sne she's wearing a tight army green pencil skirt with a jacket that's the same color with so many zips you'd think she's hiding something. Her heels are also army green with straps going up her leg. Gold hoop earrings dangle down her ears and and a huge beige sunhat sits on top of her curly weave.

"You look amazing my friend. Dramatic but amazing." She giggles and spins around.

"Good. I'm about to blow him away." Just then we hear a knock on the door. "I'm going to the bedroom so I can make my grand entrance." She whispers before running off to the bedroom. Sne and her theatrics. And people think I'm the crazy one. I open the door and find Kumkani looking dapper. I guess the dramatics also extend to him.

"Milani unjani? (How are you?)" He greets with a smirk on his face. It's the first time I'm seeing him again after that saga with Nkazimulo.

"Kumkani. Please come in." He walks in and looks around. His eyes rest on the huge luggage standing by the door before turning back to me with a frown. "Don't look at me like that. You're the one dating her." He laughs and shakes his head.

"Sne you have a guest." I shout. The clicking sound of her heels draw us to her direction. We both stare down the passage as she walks to us. I turn my gaze to Kumkani and he looks like he is in a trance. His lips are open and his eyes are bulging out.

"Hi baby." Sne says and perks his cheek. He holds her at arms length before planting a deep kiss on her lips. For a moment they seem to have forgotten I am here too so I clear my throat before this becomes R rated. They giggle like schoolgirls and pull apart.

"We should get going. We have a long trip ahead of us." Kumkani tells her.

"Before you go." I take my phone out and take a picture of Kumkani. They both look at me like I'm crazy. "Don't look at me like that. If anything happens to you I need to have a picture of the last person you were with. Speaking of which I also need to take a picture of your number plate. Let's go lovebirds." I hear them giggle behind me as I open the door. Kumkani might be one of the good guys but even the worst serial killers in the world were once labelled good guys.

While Kumkani packs the bags in the boot I take a picture of his number plate.

"And you call me dramatic." Sne says rolling her eyes.

"I'm just being careful. One of us has to be cautious. Anyways this is just for my peace of mind. I know you'll be taken care off."

"In every way." She whispers and we laugh. "Speaking of which." She opens her bag and takes out her car keys and hands them to me. "You can use the car if you need to go anywhere. Scelo's petrol card is in the cubbyhole. Make sure you use it." She insists.

"Are you planning on bankrupting your poor brother?"

"The perks of having a big brother. I'll send you Sunday. Or Monday." I give her hug before she gets in the car. I wave to them as they drive away.

I head back up to our apartment. I'm too tired to do anything right now so I'll just soak in the bath with a glass of wine and some bath salts. I take out some frozen pizza from the fridge. This will have to do for tonight. While that defrosts I go to the bedroom and take off my work clothes. I go to the bathroom and fill the tub up with warm water. I throw in some bubbles and some bath salts. I go back to the kitchen and throw the pizza in the oven. It's icy but the heat will take care of that.

While that heats up I take out my special occasion silk pyjamas. You can't get out of a bubble bath and put on an ANC tshirt. I set everything out on the bed including my lotion and perfume. Yes I spray perfume before I sleep. I'm fancy like that. I go back to check on the pizza and it's almost ready

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Just as I'm about to sink into my bliss and float away my phone rings. I pick it up without even looking at it.

"This better be important." I'm annoyed right now. All I want to do is relax.

"Bitch please when I call it's always important." Sebastian's voice seeps in from the other end of the line. Another drama queen.

"My bad. What's up?"

"I sent you some changes that Sizakele wants to do to the project. Its not much but I think it will brighten up the whole thing." He tells me. Its after hours and moguy is already working over time.

"Okay. I will look at them and tell you. How long will we keep Zo in the dark?" Sebastian laughs. This whole fake project and real project was his idea. We've been working on the real project after hours while the fake project is being worked on at work. The fake vs real started a few days ago after Sebastian saw Zothile taking pictures of the project and then handing the phone to Jayden. That wouldnt be too much of an issue except Jayden is in Mapaseka's team. Since then Sebastian insisted we pretend like we didn't see anything and then start a whole different project on the side which is the one we will be presenting.

"Of course. She might be innocent in all this but I know Mapaseka will go to any lengths to get one up on the competition even if it means stealing ideas. Anyways get back to me on those changes. Maybe we can meet tomorrow or Sunday and throw around some ideas."

"Okay. You'll let me know where and when."

"No problem. Sharp." He hangs up and I refocus my attention back on my bath. The phone rings again.

"What did you forget?" I ask and sip on my wine.

"Nothing." Someone answers and I know that voice does not belong to Sebastian. I look at the number on the screen and sure enough it's not him. I dont know the number but the voice sounds familiar.

"I'm sorry who is this?" He laughs.

"Your boss." He answers confidently.

"Which one?" He laughs again. I should be doing Trevor Noah's job seeing as I can make icy Dave laugh for no reason.

"How many bosses do you have?"

"Too many to count. What can I do for you?" He chuckles and clicks something that sounds like a pen.

"You're crazy. Your project is coming along nicely."

"Our project is locked away in the boardroom. How do you know it's 'coming along nicely'?"

"I'm looking at it." I want to ask how he got in the boardroom but I dont think I want to be reminded that he is the boss.

"Since you're snooping tell me where we can improve." He is silent for a while I almost think he has hung up but his breathing says otherwise.

"Let's see. The offices need a bit more privacy. Its good that you put them in close proximity to the floor but some things just need to be hidden and the offices are one of those things unless it's an office the public will be using regularly like the forex market offices. The rest of them can be at the back." He says.

"Okay. We will implement those changes. Why are you still at work anyway?"

"Just snooping around." He answers smugly. "You know I think Scelo was right hiring you is good for the company." There is only one Scelo that I know.

"I'm sorry which Scelo are you talking about?"

"Scelo Cebekhulu. He asked me to hire you. Well I owed him a favour."

"So I was hired just to repay a favour. Nice." I hang up the phone while he is saying something I cant hear.

I get out of the bath when the water gets cold. I release the water while I dry myself. As soon as the water is all gone I clean the tub then head to my room. I still cant get over what Dave said. I love Scelo and I know he would do anything for me just as much as he can do anything for Sne but a heads up would have been nice.

The stubborn part of my brain is shouting at the top of its voice telling me to confront him. Its almost eight in the evening Scelo's place is a ten minutes drive away. I can go there and be back before nine. Yep. I'll do that. I swap my pyjamas for a summer dress. I grab my phone and the car keys and head out. I get to Scelo's house and press the buzzer at gate. I tell him who I am and the gate slides open. By the time I park in front of the house he is already standing on the front door in his pyjama pants and a white tshirt. He is barefoot with his hands in his pockets. I get off the car and walk towards him.

"Is everything okay?" Oh sweet he is worried about me. But that's not why I'm here.

"I have a couple of questions to ask you?"

"Come on in." He walks back into the house and I follow him. This house is beautiful. It's a modern stylish home with some amazing finishes. Marble tiles cover the floor and high ceilings elevate it. There is a huge chandelier hanging in the entryway. The whole front door is made of glass that goes all the way up to the top allowing anyone outside to see the chandelier.

I follow him into the nude painted lounge with a huge cream coloured couch and a couple of chairs facing the roaring fireplace. A black and white rug sits under the glass coffee table.

"So what's up?" He sits back on the couch and sips on a glass of whiskey. There is a game of soccer playing on the huge flat screen TV mounted on the wall above the fireplace. A plate of wings and chips sit on top of the coffee table. I take a seat on the chair and look at him. Four years later and I can safely say I'm not as afraid of him as I used to be.

"Did you ask Dave to hire me?"

"Yes!" I don't know what I was expecting but this is not it. Or maybe the part of me that was angry before is now curled up in the corner realizing this was just stupid. Why did I even come here to begin with.

"Why?" He takes his eyes off the game and looks at me.

"You were looking for a job so I got you one."

"By asking for favours?"

"More like by calling in favours I'm owed. Besides what's the point of having connections if you can't use them." Before I can reply the intercom buzzes. He curses under his breath and stands up. Two minutes later he walks back into the lounge with another man behind him. I stand up getting ready to leave and I come face to face with their father.

"Milani?" He asks almost surprised to see me.

"Sawubona baba. Ninjani? (How are you?)" I put on a small smile hoping he doesn't ask me about Sne. He gives me a hug before sitting down.

"Syaphila ntombi. Kuhambanjani eskoleni? (We are good. How is school?)"

"Kuhamba kahle. Mina sengcedile. Ngmele ama results. (Its going good. I'm done. I'm just waiting for my results.)"

"Kuhleke. Shothi uzobe ukhona ngommemulo kaSne. (Good. It means you'll be available for Sne's coming of age ceremony.) Uphi yena vele? (Where is she anyway.)"

"Uhm she's at a study session. Her and some classmates are preparing for a mock trial thats coming up. I should get going. Ngjabulile ukukbona Baba. (I'm happy I saw you.)" I shake his hand and walk to the door. He shouts telling me to start practicing.

"I can't wait for this one." Scelo says behind me. Chances are he already knew about this and he chose not to say anything. Sne is screwed. Both literally and figuratively. I need to warn her before she comes back. Just when I thought this weekend would be a peaceful one. Jesus take the wheel.

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Sne is still not back. Last night she said they are coming back today but I'm here still waiting. I didnt have the heart to tell her about ummemulo and I know she doesn't know otherwise she would have told me. Or maybe I'm just stressing myself for no reason. I mean Sne is a grown woman who can decide for herself what she wants so why am I the one going crazy with stress? I need to lighten up.

I open the fridge and take out a bottle of wine and pour myself a glass. I'm bored out of my head and this stressing is not helping me in anyway. I sit down on the couch and turn the TV on. There's nothing interesting playing except repeats of old movies. DSTV is a scam I tell you. It's a little past lunchtime and I have enough time to get myself a late lunch. Yep that should work. A solo date is all I need.

I switch the TV off and hurry to my room. I rummage for something to wear. I land on a short black cut out dress that I brought in small street. It's perfect. The long sleeves will help if it gets chilly and the suede material is a bit warm so I'll be good. I put it on and pair it with red heels. The dress is figure hugging and goes just above the knee. I put on some make up and spray some perfume. I grab my small handbag and prepare to leave. My weave doesn't need much just a couple of strokes with the brush and it's good to go.

I head out and call a cab when I get to the lounge. I can't use the car because I might just get drunk and we don't do drunk driving this side. Before I can place the call someone knocks on the door. I open and find Scelo looking like he just got baptized. He is wearing a black suit with pinstripes and a white shirt. He looks at my outfit from head to toe without saying anything.

"You like?" I ask twirling around.

"You look nice. Where are you off to?" His eyes keep roaming between my face and my cleavage thanks to my wonder bra.

"A date." He walks past me and gets in the apartment.

"With who?" He doesn't seem happy or impressed. If I didn't know better I'd say he is jealous.

"With me. I'm going on a solo date." His face relaxes and I wonder what that was about.

"Cool. Let's go then. I'm also hungry."

"You do know what a solo date is right?" He laughs and walks to the door.

"I know. But it will be a double solo date. It should work. Let's go." On the one hand I'm wondering if this man is still okay upstairs or something is wrong with him. How does a solo date become a double solo date? On the other hand if he will be paying then I can get myself some seafood.

We walk down to the parking lot and he opens the car door for me. Such a gentleman. He gets on the other side and we drive towards the gate. While he is busy punching in the code for us to get out I see Kumkani's car pull up on the other side. The gate opens and he drives out. He stops to greet the security and Kumkani's car pulls up right next to the car.

"Ouch ouch." I scream holding on to my eye. He quickly turns to me missing Kumkani as he

rolls down the window to enter the code to get in.

"What's wrong?" Scelo asks sounding so concerned.

"My eye. Something is in my eye." He leans closer to me till I can feel his hot breath fanning my face. He brings his hand up to open my eye wide before blowing in it.

"I dont see anything." He says just as another car honks its horn behind us.

"I'm sure it's gone now. It's fine. Thank you." He drives out and I let go of my eye and let out a sigh of relief. I can't even say let's go back because chances are those two are still all over each other.

"So where are we going?"

"What do you feel like?"

"Seafood." He nods his head.

"Cool. I know a place." *I hope it's not that expensive.* I think to myself. I dont want to find myself bankrupting the man. We drive to the restaurant with soft music playing. His car smells like him manly and musky. We pull up to a restaurant in Bedfordview. He parks the car and we get out. We walk in and we are led to our table. The place is intimate with chilled vibe to it. But the way its so full I just have one question.

"Did you book a table?" He looks up at me with a smirk on his face.

"No." He says and goes back to looking at the menu.

"Really? So how is the restaurant full and you just walk in and get seated? Do you have shares?" He laughs as a waiter places a glass of neat whiskey in front of him and a glass of wine in front of me. He takes a sip as the waiter walks away.

"I know people."

"Let me guess. They owed you a favour." He smiles again and takes off his jacket. He throws it over his arm rest and rolls up his sleeves.

"I'm a nice guy. Anyways tell me why you were at my place on Friday. We didn't get time to talk so now you can tell me." He leans on the table and stares at me. His eyes digging deep into my soul. I also don't know why I went to his place on Friday. Its not like he has never done anything for me before this but a heads up would have been nice. I know this is South Africa and everything happens with connections but a heads up is also nice.

"Thank you for getting me the job." I tell him. He smiles.

"That's not why you came to my house Milani. Tell me what it is that you really wanted to say. This is your chance. Tell me." He probes. I wish he'd let it go.

"I said all I wanted to say." He chuckles and sits back on the chair.

"Okay. I'll pretend I believe you. How is the new job going anyway?"

"Good. I'm actually enjoying it. Some catfights here and there but nothing I can't handle." He laughs and shakes his head.

"A few days in and you're already having issues. Something is wrong with you." He says chuckling.

"You know trouble loves me. I don't call it it just likes me." He shakes his head again I swear if he keeps doing that his head will fall to the floor soon. I'm pretty sure with every head shake he loosens certain screws upstairs.

Our waiter takes our orders and walks away again.

"Can I ask you something?" He looks at me.

"Sure."

"What would you do if you heard someone plotting against the company you work for. The only problem is that you don't know who the person is because all you heard was the speaking and you didn't see them?" He leans on the table again.

"What exactly did the person say?" He questions.

"Something about a son being the next heir of the company. But from the sounds of it it sounded like even the son was being plotted or something would be done to make the son an heir. I don't know. Maybe I'm overreacting." I sigh and place my hands on the table. I've been silently obsessing over this for a week now. What if I say something and it turns out to be wrong but if I don't say something and it turns out to be right I will hate myself for the rest of my life.

I feel Scelo's large hand envelope my hands. His warmth sending tingles over my bare skin.

"You're not overreacting. This could be a potential threat to the company. But if you don't know who is making those plans then there is nothing you can do. Let it go." He pulls his hand away and a gust of cold air washes over my now naked hands. I pull my hand off the table and place it between my thighs hoping to recreate the warmth but it's just hopeless. Our food arrives and we dig in.

"So how are your living arrangements going?" He asks.

"You do know Sne and I have lived together since first year right? We are good." He chuckles and wipes away some food from the side of his mouth.

"I know that. But living at res and living in an apartment is not the same."

"Actually it is. Honestly though we are good." He nods his head and takes a piece of steak into his mouth.

Scelo and I don't talk as much Sne and I do. Talking to him feels different. Even the smallest of conversations feels deeper than normal. Sne and I speak as equals speaking to Scelo is like speaking to my big brother something I've never had before.

After our late lunch he drives me back to our apartment. A call comes in a few minutes away from the apartment but he doesn't pick up. He just looks at the number and cuts the call. The person calls again and he ignores it again.

"You do know you can answer that. Is it your girlfriend?" I don't know why that word leaves a bitter taste in my mouth but it does. He laughs.

"What if it is?" He asks and turns to look at me. All I can do is shake my head and focus on the road. He drives into the apartment building and drops me off in the parking lot saying he has to hurry somewhere.

When I get up to the apartment I find the two lovebirds making out on the couch.

"Okay you two that's enough for one weekend." I say clapping my hands and sitting on the couch across from them. "How was your weekend?"

"Great. We had so much fun." Sne gushes and looks at Kumkani adoringly. The two of them look like lovesick teenagers. But I'm about to burst that bubble.

"I'm glad you had fun. Your father is throwing you a coming of age ceremony." The gushing disappears so fast it's like it was never there to begin with.

"What do you mean?" She asks fear creeping in. I tell them everything that happened and she gags. "Oh my god." She takes the glass of wine and gulps down the amber liquid.

"Babe calm down everything will be okay." Kumkani tries to reassure her. But it's not working.

"It won't be okay. My dad is going to skin me alive." She says panicking. Its moments like these when I thank my deadbeat father for disappearing.

"Relax Sne. Kumkani is right. We will figure something out." I try to reassure her.

"Can we replace a hymen?" She asks and her question sends whatever words I thought I was going to say back down my throat. Yep she is screwed alright.

15

"Babe stressing about this will not make it go away." I should have just kept my mouth shut and let her father tell her this. But then again she would have been mad at me for knowing and not telling her. But now she's been stressing about this for the past couple of days now. "I don't know why you're stressing? Unless the virginity breaker was shit then you can stress I mean who wants a lukewarm mdavazo (sex.)" Sebastian tells her. We decided to meet up at our apartment after work to do our project.

"Lukewarm does not even begin to cover it." Sne says sipping her now cold tea. I don't know what it is about tea that relieves her stress levels. You'd think she was raised by her grandmother the way she drinks tea when she is stressed.

"So vele vele it was that bad?" Sizakele asks her. The only thing I can do is burst out laughing because I know the story and it's hilarious.

"Bad? Honestly though I blame all these novels I keep reading. You read about these virgins getting mind blowing orgasms the first time and then you come back to reality expecting the same. And then dololo a person lasts a minute or two and they expect you to be mind blown because it's your first time." The three of us have been laughing since she started talking. The frustration on her face coupled with stress is hilarious.

"Here's my advice speak to your mum. She's the only one who can get through to you father. Other than that you'll have no choice but to do this." She lays back on the couch and sighs.

"Maybe you have a point. I'll call her tomorrow when I know she's alone cause that husband of hers will drive me nuts."

"Ubabakho njalo loyo. (That's your father.)" Sebastian reminds her. All she does is roll her eyes.

"I know. But this thing should have happened two years ago. And until then I was a good girl intombi yomzulu. Technically speaking this is his fault. He should have kept his promise of doing this when I turned 21. Now it's too late and it's his fault. He should have known

better.” Moments like these make me feel sorry for whoever will stand in a courtroom against her. How is she blaming her father for losing her virginity?

Our project is due in a week and I must say it's been going well. Zothile is still none the wiser about what's going on and I'm still trying to figure out who those women were. Now that I know Zothile is working with Mapaseka it makes me wonder if they are not the one's planning something. But neither of them have kids and the other woman said something about a son who is going to be the sole heir to the Luxe empire. My guess is Dave is the target. He is his father's only son. He has two sisters who went a completely different direction to him. One is a yoga instructor and the other one is an influencer. Rich people jobs. One sits around stretching on a mat the whole day and the other takes selfies and photos for a living. I wish I had their life.

The following day I wake up to find Sne starring at me. Yes she didn't sleep. Her stress levels are beginning to stress me out.

“Snethemba Margaret Cebekhulu do you know what time it is?” I ask her rubbing my eyes trying to chase sleep away.

“Time to wake up. I'm going to call my mum and I need help. I need you to tell my mum that I am a Christian who no longer believes in anything traditional so ummemulo is out of the question.” Then moments like these make me question her ability to lie. She thinks her mother will actually believe that.

“Give me the phone.” She hands me her phone with her mum's number already dialled. The phone rings a couple of times and her mum answers.

“Hello.” Sne signals for me to put the phone on loudspeaker.

“Hi ma its Milani. Unjani? (How are you?)”

“Milani so early in the morning what's going on? Is Sne okay?” She asks in a panic.

“Sne is fine ma. I wanted to ask about ummemulo. I saw ubaba a few days ago and he said you're having one for her.”

“Oh you had me worried for a second. Yeah we haven't set a date yet we are hoping to do it when she's not swarmed with school work.” Her mum says.

“Okay so I have a question I've been thinking do you have to be a virgin to have ummemulo?” She laughs.

“I knew there was something more to this call. I take it my daughter is no longer pure?” She asks. I’ve never understood the pure and impure theory. And why it only applies to girls and not boys. I mean it’s not like the girls are having sex alone. There is always somebody there. And most of the time it’s a boy. But the boy is never labelled as impure. Patriarchy showing its teeth again.

“What if she isn’t? Would that have any effect on the ceremony?” I hear her sigh.

“Well it’s hard to say. I will speak to her father and hear what he says. Where is she anyway?”

“I’m here.” Sne answers. She takes the phone from me and walks out chatting like she wasn’t stressing a minute ago. I guess my work is done. I get off the bed and take a shower. I need to make a stop somewhere before I go to work.

When I get off the shower Sne and her mum are still on the phone laughing like nobody’s business. As close as they are they also fight just as much. I don’t know how many times I’ve had to step in and play mediator between them. They fight like cats and dogs but once all that is done they become thick as thieves. And if you ask them why they were fighting they don’t remember. Their bond is one I wish my mum and I would have. But we’ve crossed that bridge and burnt it.

I get dressed as quick as possible before knocking on Sne's door. I let her know I’m leaving before hurrying out. My uber is already at the gate waiting for me. I get in and we take the ten minute drive to Scelo’s house. I pay the uber and buzz the intercom. The gate slides open and I walk in. When I get to the door I fix myself up before knocking.

The door swings open. Instead of Scelo a short woman with curves like those Instagram models stands there in nothing but a shirt. A man’s shirt. She has lipstick mark’s on her cheeks and her hair is messy. I guess they were busy.

“Can I help you?” she asks with her eyes roaming my body from head to toe.

“Hi. Uhm is Scelo home?” she crosses her arms on her ample chest and stares at me.

“What do you want from him?”

“Its personal. Can you call him for me?” she chuckles and steps forward until she is standing inches away from me. She’s a few inches shorter than me but I can safely say if she could slap me now chances are I wouldn’t retaliate. See my mouth is faster than my

hands. Verbally I can defend myself. I will insult you to hell and back and send you to the hospital with my words alone. My hands on the other hand no pun intended wouldn't hurt a fly.

"It's a little past seven AM and you're at my boyfriend's place asking me to wake him up? Who the fuck do you think you are?" she asks poking my poor bony chest with her manicured fingers. Someone pulls her back like a sack of potatoes being pulled from a moving van.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Scelo asks staring at her with fumes of anger blowing out of his ears.

"It's too early for you whores to be showing up here. A little respect would be nice." She fires back at him. I see him clench his jaws and I know if she was a man she'd be picking herself up from the floor because he would have punched her by now.

"Do me a favour go upstairs pack your things and get the fuck out of my house." He says. She stands back shocked that she's being thrown out so early in the morning.

"You can't be serious?" she says.

"LEAVE!" Scelo screams at her face I'm sure she has spits of his saliva on her face. She turns and walks back into the house. Scelo turns to me his face a little softer than it was a moment ago. "I'm sorry about that. Come in." I stand still as he takes a step back into the house. He stops when he notices I'm not following him. "come in." he orders but I don't move.

"Uhm I can't. I have to go to work."

"Okay so why did you come here?"

"I actually wanted to take you out to breakfast as a thank you for the other day. I should have called first."

"Breakfast time hasn't passed yet. We can still do breakfast." He says just as his guest clicks her heels on the marble floors and walks past us. She clicks her tongue and continues on to the gate. Me and my stupid surprises she's missed out on her morning glory.

"Maybe next time. I should get to work."

"Let me drive you. I'll get my car keys." He says walking back into the house before I can say no. I turn to look at the gate where his guest is standing probably waiting for a cab.

She's beautiful her attitude sucks but she is beautiful. I don't know what possessed me to even think Scelo would ever look at me as anything else other than his sister's best friend. I guess this is how crushes die

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her attitude sucks but she is beautiful. I don't know what possessed me to even think Scelo would ever look at me as anything else other than his sister's best friend. I guess this is how crushes die once you realize someone is out of your league.

Scelo walks out the same time as his guests uber arrives.

"Let's go." I follow him to the car. He opens the door for me and I get in. He gets in on the other side and we drive out.

"I'm sorry about Neo she shouldn't have done what she did." He says.

"Its okay. I shouldn't have surprised you anyway."

"I like surprises." I turn to look at him and he has a smile on his face. Yeah this is not happening.

He drops me off at work and I walk into the building ready to forget this morning. I find Catherine standing at reception unimpressed. I'm guessing the receptionist not being at her desk had something to do with the red circles on her cheeks. And no they are not from blushing.

"Hey are you okay?"

"Nope. I need your help." I should not have asked if she needed help. I should have just went straight up to my desk.

"With what?"

"I need someone to watch the reception area until Nomsa shows up. I don't know where she is but she's usually the first person to come in."

"Okay. I'll let my team know."

"you're a star. I owe you." She rushes to the lift and just like that I'm left alone to man the reception till Nomsa shows up only God knows when that will be.

By lunchtime Nomsa is still nowhere to be found. I've texted Sebastian and Sizakele and

told them I won't be available not that it will affect anything because our real project starts after hours. I ordered food from the cafeteria and had it at reception.

I'm bored out of my mind. I don't know how Nomsa does this and still keep a smile on her face. A week would be too much for me. An hour before we knock off a gentleman walks in. Wearing a suit and walking like he is on a runway in Milan. I watch him with every step he takes and boy God was in a very good mood when he moulded him. The closer he gets the more I can make out his face. His chiselled face holds his strong jawline quite perfectly. His deep hazel almond eyes are a perfect contrast to his dark chocolate skin. His eyes are like pools of warmth that I wouldn't mind being lost in. His nose sits perfectly on his face and it's just the perfect shape on him. His hair is in an immaculate brush cut.

"Sawubona. (Hello.)" he says and his voice is enough to send tingles down my spine. Its deep and husky. And his lips Lord Jesus save me.

"Hi. Can I help you?" The way my voice just came out cool as ever in spite of all the jingling and butterflies dancing around my stomach.

"Uhm I heard that you guys can help me I have an apartment that I just moved into. Well I'm planning on moving to it I just need a decorator." He says with this cute smile on his face.

This man is handsome Lord.

"We are actually interior designers not decorators." His husky voice form into a laugh. A contagious beautiful laugh.

"Ngicolise Nkosazana. Angzazi lezinto. (Apologies I don't know these things.)"

"It's okay. I can recommend a designer to help you. How big is your house and what's your style? We have a few designers who specialize in different styles. Is it a modern rusty bachelor or family home?"

"My style is simple a couch a bed and maybe a TV. Two pots a plate a spoon a cup and I'm good to go." A simple man. How nice. "But my brother thinks that is a lazy style so now I'm here."

"So you let your brother bully you into decorating your home?"

"Not really. I lost while teaching him stick fighting so as the loser he said I had to decorate my place because he wont visit me if it's 'basic.'"

"Little brother?"

"More like a little terrorist. So can you help me?"

"I will find the perfect designer for you and I will make sure to set up a meeting."

“Aren't you a designer?”

“Technically speaking I am. But I just started less than a month ago so I can't take on clients yet.” He smiles and leans on the desk. The action making his biceps prominent under the suit. I should take up stick fighting if these are the results.

“What if a client requests you personally?” he asks.

“The client is always right.” I tell him and he straightens up and buries his hands in his pockets.

“Well then I guess you will be decorating sorry designing my place. I'll make sure to speak to your boss.” He turns to walk back out again and I remember I don't know his name.

“Sorry.” He turns around a smile still plastered on his face. “I didn't get your name.”

“Lulonke Lulonke Mbatha. Wena ke ngzothi Igama kubani? (What's your name?)”

“Milani Mbokazi.”

“Phangela kobhongo. Ngyajabula uk'kwazi MaMbokazi. Ube nemini enhle. (It's a pleasure to meet you. Have a nice day.)”

16

“Milani wake up.” Someone says snapping their fingers in my face. I look up and see these three looking at me like I have lost my mind somehow.

“What's going on?” I ask them trying so hard to get my mind back to the present.

“We should be asking you that.” Sne says. It's another one of those working late days. Its almost midnight and chances of Sizakele and Sebastian going home now are slim to nil.

“What are you thinking about?” Do I tell them? Even if I did tell them what will I tell them. It's not like anything magical happened today except for the moment when Lulonke walked into Luxe Home Goods and made me question my resolution on no love.

“Its nothing. Just worried about the presentation.” Sebastian rolls his eyes clearly doubting every word I just said.

“Try again and maybe this time we will believe you.” He says.

“Okay fine it's not the presentation per se but I will let you guys know once I'm sure what is happening. But all I know is that I might operative word being might have a client.” Sne starts clapping her hands in excitement while the other two stare at me with brows furrowed in confusion.

“A client? Babe first years don't get clients.” Sizakele reminds me.

"I know but some guy walked in while I was at reception just before knock off and he said he is looking for a designer to help with his apartment. And then he said he wants me to do it even after I told him I'm a first year and we are not allowed to have clients yet."

"He wants you." Sebastian says. Does he? But then again he is a Zulu man and those one's have a knack for complimenting a girl and making her feel like she's the only one in the world. Only to go back home and lay on his wife's chest. Yeah maybe I need to stop aiming high and daydreaming.

"Okay let's forget about that and focus on this project." I say completely kicking Lulonke out of my head. I need to focus on more important things.

"But what if he is in love with you?" Sne asks.

"He is not lets work please." The three of them give each other knowing looks as if they think I am lying. Their problem not mine. Me I swore men off a long time ago. They are too much trouble. And I'm glad that little crush I was developing on Scelo got nipped at the bud pretty quickly. I need to focus on what matters. And that is work.

The next morning Sne drops us off at work. And lucky for me Nomsa is back.

"Hey beautiful." She says as soon as we walk up to her. "I heard you held down the fort yesterday. Thank you." She hands me a cupcake.

"Thank you babe. I tried. Where were you anyways?"

"I had to rush my son to the hospital. He had a fever." She says sounding sad. I know how traumatizing it is to see you child get sick. I'm not a mother but I've seen plenty times thinking Cebo is dying in front of me.

"Is he feeling better?" Sizakele asks going through the mail.

"Much better thank you."

"As long as baby is okay we are thankful." Sebastian says. "Work awaits. We will see you later." Sebastian drags us to the lift and we stand there in silence. The lift opens and we get in. "She's lying through her teeth." He tells us.

"How do you know she's lying?" I ask. "She seemed genuinely sad to me."

"Please. She needs to be handed an oscar for that performance. Anyways her son lives with her mother somewhere in Mafikeng. The girl was caught by her blessers wife in her house. Apparently the wife locked her and the man in a bedroom and told them to have sex. Every time they refused she'd whip them. The wife even took a video of the whole thing." Sizakele and I stand there with our mouths wide open.

“How do you know wena cause you were here with us the whole day?” Sizakele asks the question that’s just as boggling to me.

“Oh baby I know things. I should write my own gossip blog. People tell me things unprovoked and they even send proof too. But in this case the wife’s brother is a friend of mine. He even sent me the video. I’m telling you the girl had to write a whole statement saying she’ll stay away from the man. If she doesn’t the video goes viral.” He adds. We stand around his desk listening to him. I’ll never understand women who choose to fight the side chick instead of fighting the man. He is the one who cheated. He is the one who decided to embarrass and shame his wife and his home.

As usual we gather in the small boardroom to do our ‘project’. Zothile comes in excitement written all over her face. I wonder what she is up to now.

“Guys I have a suggestion. So I’ve been thinking since this is a woman led bank I think we should include amenities for women. Like the bathrooms

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under the sinks we should incorporate drawers where we will put things like sanitary towels and tampons for when women get little incidents during their periods they can have a place to change. We can also include wipes as well. What do you think?” She’s so excited she’s close to jumping up and down. But her idea is great. It could actually work.

“I think its great. I like it.” I say. She claps her hands and looks at Sizakele and Sebastian for approval. Sizakele gives her a thumbs up.

“I like it.” She turns to Sebastian and he has his head buried in his tablet. Sizakele taps him on the shoulder and he takes off his headphones. I’m pretty sure he wasn’t even listening to anything he did all that to intimidate the poor girl. His dislike for her seems to grow everyday. I can’t blame him though why would anyone like someone who seems dead set on sabotaging their team.

“What?” Sebastian asks.

“Zothile has an idea.” Sizakele tells him. She tells him the idea and all he does is fake a smile.

“Nice. We need to go down to the shop and pick out the samples for the tiles the walls and sitting. The desks we already have samples of those.” He adds completely disregarding

Zothile and her idea.

"I thought we already did that." She says and we remember that is not something she was supposed to know.

"Oh no it's for another project. We still have clients to tend to remember." Sebastian tells her. "Milani let's go. I need your help." He gets off the chair and walks out and I have no choice but to follow him.

"Yho I cant wait for this project to be over so I don't have to look at that girl all day every day." He says when I catch up to him. He summons the lift and we wait.

"You could have at least pretended to like her idea though." I tell him.

"It's good." He admits. "And we will implement it to our idea. That's her only valid contribution to this project. Let's hope she doesn't steal her own idea and hand it to Maps on a silver platter." The lift pings announcing its arrival. The doors slide open to show Lulonke. God this man is a work of art. I stand frozen for a moment. Only when Sebastian drags me into the lift do I get my senses back.

"Nkosazana." His deep husky voice fills the entire lift and I feel Sebastian squeeze my arm.

"Unjani namuhla? (How are you today?)"

"Ngyaphila unjan wena. (I'm good how are you.)" I answer more calmly than I feel inside.

"Hhay umphefumulo nenyama kusahlangene ntombi. (I'm well too." The lift stops on the fifth floor and he walks out. He turns and holds the lift doors preventing them from closing.

"Bekukuhle ukukbona futhi ntokazi. (It was nice seeing you again.)" He let's go of the doors and they slowly close with him starring at me a smile plastered on his face. As soon as the doors close Sebastian screams jumping all over me.

"God whoever sleeps on that chest I hope they get a bout of diarrhea each time she thinks of laying on it." Sebastian says. "How do you know him anyway. He seems to know you?"

"He is the one I was telling you about yesterday." He fake faints and lands on the floor.

Sebastian is as dramatic as they come. We get to the first floor and he is still on the floor.

"Sebastian we have to go. People need the lift." Good thing the floor is clean. He stand up and we walk out the door.

"I hope he doesn't get Mapaseka as a designer. If anything you should beg Dave to hand the contract to you. In that way you two will make magic in more ways than one." He says as we walk down to the shop with our hands hooked together.

"I don't know man. I doubt I'll get the contract. He said he'd speak to my boss and ask for me personally but rules are rules. I could maybe help whoever gets the contract." It would be nice to have a contract especially since I haven't even spent six months in this job. But I also need to face the fact that first years don't get contracts. But maybe a miracle might happen.

When we get to the store we look around and find the samples that we need. We head back to the office and just before we go in we see Dave and Lulonke walking out chatting like old buddies. We slow our steps until Lulonke drives off. Dave sees us coming and he decides to wait for us.

"Lady and gentleman. Where are you coming from?" We hold up the samples.

"The shop. Who was that?" Sebastian asks as if he doesn't know.

"A new client. Speaking of clients he needs a designer well more like he asked for a specific designer." Dave says looking at me.

"I'm available." Sebastian teases. Dave laughs and Sebastian looks at me with his eyes popped out.

"Well I'm glad to hear that. Maybe you can assist Milani." Dave says. I swear for a moment my heart stopped.

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"Mr Mbatha asked for you specifically to help design his apartment."

"And you agreed? I thought first years don't get contracts yet." Dave shrugs his shoulders and walks ahead of us. We follow behind him.

"The client is always right." He says. "Besides it's not that big project. There won't be any major structural changes you'll need to make. Just making sure the place is livable." I guess I officially have my first client.

After work I find Scelo parked outside the office. I go up to his car and knock on the window. He opens the door and gets out of the car. He leans on the car with his hands buried in his pockets.

"What are you doing here?" I ask him. I know Sne has some school work to do so I know she won't be picking me up but why is Scelo here.

"I came to pick you up. Sne said she's busy so she asked me to do it." He says.

"Okay. But I can use an uber or a taxi. You didn't have to come all the way here. Sne told

me she'll be busy."

"Well I'm here now. Where are your friends? Aren't you doing a project after work?" His head tilts to the side with lines forming between his eyebrows.

"Not today. We are taking a break."

"Okay then. Let's go."

"okay." He opens the passenger door and I step in. He goes to the other side and gets in too.

"So where to?" He asks.

"Home."

"Boring. How about I take you out for the 'breakfast' you were going to take me out for. Except let's make it dinner."

"We really don't need to do that. Some other time maybe. I am tired."

"Okay we will order takeaways and you can tell me all about your job." I guess there is no arguing with that. This might just be adding more complications in my life with Scelo and Lulonke in the picture.

Aren't you full of yourself. None of those men are even in the picture. One is just being nice to his little sisters best friend and the other just wants his place decorated. Get a grip on yourself. My conscience admonishes me. She has a point though. None of these men are anything but civil to me. So maybe I need to stop jumping the gun.

17

"You need to give me inumber yalogogo omhambayo. (The number of the sangoma you use.)" Mapaseka says standing behind me. All I'm trying to do is get myself a cup of coffee before I start work but the girl is determined to ruin that. I turn around and face her. She claps her hands slowly. "I must give it to you uyaksebenzela shem. (She works for you.)" "What are you talking about?" she leans on the cupboard behind her and crosses her arms on her chest. Whatever she wants to say is clearly big is she needs to lean on anything before speaking.

"I'm talking about you first you got this job no interview no background check a mediocre portfolio and now you have a client as a first year. Njani sisi? (how sis?)" Her head leans slightly to the side.

“I still don’t understand what your problem is Maps. Me getting the job did not slash your salary in half you didn’t lose your benefits you didn’t lose any clients so what’s your problem? And as for the client I cant help it if people gravitate towards me because of my warm heart and positive aura. You should try it sometimes.” She laughs her head falling back.

“Wow I was almost inspired. But we both know you slept your way to the contract. The same way you slept your way to the job. You must really be good in bed for Dave to break so many protocols for you.”

“You know what they say when grace locates you. It breaks protocol. I need to work Maps. Some of us actually do work instead of making up conspiracy theories.” I walk out of the coffee station and leave her there fuming.

I don’t know what I did to this girl for her to even make up these stories. I wonder how far she’s spread her nonsense. On one hand I understand where she might be coming from but me being here takes absolutely nothing from her so why does she care? Just as I take a seat on my desk I get a message on my phone. I pick it up and find a message from Dave telling me to come to his office.

I go up to his office and knock. I hear his voice ordering me to come in. I open the door and find him and Catherine discussing something and looking through his laptop.

“Hi you asked me to come.” I say. Dave shows me to a seat. I sit down and wait while they finish whatever it is they were discussing.

“I think that will be all. I’ll update you as soon as I know anything.” Catherine says and walks out. I nervously wait for Dave to say something. He pulls out a document and hands it to me. It’s a contract. On top of it is a little box. I open the box and it’s a beautiful fountain pen with my initials on it.

“That’s your contract with Lulonke Mbatha as his designer. All you have to do is sign on the last page and initial every page. And the pen is a little something I give to designers when they sign their first client.” Dave says. The guy is not as cold as Sebastian made him out to be.

Sne would kill me if I signed without even skimming through just to see what this contract

says. I silently page through each page I can feel Dave's eyes on me. I get to the most important page money and all it says is I will be getting a ten percent of the proposed budget as commission. Works for me. And everything else seems standard. I sign and initial each page then hand the contract back to Dave.

"Congratulations on your first client." He says. "I will email you a copy of the contract." I take a deep breath. I can't afford to mess this up. Lulonke trusts me to do this and so does Dave. Now I just need to make sure I don't disappoint any of them. "You look nervous. What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I hope I don't mess this up." He chuckles and sits back on his chair.

"You won't. I know its daunting but you've literally been thrown to the deep end all you have to do is swim and you'll be just fine." He says encouragingly.

"Yeah the problem is I can't swim." He laughs.

"Okay wrong analogy but you get what I'm saying. You will be fine. And you've been smart enough to befriend Sizakele and Sebastian and they don't seem to mind showing you the ropes. That was a smart move and now you can take the little they've shown you and implement it here. Of course you also need to use your own imagination. And they will be there to guide you if you get stuck. We don't normally hand first years clients barely a month into their apprenticeship but whatever dlozi's are with you they seem to be working overtime. Congratulations."

"Thank you. Let me go start working."

I leave his office with a little bounce on my step. I get to my cubicle and sit down starring at the pen. It's quite strange

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they seem to be working overtime. Congratulations."

"Thank you. Let me go start working."

I leave his office with a little bounce on my step. I get to my cubicle and sit down starring at the pen. It's quite strange in a good way how a month ago I thought I'd need to work in retail or something as an entry level job. Yet here I am working my dream job and I just landed myself a client by not doing anything major. Just being myself. Things really do change.

I take my pen and go to the boardroom I find the three pretending to work. I place the pen down on the desk Sebastian and Sizakele immediately stand up.

"It's official?" Sizakele asks. I nod my head and her and Sebastian run around the desk and give me hugs. "I'm so proud of you. Sebastian look our baby is all grown up now with her own clients." She says pretending to wipe away tears. Sebastian joins her.

"I know right we are proud mama hens. I'm so happy for you babe."

"Thank you guys. I am so happy but scared too." I admit.

"Don't be scared. Babe we got you. With us next to you trust me you will knock this out the park. This is your gateway to the big time." Sizakele says her words are what I needed to boost my confidence.

When I get home Sne is not there so I cant tell her. I decide to video call my sister. When she picks up I see her face covered with flour.

"Hey snow white. What's going on?" She rolls her eyes and shows me a fresh batch of muffins. "How come you only bake when I'm not there?" She laughs.

"I'm stressed bra my exams are starting next week and I just needed to relieve some stress." She says biting into a muffin. She's determined to torture me. She sees the annoyance on my face and she laughs. "I'll courier some to you. Send me your address."

"Very funny. Save me some I think I might come home this weekend. Plus I have good news."

"You have a boyfriend." She tells me.

"I don't have a boyfriend. But today I signed my first client." She frowns.

"But you're a first year apprentice. I thought you didn't sign clients yet."

"I know right. But this client asked for me specifically."

"He has a crush on you." She tells me. "He could be your future husband." Her obsession with romance will drive her nuts.

"You're dreaming. And besides who said it's a man. It could be a woman you know."

"But it's not a woman. If it was you would have been specific. So congratulations on your contract and your future husband." She says.

"Stop daydreaming. Anyways how is your mum?" She sighs and my gut tells me it's not good news.

"Ugh she's back to her usual self. She's been locking herself in the bedroom for hours on end. I guess good times don't last after all." I hate how disappointed she is she was so

happy to see mum somehow getting better but now she is back in the dark hole she seems to like so much. It makes me wonder how Siya and Cebo are doing.

“I’m sorry I know you were hoping she was getting better.”

“It doesn’t matter anymore. Maybe you were right I shouldn’t have got my hope’s up. In my head I was thinking maybe if she got better it would be easier to leave her with the kids next year. I know Siya can take care of Cebo but what will happen when he has to go to varsity? It’s just not fair that we have to keep passing down the parental responsibilities to each other.” She says sounding emotional. I wipe the tear that escapes from my eye. I’ve personally given up on mom getting better but seeing Hlumile and Siyabonga being hopeful about it I didn’t want to break their bubble but I wish I could have shielded them from the disappointment.

“Don’t beat yourself up Hlumile. We will be fine. Next year I’ll find and a school for Cebo and Siya around here and you can all come up and we will be together again. I don’t know what’s going to happen to her but my first priority is you guys.” I love her but at some point I have to cut the cord and let mum be. I cant be worrying about her kids and worrying about her too. I have to ask the hospital if they cant admit her to the psychiatric ward as a long term patient cause clearly the girl is not willing to meet any of us halfway.

“Yeah besides that nje Siya and Cebo cant be alone around here. You know it might make it easy for thugs to rob us.”

“True. How are they anyway?”

“They are fine. They should be back soon. Phela since Siya got those football boots now he thinks he is messi. He will walk from the playground to here with them on his feet. If he could he’d probably sleep with them on.” She rolls her eyes as if she doesn’t like seeing our brother happy making me laugh.

“As long as he is happy then I’m happy. Anyways I need to bath. I’ll see you guys this weekend. I’ll let you know when I leave Joburg okay.”

“Sharp. We will see you then. Greet sis Sne.”

“I will. I love you guys.”

“We love you too. Bye.”

As soon as I hang up the phone Sne walks in with Scelo behind her with shopping bags in their hands.

“Hey you’re back early.” Sne says. I look at my watch and look back at her.

“Oh no baby. You’re late. You know I knock off at five and it’s almost half past six.” I tell her. She rushes to her bedroom with the other shopping bags.

“Milani” Scelo says and puts the shopping bags on the couch.

“Hey.”

“What are you making?” He takes a seat on the high chair watching me.

“I don’t know. Chicken and rice perhaps.” I tell him. A part of me is hoping he will say he is not hungry and leave.

“Cool. I’ll wait. I’m hungry.” Sne comes back and stands in front of me looking at me straight in the eye like she is waiting for me to tell her something. My guess is Sebastian or Sizakele already told her.

“Do you have something to tell me?” She asks.

“Like what?”

“Milani Mbokazi. Do you have something to tell me.” She says clapping her hands between each word.

“I signed my first client today.” She screams so loud Scelo and I have to close our ears to protect our eardrums.

“I’m so proud of you babe. You deserve this and more.” She gives me a hug wiping away tears.

“Thank you babe.”

“Congratulations.” Scelo adds. “How about we go out to celebrate. My treat.”

“As if it would have been anyone else’s treat. Let’s go change babe before this one changes his mind.” Sne says dragging me to the bedroom.

“If you’re not out in fifteen minutes you can forget it.” Scelo shouts behind us.

I take a quick shower and go back to my room. Jean’s and a tshirt will do for today. While I put shoes on my phone rings. It’s a number I don’t know. I pick it up.

“Hello.”

“Nkosazana.” His deep husky voice reverberates through the phone. I stop and clear my throat.

“Hi.”

“Unjani? Kuyaphileka kodwa? (How are you? Are you well?)”

“Ngyaphila. (I’m good.)” I’m tempted to ask him where he got my number but that would

just be rude.

“Dave told me you signed the contract. I am officially your client.” I guess in a sense that answers my question.

“Yes. So when would you like to start working?”

“Kusasa nje lokhu okusako. Ngzoklanda emsebenzini uzobona lendawo. (Tomorrow is fine. I will fetch you from the office so you can see the place.)”

“Kulungile. Ngzoklinda. (Okay. I’ll be expecting you.)”

“Ube nobusuku obuhle ke Nkosazana. Sesyobonana. (Have a good night. I’ll see you.)” He says and hangs up. A minute later I still have the phone on my ear as if I can still hear his voice.

“Earth to Milani. Let’s go.” Sne says popping her head in the door. I shake my head bringing myself out of the hypnotization Lulonke just left me in. I will need strength to deal with this man.

18

“How do I look?” I ask Sne twirling around. She shakes her head laughing. This is probably the third outfit I’ve changed into. First it was a pinstripe pantsuit channelling boss lady vibes but that felt like I was trying too much. I tried on a pencil skirt with a blazer but that felt too stiff. And now I have on a black lace bodysuit a pair of ripped Jean’s high heeled ankle boots and a long beige coat. At least this look is a bit more relaxed.

“I can’t wait to meet him. I don’t remember you ever being this nervous to meet a man.” She says turning on the bed resting on her palm.

“He is a client Sne and I need to make a good impression. This could open doors for me.” I turn back to the full length mirror and look at myself. I sigh deciding this is it. They do say third times a charm after all.

“A client who might just end up in your bed. I can’t wait to meet him making you this nervous. You’ll even be late for work. Let’s go.” I look at the time and she’s right. If we don’t leave now I’ll be late for work.

I pack my laptop and grab my bag. I walk out with Sne behind me whistling like a mad person.

“If this man doesn’t get on his knees and propose to you he won’t know what’s good for him.” She says behind me. Only Sne can hype me up for just a Jean’s and a bodysuit. If I could I’d clone her and make sure every girl in the world has a best friend like her.

“Unehaba. (You’re exaggerating.)” I tell her trying to hide my blushing cheeks.

“Hha Milani have you seen yourself? You look amazing and I’m sure you’ll nail this. You already have the contract anyway so all that’s left is for you to let your creative juices flow and you’ll be fine. I promise you.” I guess that’s the pep talk I needed. By the time we get to work my nerves are resting and I am looking forward to the day.

“Okay you’re fighting.” Nomsa says when I walk into the building. “You look beautiful.” She adds. I blow her a kiss and head straight for the lift. When I walk in to the office every one turns to look at me. Sebastian and Sizakele walk up to me their eyes glued to my outfit. I’m beginning to think the other days when I come to work I wear rags.

“Okay mogirl we see you.” Sebastian says loud enough for every one to hear him. He holds my hand and twirls me around. “Are you meeting a client or your man? Now I regret not dressing up. I’ll be there like a punctured spare wheel.” He carries on making Sizakele and I laugh.

“Stop being dramatic. It’s just Jean’s and a bodysuit. I’m pretty sure you’ve seen many people wear this combo.” I say. I hate the attention this is getting. And I don’t even understand why.

“Babe.” Sizakele starts. “forget the jeans look at the bodysuit. Its low cut and then your tiny weeny boobs came to the party. The make up is on point you are even wearing a new weave with six inch heels. Baby you went all out.” Jesus Christ and here I was thinking this is the simplest outfit I could choose. Now I feel like I really went overboard. I pull the coat and close it. I tie the belt tight around me.

“Its too much right?” I ask them. Now feeling a bit conscious.

“No it’s perfect. Stop stressing.” Sebastian assures me.

“Maybe I should ask Sne to bring me a shirt atleast.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You are just fine.” My desk phone rings and Sizakele picks it up. We stare at her as she speaks to the person on the other end. She hangs up and looks at me.

“Your client is here.” She tells me. My heart goes from zero to hundred in just seconds.

Attraction aside this could either make or break my career. It might not be a big contact but it’s a start and I need to make sure I nail it.

“Take deep breaths. You will be fine.” Sebastian assures me when the lift doors close. I take a couple of deep breaths before we get to the first floor. As soon as the doors open I see Lulonke standing at reception busy on his phone.

“You guys are matching.” Sebastian whispers excitedly. He is wearing a black pair of jeans a black turtleneck and a mid length nude coat with black dress shoes. Even from the back he looks good. I take one last deep breath and walk towards him. I clear my throat and he turns around. A wide smile fills his face when he sees my outfit. When our eyes meet everything else around us ceases to exist. This man is gorgeous.

“Nkosazana. Waze waba muhle. (You look beautiful.)” He says his eyes roaming my body.

“Ngyabonga. (Thank you.) You don’t look too shabby yourself.” He smiles and puts away his phone.

“Shall we?” Sebastian clears his throat Lulonke’s gaze meets his and it’s almost funny how Sebastian tries to hold his stare but fails.

“Uhm Sebastian this is my client Lulonke Mbatha Shandu this is Sebastian. My colleague and he will be my advisor for this project.” His eyes return back to me with a huge smile on his lips.

“Angkezwa bemgcela uphinde. (I didn’t hear what you said please repeat it.)” How did he not hear me? I was loud and clear enough. What is he trying to do.

“I said this is Sebastian my advisor for the project.” I tell him.

“Yes. Continue.” He urges. Sebastian leans in and whispers to me.

“I think he wants to hear you call him Shandu again.” Of course he does.

“I think we should get going.” I say I’m not about to repeat myself like a mad person. He laughs and motions for me to go before him. I walk out with my head held high trying to ignore his eyes digging holes on my back. He leads us to his car and he opens the front door for me. I see Sebastian in the corner of my eye waiting for his door to be opened too. I see Lulonke shake his head before he opens the door for him.

“Thank you sir. You’re so kind.” Sebastian says getting in the car. “Just so we are clear if you don’t want him please recommend me for the position.” He whispers as Lulonke goes

around the car.

“I don’t think he plays for your team babe.”

Even spaghetti is straight until you dip it in hot water. I’m just saying.” He says just as Lulonke gets in.

“Safety first seat belts on please.” I pull the seat belt and when I try to click it in I fail.

Lulonke reaches his hand out to help me touching my bare hand and sending tingles all over my body. Our eyes lock again and he smiles. Sebastian clears his throat again and we let go of each other. Yeah today is going to be a long day. “Right.” He starts the car and we drive in silence.

“So Mr Shandu KaNdaba.” Sebastian starts. There goes the silence bit. “What do you do for a living?”

“I’m in law.” Lulonke answers looking at him through the rearview mirror.

“Which kind? I actually think you’d look good in a police uniform.” Lulonke laughs.

“Uhm thank you I guess. I’m actually a lawyer.” I quickly turn to look at his side profile. I’m not sure what the universe is trying to tell me by sending lawyers my way. Scelo studied law

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I guess. I’m actually a lawyer.” I quickly turn to look at his side profile. I’m not sure what the universe is trying to tell me by sending lawyers my way. Scelo studied law Sne is studying law Nkazimulo is a lawyer and now Lulonke is a lawyer. Maybe the universe is preparing me for a something.

“Nice.” Sebastian says. “So if I can get into trouble right now you’d save me?”

“What kind of trouble?” Lulonke asks him.

“If say I beat up someone.” I burst out laughing and the two of them look at me.

“I’m sorry verbal abuse would be more like it. Sebastian couldn’t fight anyone even if his life depended on it. He is just like me. We can talk the talk but when it comes to fighting singamagwala. (We are cowards.)”

“Well I’m glad to hear that. Violence is never the answer anyway.” Lulonke says side eyeing me.

25 minutes later we pull up to an estate in Waterfall. The only time I’ve been here is when I mentally see myself in the houses on Property24. That seems to be something all normal people do we daydream and even mentally renovate said houses even with R4.50 in our

bank accounts. After registering our names on the visitors book we drive a few minutes before pulling up to a house.

"I thought you said you needed your apartment to be decorated?" I ask him before we get off the car.

"Apartment house they all have a roof shall we?" We get out of the car and he leads us to a modern house with large panelled windows. The outside is impressive I wonder what the inside looks like.

I get my answer when he opens the double glass doors and we walk in. Well the inside is just as impressive. The house has an open plan design with exposed beams. It's free flowing from the lounge the dining area onto the custom kitchen with clean lines and immaculate cupboards. I swear we are guests in the world while others actually live here.

"Your house is beautiful."

"Beautiful?" Sebastian asks he is just as captivated by this place as I am. "Babe this is amazing. This is a mini heaven. I should change careers. Clearly law has money." He adds running up the stairs.

"So do you think you can help me?" Lulonke asks his voice echoing through the empty house sounding like its attached to a base speaker.

"I'm sure we can do something. But I'll have to redo my plans because I had planned for an apartment not an entire house." He laughs and takes the few steps that allow him to close the gap between us.

"I like your outfit. But why are you copying me?" He asks. He is so close I can smell his breathe. I can tell you this he knows what a Dentist is.

"You're the one copying me." I fire back.

"Or maybe idlozi liyakhuluma. (The ancestors are talking.)" He says starring at my lips. This is going to be a difficult however many days this takes. I clear my throat and turn around walking towards the kitchen. I place my laptop bag on the kitchen counter.

"So we need to discuss the budget for the project. And since the house seems like it wont need any structural changes the budget wont be that much basically what we'll be doing is furnishing mostly." I turn around and almost hit his large chest. This house is huge but he towers over it with his presence.

“There is no budget MaPhangela. You have free reign.” He says so nonchalantly. People with money really do behave different.

“That’s a dangerous thing to say to a woman. A very dangerous thing.” He chuckles and runs his hand through his head.

“Well just don’t bankrupt me.”

“I was an accountant in my previous life. I’ll try to penny pinch as much as I can.” He laughs.

“Milani come up here.” Sebastian shouts from the stairs.

“Uhm let me go see what he needs. I’ll be right back.” I leave him and head up the stairs. I find Sebastian standing at the top. He signals for me to come up. I go up and he hooks his arm onto mine. The top floor is just as impressive as the first floor. There are four bedrooms each with it’s own ensuite bathroom.

“How is your mjolo going?” Sebastian asks.

“We have an unlimited budget.” I tell him.

“No!”

“Yes!” He screams and I have to close his mouth before Lulonke thinks we are crazy.

“Behave yourself. We are in Waterfall people here don’t scream.” He holds my hand and pulls it away from his mouth.

“Mapaseka is going to be so jealous. An unlimited budget is every designer’s dream. And you my friend just hit the jackpot.” He whispers.

“Do not even tell her. In fact don’t even tell anyone it’s a house except for Sizakele. Everyone should just be on the apartment vibes. Are we clear.” He nods his head but he looks disappointed.

“This is not fair. I just want to see the look on her devil face when she finds out.” He begs.

“And you will. When we are done with this place and Dave gives us the commission. Keep your camera ready.”

“You know what you’re right. That will be so much better. So what’s the plan? Do we go back to the drawing board?” He asks as we walk into the main bedroom. Its huge.

“We have to. I prepared for an apartment. So we have to redo the plans. We have to take pictures so I can work on the plans at home.”

“Why would he buy a house this big when he lives alone?” Sebastian asks. I stop dead in my tracks and realise I didn’t think about this before. What if he has a wife and a kid? Or kids? Maybe one of the bedrooms will be a nursery. Why the fuck did I not think about this.

“What if he is married?” Sebastian quickly shushes me and closes my mouth.

“Do not put that negativity in the universe. DO NOT!” He orders. But what if he is? That’s a valid question right?

19

Lulonke's house is coming along just great. Lucky for me the house doesn't have any major structural changes so it should be done in a month latest. I still can't believe I went from designing for an apartment to an actual house. I'm not sure what kind of games God is playing but if this is what happens when he is in a good mood then I pray I don't do anything to piss him off. Yet.

I've done an outline of what the bedrooms will look like. But I feel like at least one of them should be a kids room. But now I'll have to ask him if that's Okay or not. And in the back of my mind I don't know if I want to hear that he has kids and possibly a wife hiding away somewhere. But if I want to do this right I need to ask. Thank God Sne took the kids to the mall to get pizza and some snacks so I can work in peace. Mum is still locked in her room since we arrived an hour ago. When I went to greet her she just lay there staring at the wall. At least she eats when she needs to. Other than that we can only wait and see.

I pull my phone out between the couch cushions where it has decided to hide and dial Lulonke's number. It's past seven in the evening I hope I'm not disturbing a family dinner. It rings a couple of times before he picks up.

“MaPhangela.” He says as soon as he picks up. I am five to blushing when I hear people screaming and whistling from his end. “Shut up man.” He shouts and the whistles die down but I can still hear giggles and muffled laughs. I wonder where he is. “Ngyacolisa MaMbokazi inkinga nghleli nabantu abanganama table manners. (I'm sorry. The problem I have I'm sitting with people who have no table manners.)” he says and the table mannersless crew shouts again. Is that even a word? I hear him laughing before the noise fades away. I'm guessing he's found a quiet spot. “MaPhangela usekhona? (Are you still there.)”

“I'm here. Ngabe ngyakphazamisa? (Am I disturbing you?)” The only good thing in all this is that the people he is around sound male. Atleast I'm not disturbing a family dinner.

“Cha Ntokazi singakhuluma. (No we can talk.) Unjani? (How are you?)” Shaka must be proud wherever he is his descendants are causing havoc with just their voices and charming the pants out of poor girls.

“Ngyaphila. (I’m good.) I wanted to ask with the bedroom design I was thinking of adding a kids bedroom. Will that work?” I am holding my breath right now. Simple as that question is it might just break my sweet little heart.

“Sure. Just one bedroom?” He asks. That sure has already sent me to only God knows where. I guess there goes my little crush. I clear my throat.

“Would you like me to do two bedrooms? One for a girl and another for a boy?” He is silent for a moment.

“No I think one will do. Maybe you can use those double beds for kids.” Double beds for kids? What is he on about?

“You mean bunk beds?” He laughs. I wonder what it feels like when he laughs and you’re sleeping on his chest. I’m sure it sounds like putting your ear on a base speaker.

“Those ones. There are four kids so you can do two bunk beds. Two girls and two boys.” Yep this is not happening. Who has time to be stepmother to four kids. Not me that’s for sure.

“Okay. I’ll do that. One more thing the main bedroom I figured since it’s your house can I make it a bit masculine with feminine touches.” I don’t know why I’m still testing these waters. The man has four kids who knows maybe even four baby mamas.

“As long as there are no duvets with flowers I’m good.” He answers.

“Noted. I’ll update you with everything. Goodnight.”

“Wait. Awungtshela why are you working on a Friday night? Aren’t people your age clubbing today.”

“Aren’t people your age asleep already?” He laughs. By the time I’m done with this house I’ll need a cleansing to rid me of all these things he keeps unknowingly doing to me.

“I’m not that old MaPhangela. How old are you?” He asks. I hope for his sake he is not over 35 my relationship cut off is 32 at least. The only time I go over that is when a man is a bag and there are no feelings involved.

“I’m 23.”

“See there’s only seven years between us. I’m still young. Somewhat.”

“Uma kusho wena ke Shandu ka Ndaba. Goodnight. (If you say so.)” I hang up before he can reply. He calls back a couple of times but I don’t reply. Sne and the kids pull up and I know the noise is about to begin. I guess that’s my cue to put the laptop aside and enjoy being home.

Cebo comes running to me with a teddy bear that’s almost as big as as she is.

“Sisi bona sis Sne bought me cuddly. (Sis look.)” She says jumping up and down.

Siyabonga comes in bouncing a brand new ball and he has on a cap he didn’t have when he left. “Sisi do you like my teddy bear?” Cebo asks hugging the huge teddy bear.

“Of course I like it nana its beautiful. Are you sure you’ll both fit in the bed?” She laughs.

“Of course we will fit.” She runs off dragging the brown fluffy bear behind her. Sne and Hlumile walk in with shopping bags and the sneaky Sne who said they were only getting pizza and snacks is avoiding eye contact with me. I leave Siya watching soccer and join the two in the kitchen.

“Don’t look at me

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I tried to stop her but she wouldn’t listen.” Hlumile says and runs out with something that looks like new headphones. The kitchen table is filled with plastic bags from pick n pay.

“Before you throw a tantrum it’s just groceries. It’s not a big deal.” She says putting meat away in the fridge.

“We had a deal. You don’t spend money because you always go overboard Snethemba.”

“I do not go overboard. It’s just groceries a basic necessity. You cannot fault me for wanting the kids to have a good meal.” There is clearly no point in even trying to knock some sense into her.

“You’re impossible. So what did you get?” Her face lights up seeing that I’ve given up on trying to set her straight.

“We got pizza some wings and some burgers. We decided we are going to hook my laptop to the TV and have a Netflix and chill session. And we got popcorn too. It’s going t be so much fun.” She’s so stoked about this. I walk up to her as she puts strawberries in the fridge and wrap my arms around her waist.

“You’re the best you know that. Thank you for being you.” She squeezes my arm and I kiss

her shoulder. "By the way Lulonke has four kids." She turns around so fast she almost knocks me off my feet.

"You lie. When did he tell you this?"

"A few minutes ago. I asked him about turning one of the bedrooms into a kids bedroom and he said yes. Four beds four kids. Two girls two boys." She claps her hands before shoving them under her armpits like an old woman listening to gossip by the riverside.

"Wow people will surprise you. But at least he didn't lie. So maybe there is a chance after all." Is this one for real? A whole me stepmother to four kids. Never! I refuse.

"You did hear me say four kids right? Two girls two boys. The man is done having babies. And me I still want to have kids when I turn 40."

"Your eggs will be scrambled by then." She says and laughs. I'm still even debating if I want kids. One day maybe.

Our movie night went better than I expected. We actually slept around one in the morning. Cebo made us watch some cartoon movie Siya forced us to watch an action one and by the time we watched Hlumile's romantic comedy Siya and Cebo were fast asleep. Good thing hers was the last one because we got to cry and laugh. The following day we went to the mall again and this time I made sure to hide Sne's cards. We didn't even get to do much because Sne had bought everything the kids will need while I'm away.

On Sunday we cooked together and had a nice lunch before we went back to Joburg. I ended up driving us back because Sne was too full. When we got to the apartment we found Scelo's car parked in the parking lot. I parked next to him and when we got to the apartment he was sitting on the couch watching soccer.

"I didn't give you my keys to come and make yourself comfortable in our house. Why are you not at your house?" Sne asked him pretending to be pissed. He looked different with casual clothes on. He was less intimidating which made it easier for us to join him on the couch and watch the game even though we knew nothing about what was going on.

"I could ask you the same thing I didn't give you my keys to go shopping in my house." He answered.

"Then maybe you should stop buying fancy foods that some of us can't afford." She fired back. I don't know what is it she can't afford and that word only comes out when her siblings or parents are involved either than that she can afford things.

Monday morning I wake up ready to conquer the world. And it helps that my first salary as

an interior designer clocked in during the night. Not bad. I take a shower and get dressed as comfortably as I can. Today I have to go to the furniture store and order the things I'll need for Lulonke's house. What's not there I'll have to order from the other branches or online. Today will be a busy day.

When I get to work I don't even sit down. I drag Sebastian and Sizakele down to the furniture store. Good thing our project preparations are done. We will just do a few touch ups before presentation day. I walk towards the bunk beds and these two follow behind me. "What are we doing this side?" Sizakele asks.

"Please don't break my heart." Sebastian adds pretending to shed a few tears.

"He has four kids." I tell them. Sebastian simply fake faints and falls onto a bed behind him.

"Please wake me up when the trumpets ring." He says his one hand clutching his chest and the other arm resting on his eyes. The drama.

"While you die there I am going to shop for my future step kids." That gets him up fast.

"I can't believe the man has four kids. He looks so young. But then again Zulu men get married at eighteen and start making babies immediately. Pity I was looking forward to planning your traditional wedding." He adds pretending to be heartbroken.

"Bhekisisa Isaac Ngidi you do remember you're a Zulu man to right?" Sizakele reminds him earning herself an eye roll.

"Whatever." He hooks his arms around our necks and walks between us. "Babe my advice before writing the man off ask a few more questions and dig a little deeper. For all you know he might have adopted those kids and there is no wife or baby mama to speak off."

"I agree. He could be innocently taking care of needy kids. Don't give up just yet."

Sound advice but I'm not sure anymore. Let me just focus on one thing at a time. Priority number one get this house done and dusted.

20

"That bed goes into the main bedroom. You'll see MB pasted on the door. The other beds also have stickers on them and stating which bedroom they are going to. There is B2 B3 and B4. Everything has a sticker on it stating where it's going. Please do not break

anything.” The great thing about Luxe home goods is that furniture is always available whenever we need it as designers. And right now the big furniture is being delivered today.

“You’re busy.” Sebastian says walking in. I didn’t even bother going to the office. I came straight here and waited for the delivery. I decided to go with a clean neutral design. In that way if there is a wife or girlfriend somewhere they can add some of their preferences without messing with the design.

“You have no idea. I’m already tired and I haven’t done anything big.”

“You better get used to it. But the fun part is about to begin. As soon as the furniture is in the big thing will be figuring out where everything goes. But you already have a plan so that’s good. You’ll be done in no time. Where do you want to start? I’m thinking upstairs.” He suggests.

“Yeah. Plus the couches will arrive tomorrow. And another thing there is a room towards the back of the house. I want to turn it into an office. What do you think?”

“I’m sure hubby would appreciate it.”

“Ucalile. (You’ve started.) Let’s go upstairs.”

We walk up to the bedrooms and find almost all the furniture in. He helps me figure out where everything goes. The beds and headboards are in place. All that’s left now is the small things like side tables. All that will arrive tomorrow. Sebastian leaves early since he and Sizakele still have to finish up their project. Once I’m done with the other bedrooms I go into the main bedroom. This room is the biggest of all the rooms. It has a huge window on one side and a sliding door on the other. I figure it would look better with the bed on the other side of the room looking out to the garden and the mountain view. Yep that should work. One problem though I’m alone and no one is here to help me with moving the bed or headboard.

I throw myself on the bed and look up to the ceiling. Its almost lunchtime and I’m hungry. I should go get myself something to eat. I get off the bed and walk out the door. Instead I hit a wall a human one and almost fall to the ground but strong hands hold me before I hit the floor screaming. When I look up I see Lulonke starring at me with a worried look in his eyes. “Are you Okay?” he asks pulling me up to stand on my feet. I wriggle myself out of his hold and quickly open the sliding door to get some fresh air and calm my beating heart.

“MaMbokazi Uright? (Are you Okay?)” He keeps asking. I close my eyes and take a few

deep breaths before turning around to face him.

“Do you know there is something called knocking or ringing the doorbell? Something to make another person aware they have company to avoid giving them a heart attack.” I scream at him. This man doesn’t take me seriously he is laughing. Am I a joke to him? “Yin ehleksayo Lulongke Mbatha? (What’s funny?)”

“Ngyacolisa. Umuhle mawcasukile. (I’m sorry you look beautiful when you’re angry.)” I roll my eyes and walk back into the bedroom.

“What are you doing here anyway?” he stands in the middle of the room with his hands deep inside his pants pockets.

“I came to see you. I haven’t seen you in...” He looks at his watch. “In eight days. So how are you?”

“I almost had a heart attack a minute ago. So I’m fine. Very fine.” He smiles and looks around the room and an idea hits me. “Since you’re here you can help me. Hold that side.” I direct him to the headboard.

“And how much are you paying me for the hard labour?” He asks still stuck in the same place.

“How much do you want? You can deduct it from the budget.” He laughs and picks up the headboard. It stands against the wall. We pull the bed and put it in its place. I sit on the foot of the bed looking outside. “Perfect.”

“Yeah. The view is beautiful. Almost like you.” He takes a seat next to me. “This bed is comfortable. Nice choice.”

“Thank you. I’m sure your wife will enjoy it too.” I stand up and turn back to look at him. He is smiling. I’m beginning to think something is wrong with this one. When I’m serious he laughs. “Speaking of beds the kids bedrooms what are their favourite cartoons or hobbies? How old are they anyway?”

“The boys are nine and seven. One is obsessed with Superman and the other thinks the sun rises and sets on Batman’s ass. The girls are five. Twins. Both obsessed with Disney princesses.” Its quite adorable how his tone changes when he speaks about them. It’s full of love and adoration. He must be a great dad.

“That’s sweet. Will they be living here or they will be visiting?”

“Visiting. I don’t think their parents would sign up for me to stay with them full time. Bathi nginemfundiso embi. (Apparently I am a bad influence.)” He laughs. Meanwhile my heart is

doing flips. He doesn't have kids.

"So the kids are not yours?" I need to hear it from his mouth. I mean it's obvious but hearing it from the horse's mouth wouldn't hurt.

"Not biologically. They are my siblings' kids." I don't think I've ever had to keep my cool as much as I'm doing now. If he wasn't here I'd probably be jumping and dancing all over the house.

"That's nice." I look at my phone and it's lunchtime. I need food before I faint. "I am going to order food, do you want something?"

"As long as inyama ikhona. (Meat is there.)" He lays back on the bed while I make the order. By the time I'm done he is snoring on the bed. Did he come here just to sleep?

When the food arrives I hesitate on whether to wake him up or not. But then the food will get cold. I shake him a bit and he pops his eyes open.

"Food is here." He sits up rubbing his eyes.

"How long was I out?" He stands up and stretches.

"About half an hour. Is the bed that comfortable?" I pick out a rug and throw it on the floor. I take a refuse bag and place it on the top before putting the food down.

"So we are sitting on refuse bags?" I sit down and motion for him to do the same. He sits down and picks up a piece of meat.

"We can't get the rug dirty. I'd be in trouble." My phone beeps. It's a message from the store. The couch is being delivered today.

"Is everything okay?" He asks seeing the confused look on my face.

"They are delivering the couch today. I thought they said tomorrow."

"Isn't that good news?"

"I guess. So tell me something, why did you go into law? Was it always your dream job?" He smiles and throws another piece of meat in his mouth.

"Not really. My father is a lawyer. He had this dream of having his law firm and naming it Mbatha and sons. My big brothers are lawyers and so am I. And we all work for Mbatha and sons. I'd say it wasn't my dream job but I enjoy it." A family legacy I wonder what mine is. Depression

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abandonment or both?

“So what’s your dream job?”

“I wanted to be a teacher. But now I lecture part time at UKZN so maybe I did get my dream job after all. And you what did you want to be?” I open my mouth to answer him but my phone pings. The delivery is not happening today. I hope this is not some joke.

“I think its time for me to go back to the office. The couch is not getting delivered today.” He helps me clean up before we go. He opens the car door for me and I get in. He gets on the other side and instead of driving he turns to look at me.

“Can I ask you something?” I nod my head and hold my breathe expecting the worst. “You know what never mind.” He starts the car leaving me completely confused.

“No ask me.” I hate being in limbo and this moment will gnaw at me for a while unless I get what ever he wanted to ask.

“Do you have a boyfriend?” I sigh thanking the heavens he’s not trying to fish for the codes to the nuclear weapons. Not that I would know.

“No. I don’t have a boyfriend. Since we are asking do you have a wife?” He chuckles.

“Nope. I am as single as single can be?” He answers. Okay then I guess the crush is back on.

“Not even a girl who thinks she’s in a relationship with you?” He shakes his head.

“Nope. Ngisishimane nje. (I’m single.)”

“Okay so what’s wrong with you? You’re handsome successful and respectful yet no woman can claim you as her own? Are you crazy maybe?” He laughs.

“Awfuni ngibe ngowakho mhlampe? (Don’t you want me to be yours?)” Even though his eyes are glued on the road I can see him side eyeing me. Do I want him to be mine? Maybe. Am I going to fell him that? Not today.

He pulls up to the office and I quickly say my goodbyes and hurry inside. Sizakele and Sebastian are not back from their project and I can’t tell them through the phone that I was wrong and there are no kids or a wife. Zothile pops her head between our cubicles.

“Can I ask you something?” she says almost in a whisper. It seems today is ‘ask Milani something’ day.

“Sure. What’s up?” She disappears back to her cubicle and two seconds later she drags her

chair to sit next to me.

“So I know you and Sebastian and Sizakele are close but I have the feeling you guys are keeping something from me. I mean none of you seem interested in the project anymore you spend more time outside the office so I wonder if maybe you forgot to tell me what the plan is.” Poor girl if only you weren’t a snitch you’d be in on the secret too.

“There is nothing I know off besides what you also know. Being out of office doesn’t mean we don’t care about the project but we also have clients who need attention. And if there are any changes we need to make to the project you’ll be notified too. Stop stressing.” She let’s out a sigh of relief I almost feel bad for her.

“Okay I was getting worried. Thank you Milani.” She drags herself back to her desk and I can’t help but roll my eyes. If anyone didn’t know they would think she was just an innocent person but I know better.

Since I cant wait for my friends to come back so I can give them an update I create a WhatsApp group and add all three of them. I post just one message

‘He is not married and he doesn’t have kids.’

I press send and switch my phone off.

21

♪♪ Ubab’ uding’ azomthuma
Thuma mina webaba
Thuma mina
Ezizweni Zonkhe
Thuma mina webaba
Thuma mina.
Emagumbin’aman’ omhlaba
Thuma mina webaba
Thuma mina. ♪♪

The melodic sounds of the choir fill the church. I wish I had a voice to sing. But everyone

who knows me knows if I sing even God has to cover his ears. I cant sing to save my life. Sne on the other hand has a voice like an angel. She hates singing but she's gifted in that department that's why right now she's standing up on the stage leading the choir. As to how she got roped into singing with the choir is beyond me. But judging from the people with their hands up in the air and shouting haleluya's they feel her anointing too.

After church I wait for her outside while she speaks to some of the church members who are praising her for her singing. When she's done she walks over to where she's parked. I've been waiting here for thirty minutes while she says her goodbyes. The sun has also been frying me for the past thirty minutes.

"Why didn't you come get the keys it's too hot for you to be standing in the sun like this." She says opening the car. I quickly get in and sit down. I quickly get out when the hot seat burns my ass. And this one is laughing her lungs out.

"Its not funny Sne."

"But why would you jump in just like that. You know the car has been in the sun for hours now. Let me turn the aircon on it should cool the car. She switches the air conditioner on. "You're the one who wasted time praying for people." Now I'm annoyed. Why would she laugh at me when all this is her fault.

"Hhay don't take your frustrations out on me. I'm not the one who told your boyfriend not to call you the whole weekend." She says fanning herself with the programme.

"Okay first of all he is not my boyfriend secondly I am not frustrated I'm just tired. And hungry." I clarify. Who cares if Lulonke doesn't call the whole week. His house is almost done and the last time I saw him or spoke to him was when he came to the house to see how far we are.

"Keep telling yourself that babes. But you and I both know the truth. The whole service you were looking at your phone waiting for it to ring." I hate that she's right but I also need to stop acting like Lulonke is my boyfriend. He is a client and that's where our relationship begins and ends. I just need to make sure I don't cross that line. Or maybe I need to go back and not be feeling how I'm feeling right now.

Once the car is cooled down we drive to Tasha's in Sandton for lunch. Its packed. We cant even find a table. We have to wait at the bar and order drinks until someone decides to leave. After about an hour a couple stands up and leaves. A waiter calls us over and we sit

down. Finally. I place another order for a long island ice tea. I see Sne giving me a side eye. "Stop doing that." She chuckles.

"Babe stop stressing I'm sure he has a good reason for not calling." I sigh and try to focus on the moment. I cant let Lulonke ruin my day heck he's already ruined my week.

"You know what you're right. Fuck Lulonke. Let's have fun." She laughs.

"I did not say that. Don't put words in my mouth. I agree though let's have some fun. Let's have our lunch and then we will go home and Netflix and chill. We will binge on ice cream and curse all men."

"Including Kumkani?" She pouts her mouth and rolls her eyes.

"Except him. We can slander everyone else except my man. Ngyala ke lapho. (I refuse.)"

"Fine we can spare Kumkani. But everyone else is fair game."

"Exactly." We clink our glasses.

"Men are trash." We say in unison.

"Except Kumkani." Sne clarifies.

While eating we see Lakhiwe walk in looking all sorts of beautiful with her mum. You can say whatever you want about money not buying happiness but I'd like to see for myself as soon as I have millions of Randela's in my bank account I'll also tell you money doesn't buy happiness. Lakhiwe and her mum look like sisters more than mother and daughter.

"What's got your attention?" Sne asks following my gaze. She chuckles and turns back to me.

"Stop being a stalker. They will send their bodyguards here and they will beat you up."

"Money is nice neh? I mean look at them. People are sitting at the bar waiting to be seated and they just come in and find a table reserved for them. I promise you we are visitors in this world the true residents are those ones." She laughs and shakes her head.

"One day friend nathi we will be residents of this world. Trust me. How is your project going anyway. Wont you be presenting to her in a couple of days?"

"We will. Now I feel nervous. Its one thing seeing someone on TV or newspapers. But seeing them live is a whole different thing. I trust our presentation but I really hope it will be up to her standard."

"At least Lakhiwe has got your mind away from Lulonke." And just like that I'm back to my sad self.

“Let’s go home.” She laughs. I pay the bill and we leave. We do a bit of shopping before heading home.

We get home and set up our little movie date. We don’t even get through the first movie before we fall asleep on the couch. When we wake up it’s already dark outside and we are hungry. I leave Sne still sleeping and whip up some eggs with bread and coffee. If she wants proper food she’ll have to get up and cook.

I wake her up and hand her the food. My phone rings just as I sit down to eat. I look at the number and it’s not saved in my phone. I don’t know who it might be. I ignore it and Sne gives me a side eye.

“What if its Lulonke?” She asks. I didn’t think of that. But of it’s important they will have to call back. And sure enough they do call back. I pick it up and the first thing I hear someone crying in the background and I start panicking. I put the phone on loudspeaker.

“Who is crying?” Sne whispers. I shrug my shoulders.

“Hello.” My heart is beating out of control. All I can think about is the kids. Are they okay?

“Who is this?”

“Hi Milani uCeliwe from enext door kini. (Its Celiwe from next door.)” I grab Sne's arm and squeeze tight. I might be exaggerating but I feel like there’s something terrible that has happened. For starters I only know Celiwe because Cebo plays with her kids. So if she’s calling me then there really must be something going on. And I don’t like the sounds coming from the background.

“Hi Celiwe what’s going on? Is everything okay with my siblings?”

“Eish Milani I think you should come home. If you can please come tonight. Something has happened. Please come home.” She says. I don’t know her that well but her voice is filled with panic and fear.

“Just tell me what’s going on? Please.”

“Milani

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but her voice is filled with panic and fear.

“Just tell me what’s going on? Please.”

“Milani come home. Please.” She begs.

“We are coming.” Sne says grabbing the phone from me. She cuts the call and looks at me. I’m frozen in one place not sure what to do. “Go and change we are going.” She orders. I feel like I am in a trance. I have a hundred thoughts going around in my head. I can hear Sne talking to someone. I change into Jean’s and a t-shirt and put some sandals on my feet. I walk back out to find Sne pacing up and down the lounge.

“Let’s go.” I tell her.

“Get your phone and your bag.” I rush back to the bedroom and grab my bag. I search around for my phone but I can’t find it.

“Sne I can’t find my phone.” I shout. She pops her head in the door waving my phone around.

“I have it. Let’s go.” I follow her out. I find Scelo in the lounge.

“Let’s go.” He opens the door for us and we leave.

The drive to KwaMhlanga seems to be taking longer than usual. I know it’s late and we have to be careful on the road but this seems to be too slow for my liking even though Scelo is probably driving a tad bit over the speed limit. The silence in the car is making things worse.

“Can we play some music please. The silence is making me overthink.” I tell them. Sne quickly connects her phone to the bluetooth and plays some amapiano songs. I thought the noise would help but it’s not helping. I try to sleep just to make the time go quicker but even that is impossible.

The closer we get to the house the harder my heart beats. We pull up to the gate and find people moving around the yard. It’s late why are they here? I jump off the car as soon as Scelo parks the car outside the gate. The gate is wide open so I quickly run up to the house. I hear someone wailing and it gets louder the closer I get. When I get into the house I find some women including Celiwe comforting Hlumile.

“What’s going? Hlumile?” When she looks up I see her eyes are blood shot red.

“Ngyacolisa Milani ngzamide. I promise I tried to protect them. (I’m sorry. I tried.)” She says getting off the carpet and walking towards me. I wrap my arms around her and she sobs. Tears run down my face because I don’t even know what it going on. I pull her face away

from me and look at her.

“Hlumile what’s going on? What happened? Did someone hurt you?” I ask. She keeps shaking her head and sobbing.

“Milani ngcela uhlale phansi. (Milani please sit down.)” one of the women asks me. I ignore her and focus on my sister.

“Where are the kids? Ba right? (Are they okay?)” no one answers me. Instead Hlumile sobs louder. I sit her down on the couch and try to rush to the bedroom but one of the women stops me.

“Ngyakcela sisi ngcela uhlale phansi sikhulume. (Please just sit down so we can talk.)” The woman says. I’m not close to any of the women here. I know them sure but I cant say I’ve spent more than five minutes speaking to each of them.

“Can someone just tell us what’s going on?” Scelo orders. She walks up to me and holds my arm leading me back to the couch. I sit down next to Hlumile and she lays on my lap crying.

“There was an accident earlier.” Celiwe starts. “Hlumile went to study for her exams at the school. Cebo was playing with my kids and Siyabonga was here with his friends. They were playing cards outside. In the evening he came to get Cebo and brought her home. That was the last time we saw them.”

“What do you mean that was the last time you saw them? Are they missing?” I ask. The women look at each other before Celiwe continues.

“Hlumile came home and a few minutes later I heard her screaming. I rushed here and she was hysterical. I decided to go check on the kids because Hlumile was inconsolable. I found Cebo holding on to her teddy bear with white foam coming out of her mouth. When I went to check on Siyabonga he was also laying on the floor of his bedroom with foam and blood coming out of his mouth. Milani Cebo and Siyabonga sebas'shiyile. (They are dead.)”

Her words were seeping into my head in slow motion. I could feel my head getting bigger with each passing second. I cant believe what she just said. I get off the couch and go to the bedroom. I find her covered in a sheet. Her new teddy bear laying next to her. I slowly walk towards the bed. I open the sheet. She looks so peaceful. I kneel down next to the bed tears streaming down my face.

“Cebo vuka nana. Vuka. I’m here vuka nana. (Wake up wake up. I’m here wake up.)” She won’t move. I shake her a bit but nothing. “Cebo I promise ngzokthengela ubabrbie. Vuka. (I’ll buy you a barbie doll. Wake up.)” She wont move. I pull the sheet away from her. She’s wearing her barbie pyjamas. She only wears these ones for special occasions. I pick her up heavy as she is I don’t feel the weight.

“Milani leave her like that till the police arrive. You can’t move her.” I hear Sne but she seems so far away. I take Cebo and lay her head on my shoulder. I walk out of the bedroom and we go to Siya's room. I open the door. He is on the floor a sheet covering his body. I sit down next to him cuddling Cebo in my arms.

“Siyabonga wake up. It’s not funny anymore please wake up. I won’t get mad if you ruin your shoes playing soccer just wake up. Please. Wake up. Cebo wake up.”

I sit there with my sister on my arms and my brother laying on the floor. Dead. This has to be a dream. Yeah I’ll wake up in the morning and I’ll be in my bed and these two will be fighting for the remote in the morning. Yeah this is just a dream. I’ll wake up. I will wake up.

22

Death it comes like a thief in the night and leaves the same way it came. But the damage and destruction it leaves behind is felt by those left to pick up the pieces.

In a bedroom with different posters of soccer players covering the wall it's easy to see that the person who sleeps here doesnt just love soccer it consumes every inch of their lives. The majority of posters plastered with Messi's face tells who their favorite player is.

Milani sits flat on the floor the ice cold body of her sister gently cuddled in her arms. Her brother's lifeless one laying on the floor a blanket over him as if the warmth will bring life back into him. Rocking back and forth for what feels like hours now no one knows how to help her. She seems to be in a trance her eyes are facing the wall in front of her tears freely flowing down her cheeks but no sound comes out of her mouth.

Hlumile sits just under the window her knees up to her chest her hands balled into fists and her chin

resting on them. Her quiet sobs sound so loud. Her eyes rest on her brother's head waiting hoping and praying for him to move to wake up and tell her it was a joke.

More and more people keep flooding the house each one of them led here by their curiosity wanting to make sure that what they heard was real. The children really are dead. If it wasn't for Sneethemba closing the bedroom door and locking it people would be peeking in and whispering amongst themselves. The sad part about people today no one respects death maybe that's why it keeps coming back and claiming more and more lives all in a bid to assert itself and remind us that it's still more powerful than we care to admit.

Scelo walks into the house panic and worry written all over his face. He was shocked when Sne called and told him what happened. He drove here hopeful that maybe Sne exaggerated everything like she always does. But now seeing all the people in the house some sipping on tea and others speaking in hush tones he realizes there was no exaggeration.

He sends his sister a text asking where she is. As soon as Sne receives it she quickly leaves the bedroom door unmanned and hurries to the front door. She throws herself at her brother sobbing in his arms.

"Bhuti I don't know what to do." She says as her brother runs his hands up and down her back as her chest rises and falls with each sob.

"I know. Where are they?" He asks glaring at everyone staring at them. Sne wipes her tears and leads her brother to the bedroom. She unlocks the door and leads Scelo in. His heart breaks at the sight before him. He stands frozen in one place for a moment before leaning down and feeling for Siya's pulse. He lets out a deep sigh feeling the cold body laying on the floor with no life in it.

"Has anyone called the police?" He asks looking up at his sister.

"We've been calling. They keep saying they are on their way. I don't know how many times I've called them." He nods his head and looks down at Cebo. She looks like she is in pain still. Her skin is pale her eyes are wide open her tongue looks like it grew five sizes bigger and darker as it fills her mouth. Scelo reaches out to her and tries to close her eyelids. They close halfway through. He sits down next to Milani and texts someone before throwing the phone on the floor.

"The police are on their way." He says watching for a reaction from Milani and getting none. Sne

slides down the door till her buttocks hit the ground her eyes are red and swollen. A knock on the door makes her stand up and open it.

Aunty Sbongile throws herself into the room and the moment she lays eyes on the lifeless bodies of the kids she lets out a wail so loud you'd think she actually cared about them. She grabs Siyabonga turning him around to face the ceiling.

"Ingane kabhuti nkosiyam (my brother's child!)" She says tears and snort running down her face. For the first time in a long time Milani's eyes move from the wall to look at the woman giving an oscar worthy performance in front of her.

"What are you doing?" She speaks for the first time in a long while. Aunty Sbongile's wails die down to quiet sobs.

"What?" She wipes her tears and looks at her niece.

"I said what are you doing? Why are you crying?"

"Huh Milani. My brothers son just died. Am I not supposed to cry for him?" She looks around the room hoping Sne Hlumile or Scelo can understand her tears. But all she gets are bewildered eyes staring back at her. Milani lays Cebo gently on the floor and gets up.

"Aunty

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Hlumile or Scelo can understand her tears. But all she gets are bewildered eyes staring back at her. Milani lays Cebo gently on the floor and gets up.

"Aunty now that he is dead you remember that he is your brothers child? Where were you when he didnt have shoes to wear to school and had to walk barefoot or wear flip flops? Did you remember him then? Did you remember him when he didn't have food to eat and the only meal he had a day was a slice of bread his friend gave him at school? Did you remember him then? Tell me. Did you?" Sbongile gets off the floor and wipes her tears.

"Milani this is not the time for this. Not in front of the kids." She begs.

"Aunty they knew when they were alive that you never loved them let alone cared. So I can promise you now even in death they know that. Now do me a favor and get the fuck out."

"Excuse me?"

"I said get the fuck out of my house. And take your people with you."

"Milani Dont say things you'll regret tomorrow. You need your family."

"Get the fuck out Aunty." Milani hisses. Her aunt stands there arms crossed on her chest ready for whatever may come.

Scelo stands up and plants himself between the two women. He takes one look at Lani before turning to her aunt.

"Uhm with all due respect Aunty I think you should leave." He says his voice deep respectful but still with a commanding tone laced on it. S bongile chuckles looks at him from head to toe and back again.

"And who are you? This is a family matter. Stay out of it." She barks but Scelo is not moved.

"Milani is my family. If she doesn't want you here then I suggest you leave. Now." Her arms leave her chest and make their way to her waist. The action making her pink gown to open a bit.

"Or what? This is my brother's house. I'm not going anywhere." Scelo takes one step towards her and immediately closes the gap between them. They are so close but yet so far. Scelo is taller than her all she can do is look up at him.

"I'm trying so hard to be respectful right now. But if you dont leave in the next ten seconds I will drag you out of here. Trust me." S bongile clicks her tongue and walks out just as the police walk into the house. While the other officers get people out of the house two plain officers in plain clothes walk into the bedroom. They introduce themselves as Detectives Mtshali and Masombuka.

"What happened here?" Masombuka asks looking around the room. He squats down and feels for a pulse on both bodies but finds none. He sighs and stands up. "Is anyone going to answer me.or should we do the questioning at the station?" He continues looking around at each of them.

"We dont know what happened. We got a call and we were told the kids were poisoned so we rushed here. When we got here they were already cold." Sne tells them.

"Do you know how they got the poison?" The other one asks. Scelo and Sne look at each other exchanging some knowing looks.

"Isnt that your job?" Sne snaps. "You show up here almost 8 hours after the fact and now you want

us to do your jobs for you? Are you for real?"

"Sne.."

"No Scelo I've watched my best friend cuddle her baby sister's cold body for the past eight hours because these incompetent lazy civil servants take forever to get to where they are needed. And now they want us to do their jobs for them."

"Okay that's enough. Let's go." Scelo grabs her by the arm and leads her out of the room.

The officers look at each other before continuing with their jobs. They take down all the information they need before the forensics take the bodies away. By the time everything is done the sun is almost up.

Milani and Hlumile sit on the bedroom floor their new reality not fully sinking in.

"I shouldn't have left them alone." Hlumile says staring at the wall.

"Its not your fault." Milani assures her. "I just wish I knew what happened."

"Do you think mum had something to do with it?" Hlumile asks. She's been thinking about it for a while. When she came back from her study session her mum was in the lounge even though she was also in pain she tried to not let it show. But as soon as Hlumile saw the kids and started screaming her mother then started showing signs of discomfort. Her arm lay across her stomach as if she was in pain. When MaM'Celiwe and her husband came in they saw her too. And her husband rushed her to the hospital.

"I dont know. Where is she anyway?"

"The hospital. Should we go?"

"If you want. I have a funeral to plan." Milani says and gets off the floor Cebo's blanket in hand and walks out the bedroom. She finds Scelo and Sne in the kitchen.

"Hey." Sne says and gives her friend a hug. "How are you feeling?"

"Like someone just ripped my heart out and stomped on it a thousand times." Sne helps her sit down while Scelo turns on the kettle.

"I'm sorry."

"I should have never left them. I should have stayed here after matric. At the least I should have come back here when I finished my exams. How did I expect Hlumile to deal with her studies and taking care of kids all be herself? This is all my fault." Milani says as fresh tears stream down her face.

"Lani it's not your fault. It's never been your fault. You did what you had to do to make sure you and your siblings have a good life. You fought so hard for them to have a better life. This is not your fault." Sne assures her. She shakes her head chuckling a bit.

"And what has that done for them? Right at this moment they should be waking up and getting ready for school instead they are lying in some cold table at the morgue because I failed to protect them." Scelo places a cup of tea in front of her before taking a seat.

"Milani you're not God and you didnt poison the kids. You need to stop blaming yourself for this. The police are going to find the person responsible." He tells her.

"They dont need to look any further. They should ask my mother." The two siblings look at each other shock all over their faces.

"You think she did this?" Sne questions.

"Who would walk in to a house put poison in some kids food and then leave without even taking anything in the house? She did this. And now I want to know why." She gets off the chair and calls Hlumile.

"What?" Hlumile asks coming into the kitchen.

"We are going to the hospital." She tells her before turning to Sne. "Can you drive us?"

"I'll drive you." Scelo says and leads them out the door.

The hospital is almost full. It's a Monday morning people are hungover but hoping for a doctor's note so they can avoid work mothers sit quietly with their crying infants probably irritated from being woken up so early in the morning and nurses are changing shifts. The smell of disinfectant hits Milani as soon as she walks into the hospital. She heads straight to the reception desk where a tired looking nurse is getting ready to leave.

"Hi I am looking for my mother Khetsiwe Mbokazi. She was admitted last night." Milani says to the nurse who doesnt even seem to hear anything she says.

"As you can see my shift is over. You'll have to wait for the next nurse." The nurse answers throwing her bag and a black plastic bag over her shoulder and walking out.

"Wow." A dumbfounded Milani says looking at the empty nurse's chair. She turns around looking down the hallway on one end a bunch of people are waiting in line hoping for help and the other is filled with nurses on their way out. Without thinking twice she marches down the hallway going the opposite direction to the nurses. None of them paying any attention to her or the people behind her.

Ten minutes later after going from ward to ward looking for her mother she sees her lone figure laying alone in a private ward. She chuckles wondering who will be paying for the private ward because it sure as hell wont be her.

Scelo pulls her back just as she pushes the door open. She turns around to look at him her face unreadable.

"Are you sure about this?" He asks. He's not sure what to think of her recent mood. She's not shedding tears as much as she was a few hours ago. It was easier then to read where she was emotionally but now now she's like a rock with no emotions.

"I'm sure. I just need to speak to my mother." She says an almost invisible smile crossing her lips.

23

She looks so peaceful. A tiny smile across her lips as if she didn't just kill her children. I might not have the proof but I know she did it. For the longest time I was angry at her for being so weak to let a man walking out on her be her breaking point. I'd never do that. No man will ever have that much power over me. Not even Jesus.

I pull up the chair dragging it on the floor making a noise that sends her eyes open shock and confusion masking her face. She looks around until her eyes land on me and she smiles. A bright wide smile. I place the chair next to the bed and look at her.

"Milani you came." She says excitement taking over her face.

"I did. Do you know why you're here?" I ask. Her face falls she looks down at her fingers balled into fists on her lap. "Do you know what you did?"

The door swings open before I can get my answer. A doctor walks in her white coat looking a bit oversized for her tiny frame. She looks young even younger than me. Smart people.

"You must be Milani you are listed as Miss Mbokazi's next of kin." The doctor says looking at her clipboard. She takes off her glasses and looks at me waiting for confirmation. I nod my head hoping she'll continue with whatever she came here for and then leave I still need to talk to my mother.

"I am Doctor Skhosana your mother ingested some poisoned wild mushrooms." She tells me. I stand up and look at her as if that will make my hearing any clearer.

"How? She's allergic to mushrooms." I say and look back at my mother. Her eyes are still glued to her hands. Not once has she looked up since the doctor came in. Could it be guilt?

"I don't know how she got to them but her system was full of the poison and add her allergies to that she's lucky to still be alive." The doctor says. And it all makes sense now. Cebo is also allergic to mushrooms. Or was allergic. And her tiny system couldn't handle both the poison and fighting off the allergy. "I've also alerted the investigating officer in your case. They were here a few minutes before you got here." She adds.

I sit back down on the chair numbness washing over me. She knew what she was doing. Her whole entire life she's known about her allergy she knows she passed it down to Cebo and she used the one thing she knows can kill her and the kids to do something like this. They should have never let her out.

"A psychiatrist will be here to see her later just to make sure she's Okay. Her file states that she was once admitted to the psychiatric wing of the hospital so the psychiatrist will need to assess her situation make sure she's okay before the police can proceed with their investigation."

I let out a chuckle shaking my head. They need to make sure she's 'okay'.

"She's alive how okay does she need to be?" I whisper loud enough for her to hear me.

"Milani I know how complicated this is....."

"Complicated? She killed my brother and sister. Two innocent children. They are dead because of her and you need to make sure she's Okay? Are you for real?" I turn to her a different type of anger taking over me. All of a sudden she's a victim.

"I was trying to help you." My mother whispers. Her eyes still not coming up. "I know how hard you work and how hard things have been for you. I just wanted you to have a normal life."

"Did I ask you for your help?"

"Milani a word please." The doctor says walking out. I follow her and find her in the hallway. "Can I ask you something?" I dont know why she even has to ask. I'm here aren't I? I nod my head nonetheless. "When was the last time your mother took her medication?"

"She takes her medication everyday."

"Are you sure? Because there are no traces of any of her medications in her system. From the looks of it I dont think your mother has been taking her meds. And that's a very dangerous thing for someone with multiple conditions like her." Multiple conditions? Last I remember she was diagnosed with bipolar disorder and clinical depression.

"I know how bipolar and depression are. And I assure you she's been taking her medications." I tell her. She frowns and opens her file again looking at it like she's trying to find something. I hope it's nothing major. As soon as she finds what she's looking for she looks up at me.

"According to your mother's file she was also diagnosed with residual schizophrenia."

And then everything makes sense. When she was diagnosed with depression and bipolar thirteen years ago I didnt know what that was but she had medication and she took it religiously. I thought she'd get better and she was. She carried on with life she went to work and she even got pregnant with Cebo. No one knows her father but we didnt care it was just nice having a little baby in the house.

That bubble was quickly burst when my mother was diagnosed with post natal and clinical depression just weeks after Cebo's birth and she tried to kill herself. Not only did she have to be admitted into a psyche ward but I had to take care of the children. A part of me always felt she was weak. To let a man break her like that.

I want to feel bad for her I really do but the image of Cebo and Siya laying lifeless on the floor will never leave my mind. She did that. Mental illness or not she killed my siblings and that's not something I can easily forget.

I dont know when the doctor left I sit on the cold floor feeling dejected and tired. I've tried everything I can to make sure my siblings and I have a somewhat good life. But now they are gone. It feels like my mother just stuck a big ass knife through my heart and she keeps twisting it. Help me? Please.

"Hey

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I sit on the cold floor feeling dejected and tired. I've tried everything I can to make sure my siblings and I have a somewhat good life. But now they are gone. It feels like my mother just stuck a big ass knife through my heart and she keeps twisting it. Help me? Please.

"Hey is everything okay?" I hear Sne speaking. I look up and see the three of them looking down at me worry and dark eyes under their eyes. I cant believe I havent slept in almost 24 hours.

"She says she was trying to help me." I say and for some reason a bout of laughter escapes me.

"I've needed her help when I was thirteen and taking care of a baby and she was too strung out on meds to help me. I needed her help when I left home to go and study in Joburg and she failed to come to the party. And now now when I really do not need her help she decides to 'help' me. And her help her help means I have to plan a funeral. When will it ever end?" Hlumile takes a seat next to me resting her head on my shoulder. I can feel her tears falling down my arm. Sne sits on the other side holding my hand.

Scelo squats down in front of me wiping away my tears.

"You dont have to go through this alone Lani we are here for you." He says.

"I am tired. I am tired of always having to fight for anything. Everytime I think i see the light at the end of the tunnel it always turns out to be nothing but a hole letting in the sunlight and when night comes it all goes back to being dark again. When will I ever be happy?"

We all sit there in silence oblivious to the nurses walking up and down the corridors. People moving on with their lives like two young lives didnt just end a few hours ago. Who am I kidding nobody gives a fuck about my problems it's always been me against the world at some point I need to accept it.

"I have an exam in two hours." Hlumile says breaking the silence.

"Yeah we should get going." I wipe my tears and get off the floor. My nonexistent butt numb and cold. A bad combination. Before we leave I open the door to my mothers room and see her curled up on the bed whispering 'I was trying to help' over and over again. I close the door and with it shutting

off whatever relationship my mother and I had. I can't help her until she decides herself that she wants help.

By the time we get home there are more people outside and some knocking on the door. I'm in no mood to deal with people right now. We get off the car and Sne opens the door. I get in and throw myself on the couch while Hlumile rushes to get ready for school. I just hope she'll be able to keep it together for the whole week. I know I wouldn't.

A woman starts a song outside before leading a bunch of other women into the house. It's a bit too early for all this. But it would be rude to tell them to fuck off. I just hope they can make this quick because I see some of them are wearing work uniforms.

The song dies down and I sit there in yesterday's clothes my armpits already complaining and my breath not as minty as it was when I last brushed. All I need right now is sleep but I sit there listening to people rambling on about how sorry they are. Words that mean nothing to me right now. I had to learn the hard way that words with no actions mean nothing. My father said he loved me and would always be here but he left. My mother said she loved me and she'll always be here. She left. Not physically but she left anyway.

The adult in me knows it's not mum's fault she's sick. But the little broken girl inside me feels abandoned by the same people who brought me into the world and that shit hurts like hell.

After about twenty minutes of them talking none stop they finally say their goodbyes. I watch them walk out the door and realise more will be coming. And I am not ready to face any of them. I get off the couch and close the door locking it.

"I'm going to take a nap." Sne says getting off the couch. Hlumile walks back into the lounge with her uniform on.

"I'll make you a lunchbox." I say walking into the kitchen with her behind me.

"You don't have to do that. I'll come back home as soon as I'm done writing." She says taking an apple and a banana. "I have to go."

"Okay I'll ask Sne to borrow me her car so I can drop you off."

"No need. I'll take her." Scelo says waiting by the door.

"Thanks. I'll see you later." Hlumile says giving me a hug. I watch them leave before going to the

bathroom. I take a quick bath and brush my teeth before heading to the bedroom.

I find Sne already sleeping. I look around the room and see Cebo and Siya's polished shoes sitting by the wardrobe their uniforms hanging on the outside of the wardrobe ready for the week. I never did understand why he kept his uniform this side when he had his own bedroom.

The reality of everything hits me fully and I slump down on the floor. I'll never see them again they will never again fight for the remote in the morning before going to school they will never again sit in the kitchen doing their homework while arguing about the pettiest thing.

I bring my knees up to my chest silently sobbing. I wish I could go back in time and fix this. I should have never left them. Or better yet I should have taken them sooner. This whole thing would have been avoided if I'd just taken them.

I hear a knock on the door. Its probably Scelo I shouldn't have locked the door. I wipe my tears and get off the floor. I grab a robe from the wardrobe and put it on before heading out. I open the door and find the two Detective's dressed more professionally than they were the first time I saw them.

"Good morning. Can we come in?" One of them asks. I step aside and they walk in.

"Can I get you anything? Water tea?" I'm hoping they say nothing so we can keep it moving. I need sleep and I doubt theres anything they can tell me that I dont know.

"No thank you." Hallelujah. "Can we sit?" I show them to the couches and they sit down. I sit across from them and wait.

"So this morning when forensics were busy in the house they found some things and we were hoping you'd answer some questions for us. Is that okay?" Mtshali asks. I nod my head. "We found prescription medication in your mother's room."

"Yes she has bipolar and she suffers from clinical depression. And I just found out she also has schizophrenia." I tell them and they note it down.

"Has she been taking her medication?" Masombuka questions.

"Of course. My sister made sure to always fill her prescription. And we would take her to the doctor every six months."

"Did she see a therapist?" Masombuka continues.

"Only when she was at the hospital. After that she said she was fine and she would take her

medication. She'd be better some days and some days she'd just want to be alone. Why are you asking me all this?" I'm pretty sure I've said this to the doctor so why am I repeating it to them.

They look at each other before Mtshali pulls out a clear plastic bag written Evidence on it from his jacket pocket. Inside it is a bunch of pills. Pills I recognize because they are the same ones my mother takes. He places them on the table and there is a lot of them. A lot. Enough to send anyone to their grave.

"We found these inside your mothers handbag." He pulls another plastic bag with something that looks like dried tree bark. "And these are wild mushrooms we also found in the handbag. From the looks of it they were picked a few days maybe weeks ago we wont know for sure until the lab runs their tests. These were dried and then turned into powder. Since the doctors found traces of the powder in your mother's stomach when they were pumping her we think this is what was used to kill the kids."

"I know about the mushrooms the doctor told me."

"Good from the looks of it it seems your mother has been planning this for a while now." I sit there unsure of what to think. How does someone who in essence is mentally challenged plan a whole entire murder right under our noses and no one suspected a thing. And if Hlumile was here maybe she would also be lying in a morgue.

I sigh and run my hands on my face. I dont know what to do or even say. All I know at this moment is that I've never hated my mother more than I do now. When we needed her as her children we were forced to accept that she is sick. But she wasnt sick enough to plan an elaborate murder. How twisted and selfish can she be.

"So what's going to happen now? Is she going to jail?"

"Well we are building a case against her. But with her history and the fact that she hasnt been taking her medication the case might not even go to court. At best she'll probably be sent to a mental institution for a long time." I chuckle and get off the couch I should have known.

"So she kills two innocent kids and she gets away with it? Where is the justice in that?" I ask them. They stand up and take their evidence.

"Look we will do the best we can but like I said don't get your hope's up. This case is not likely to see the inside of a court room." Mtshali says. "We have to get going. We will update you when we have more information." I nod my head and walk them to the door.

As soon as I open the door I see Scelo standing outside with a bunch of takeaway bags. He steps aside as the officers walk out.

"What was that about?" He asks walking into the house.

"She has been planning all this for a while now. One way or another she was going to do it." He places the takeaways on the table and gives me a hug.

"I'm sorry." He whispers. I'm so numb I can't even cry. Maybe it's time I accept that happiness will always be a distant dream to me. Just when I thought there was light at the end of the tunnel someone has to put it out.

24

The buzzing of my phone under my pillow is enough to bring me back to the land of the living. I pull it out and squint my eyes to look at it. I have a whole lot of missed calls and missed alarms messages and notifications. My battery is dangerously low. I haven't charge it since Sunday. The fact that the phone is still alive is a miracle all on its own. I don't even think I brought my charger with me.

I check the missed calls and find some from Lulonke Sizakele Sebastian and even Dave. I was supposed to go to work yesterday and unfortunately I didn't show up. And I didn't even call to say why I couldn't come. The past two days have been overwhelming and quite frankly it's something I wish I could forget. But how can I forget that my world has been turned totally upside down.

I lay on the bed looking up at the ceiling. I remember when I had the ceiling installed. We were all excited. And as if the heavens were on our side on the day they finished it rained. We sat in the lounge listening to the rain but it wasn't the same as before. The rain wasn't as loud as it used to be and it was so surreal. As minute as it seems it was a great change for us and we loved it. For the first time in a long time Cebo didn't cover her ears when it rained or thunder and lightning struck. I'll never forget that day. Now I'll never get to share these little wins with them again. The only person I have left is Hlumile.

I sigh and take my phone. I dial Dave's number hoping that the battery will last long enough for at least a minute just so I can tell Dave what's going on. Lucky for me he picks up quickly.

"Milani how are you?" He asks sounding worried.

"Hey I'm okay I want to apologize for not coming to work yesterday i....."

"I know." He interrupts me. "Scelo told me what happened. You can take the next couple of weeks off." Of course.

"Thank you."

"I'm really sorry Milani. And don't worry about work. I know you have a presentation I've spoken to Sebastian and Sizakele they will take care of everything." I take a deep breath trying to hold my tears back. This is a huge presentation. And if we get the contract our names will be on everyone's lips. I was so looking forward to it and now it's all gone. Thanks to my mother.

"Thanks Dave but I also have Mr Mbatha's place to finish up." I tell him. Two weeks is a bit excessive I don't think I want to spend the next few days with nothing to do. It will just make me overthink and get deep into my head.

"I also called him. He said he will wait until you're ready to finish his place. He refused to have anyone else finish up so relax. Don't think about work. Okay?" I nod my head and then remember he can't see me.

"Okay. Thanks Dave. I should go. I need to serve tea or something." He chuckles and says his goodbyes. I place the phone next to me willing myself to get up. My body feels heavy. I don't know how long I've been out of it. I look at my phone again and realise it's Tuesday and it's late in the afternoon. The last I remember it was a Monday and the detectives were here telling me how my mother killed my siblings and that she'll get away with it.

I drag myself off the bed and walk to the door. I turn the handle and it won't budge. It's locked but the key is not here. I hear faint sounds of people speaking on the other side. I walk to the bed and sit down. I grab my phone and it's at 3 percent. I hope the gods of cellphones can grant me this one last wish. I dial Sne's number and it rings twice before it goes to voicemail.

A moment later I hear a key turn on the door before it opens. As soon as Sne opens the door and walks in so does the noise. Last I remember the only people who are supposed to be here are Hlumile Sne Scelo and I and I know the three of them can't make that much noise. In fact the two of them because Sne is here.

She quickly closes the door behind her and comes over to me.

"You're up. I was scared there for a second." She says sitting next to me.

"How long have I been out?"

"Over 24 hours." She says like it's the most normal thing. My mouth shoots open and I stare at her. Who sleeps 24 hours?

"Why didnt you wake me up? Who sleeps that long Snethemba?" She looks away and I can tell she is hiding something. "Snethemba Cebekhulu speak? Why was I out so long?" She looks up at me.

"Okay don't be mad yesterday after we had breakfast I gave you some sleeping pills." She says. I frown trying to remember if I took any pills but nothing comes to mind.

"I don't remember taking sleeping pills." Or maybe I forgot?

"That's because you didnt. I slipped them in your juice. You needed the rest and knowing you you were going to keep beating yourself up about this so I couldn't have that. So I gave you a couple of my sleeping pills to help you rest."

"YOUR sleeping pills?" She nods her head nervously. Maybe because she knows how strong her pills are. That's why I slept for an entire day.

"I know two were a bit extreme but I really didn't think they would knock you out for an entire day." I shake my head and smile cause I know this conversation is not going anywhere. If I get mad at her she'll just pout and give me her puppy eyes and as always I'll forget.

"Fine. Maybe I did need the rest. So what's with the noise?" I ask pointing to the door.

"Oh the calvary has arrived. Your aunts from Nelspruit are here. Some of your dads relatives too. Atleast that's who they said they are." They are here. All of them. Of course they are. Probably to see for themselves the kind of mess they left us in. I immediately go into panic mode thinking about the plates and pots and all things important that they may get their hands on.

"I need to go pack things in the kitchen before they disappear." I say standing up but Sne pulls me back to the bed.

"Relax. Hlumile and I already did that. Everything that's important has been locked in the other bedroom. The key is with Scelo. If I had bigger boobs it would be safely there." She says hitting her nonexistent chest. "But lo and behold I didn't wake up in time when they were handing out boobs." She adds making me laugh. "I've missed your laugh. I know it's been two days but still. I like it when you laugh." I pull her in for a hug.

"I dont know what I did to deserve you but I hope to God I keep doing it." I whisper in her ear. She pulls back and wipes my tears away.

"Stop stealing my line." She says and we laugh. "You have to go greet the vultures. Siza and Hlumile are busy serving them tea. And we have to dish up supper soon. Apparently they prefer to have an early supper." She shakes her head. "I don't know why these people show up here empty handed expecting to be fed three times a day with snacks and tea in between. Funerals are bloody expensive. The meat in the fridge is almost finished. Tomorrow we have to go and buy more groceries." She tells me. I don't have enough money to feed vultures until Saturday. If they are here to stay they will have to contribute money and buy food. If they fail to do that they can go back to whatever hole they crawled out of.

"Siza and Sebastian are here?" I didn't even know they were coming.

"Yeah. And so is Lulonke. He however is parked outside and he refuses to come in. Said something about it being disrespectful." She says as if it's the most normal thing to say. I haven't spoken to Lulonke in a few days and now his presence explains the many missed calls from him.

I change my pyjamas and put on a long skirt with a simple t-shirt. She gives me her charger so I leave my phone charging. We walk out the door and she locks it and puts the key in her pocket. We get to the lounge and it's changed. The TV has been covered by a sheet. The couches are piled up in the corner there are mattresses on the floor and my supposed aunts are sitting there like the dutiful and mourning family one would think they are.

"Sanbonani. (Hello.)" I say looking around the room. I see my aunt Ncamsile mum's younger sister Carol

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Carol Maggie and Nomalanga mum's older sisters Sbongile is also here as well as her sister Zodwa and two other women I don't know. If these people think I'm going to feed them for the whole week then they have another thing coming.

"Oh mntfwana sisi nkosiyam. (My niece.)" Ncamsile says putting the cup of tea on the floor and getting off the mattress. She pulls me into a bone crushing hug and I feel my tiny bones begging for help. She runs her hand up and down my back. I'm sure she hasn't even noticed that I'm not hugging her back. She pulls away holding me at arms length. Her sad face looks really convincing. "Ncesi sisi (condolences)." She keeps saying over and over again. Anyone watching would think she's being genuine. Or maybe she is but my cynical self has learnt to see beyond the act people put on.

She pulls away and looks at me straight in the eyes. All I can do is stand there with my resting bitch face as Sne calls it.

"Inkhosi iphile inkhosi itsatsile. (The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away.)" She adds for good measure. And that's the cue I need to get the fuck out there before i say things i shouldn't say. When did my mother become God? I know people will say it was God's plan if this is God's plan then maybe he is not as kind and merciful as all those church ladies say. Maybe they should reconsider their relationship with the guy. He seems to be a scam.

I get to the kitchen and find the table decked out with plastic plates and food with Hlengiwe on dish up duty with some girl who is probably a cousin. I'm pretty sure they cooked the entire packet of 5kg portions judging by the huge chunks of meat. They didnt even bother cutting them in half. I look at Hlumile and she shrugs her shoulders. Now I know this is not on her. She knows better. We have to maximize our food as much as we can. We learnt that the hard way.

I look at Hlengiwe and she doesn't see anything wrong with the huge chunks of meat. Again I say I'm not about to fork out thousands of rands to feed these scavengers. It ain't happening. Sne Hlumile Siza and Sebastian are tucked away in the corner watching the show.

"Why didnt you cut the meat?" I ask and Hlengiwe and the unknown girl look up at me confused. I'm pretty sure even in their own homes they dont cook like this.

"What do you mean? The meat is already cut." The girl answers.

"I'm sorry who are you again?" She looks at Hlengiwe and back to me. She sees I'm still waiting for an answer and she sighs.

"My name is Kele I'm your cousin." She sounds offended that I dont know her. But I'm pretty sure even she doesnt know me. I glare at her and it registers in her head I have no idea who she is. "My dad and your dad are brothers." She says like she us explaining to a child.

"That's nice. Now Kele tell me in your father's house do you cook meat as if you have hundreds of chickens running around the yard?" She looks at Hlengiwe and I see my dear cousin shaking her head. "No seriously tell me. You come in here take out a whole packet of meat and dish it out like its Christmas. Are you going to replace that meat?" Her jaw drops and I know she has no answer. So I'm left with no choice.

I grab a tray and pick out all the pieces of meat from the plates and place them on the tray. I take a knife from the drawer and cut each piece in half including the drumsticks and wings. I put a half a

piece in each plate and put the rest of the meat back in the pot.

"Now you can go serve your parents." They both look at me shock all over their faces. I see Hlengiwe clap her hands once.

"Wow are you really that stingy? Everyone is here trying to help you through this and all you care about is meat? Wow." She adds clapping her hands again.

"Hlengiwe do you know how much a 5kg packet of chicken costs? You're 22 you should know. Oh wait you don't because as much as you are an adult you have no idea how the real world works. Secondly I didnt ask for anyone to show their faces here waiting for me to feed them. I bet none of you even brought an onion and you're going to tell me I'm stingy. Bitch please." She and her best friend fill a couple of trays with food and take them out to the lounge.

I see Sebastian walking over to me before pulling me into a hug. His hugs are always warm and fuzzy and right now I feel my tears pushing their way out. But I dont have time to cry right now.

"I'm so sorry friend." He says pulling away from me. I give him a faint smile before Siza gives me a hug too.

"We are here for you Okay. Anything you need we are here." She says.

"Thanks guys. But are you not working tomorrow?" I ask and they shrug their shoulders.

"We are and yummy Scelo has offered to take us to work in the morning and then bring us back in the evening." Sebastian says.

"You're staying?"

"The whole week baby or until you throw us out. Whichever comes first." Siza says.

Hlengiwe and Kele come back to take the last batch of food both of them giving me a stinky eye.

"Have you guys eaten?" They shake their heads and I feel like popping their heads off. "So you were going to let the vultures have all the food? Are you nuts?"

"We didn't want any trouble. Scelo said he will bring us food." Sne says. And then I remember that Lulonke is outside. Atleast I hope he still is. I open the cupboard looking for a decent plate and there is none Sne was not joking they really did clean up here. Even the spoons are plastic. The only thing decent is the knife I just used.

"I need to dish up for Lulonke i need a plate." I say. I'm not about to dish up for him in a plastic plate.

"Scelo has the keys babe and he is not here." Sne tells me. Well I guess plastic it is. I dish up for him making sure to put as much meat as I can put on the plate. I place it on the table just as Hlengiwe

comes in to get a spoon. She looks at the plate and then up at me.

"Whose food is that?" She asks.

"Mine. Do you have a problem?"

"So you refuse for the elders to....." I put my hand up and she stops talking.

"Not today satan. I'm not in the mood." I cover the plate and walk out to the lounge to find the supposed elders whispering among themselves.

"Milani." Aunt Carol calls out making me stop and look at her. "Uyaphi? (Where are you going?)"

"Out." I say and open the door.

"Out where?" Ncamsile adds. "Kufiwe laykhaya there's no need to be out gallivanting at this time of the night. (There's a death in the family.)" I look at her and chuckle before walking out the door. If she thinks she's going to parent me now when she failed ten years ago. I close the door behind me and walk down to the gate. I look down the road and see no car. I look up and see a car parked there. I dont know if its him but I hope it is. I take in a deep breath. I cant believe he is actually here. Maybe he isn't so bad after all.

25

He is here. I dont know why but his presence somehow makes things a little bearable. Not better bearable. I dont think anything will make any of this better. He takes the plate and puts it on the dashboard. For his sake I hope the rice doesnt spill all over the dashboard.

"How are you feeling?" He asks holding my hand his voice laced with concern and worry. I take a deep breath trying to scramble everything thats going on in my head. I have no idea how I feel.

"I dont know." He nods his head in understanding. "What are you doing here anyway? You know you are a client right?" He looks up at me and smiles. His smile is beautiful and his teeth is white as snow. I wonder if those are God given or he is just hygienic.

"Please you and I both know you're going to be my wife so I have to be here." He says matter of factly.

"You arent just fast you are rocket fast." He laughs.

"I like to think I just know what I want. So what's happening inside? I didnt want to come in without talking to you first." How respectful. Unlike the vultures pretending to care.

"Well the vultures have landed and now they expect me to feed them for the entire week while they sit on the mattress making demands." I look up at him and he seems confused. And then it dawn's on me that he doesn't know my story. And I doubt this is the time to tell him my family is the textbook definition of screwed.

"Vultures? Who are those?"

"My supposed family. It's a long story. Maybe one day I will tell you all about it." I say trying to deflect from even thinking about the next week and what it entails.

"I'll hold you to that. So how can I help?" Maybe he has superpowers and he can make those women disappear the same way they appeared. But that would be asking for too much right now.

"Nothing. I just have to do some running around tomorrow. I need to make sure I get the death certificates and then lodge a claim with my bank for the funeral cover I have to add more groceries and prepare for the funeral I have to go to the municipal offices to get burial plots I need to choose caskets....." Listing everything out loud is more overwhelming than I thought. I've never planned a funeral in my life and now I have to plan two. "I've never planned a funeral before." I blurt out and feel Lulonke's intense gaze on me.

I feel his gaze on me and I'm hoping for him to look away even for a second just so I can wipe the tear drop on the corner of my eye. But he doesn't.

"I'll help you." He says and I quickly turn to look at him.

"You don't have to do that. She and my other friends are here." He smiles again and I want to kiss him. Yes this is probably the wrong time to even be thinking about that but I'd give anything right now to feel something other than grief and pain.

"Am I not your friend?" He asks a smirk crossing his perfectly lubricated lips.

"Technically speaking you are a client."

"Six no nine. Same thing." I'm tempted to refuse his help but right now I don't think I have the liberty to turn away a helping hand. "I just hope your elders don't think I'm being disrespectful." I frown and look at him and he sees my confusion. Why would my parents see that as being disrespectful? Besides neither one of them are here so who cares.

"I'm going to come and pay lobola one day so I don't want your parents thinking *ngyazenzela nje emzini wabo*. (I do what I please in their home.)" He says and then I remember he is a Zulu man. But then again that's a black men thing. Right? Respect. I

"Dont worry about that. We are friends right?" He smiles revealing his pearly whites. This man is gorgeous though.

"For now." I feel a bunch of butterflies floating around my stomach at his words. It's quite nice to have someone see a future with you even though I dont see it yet but he does. So that's good.

"Okay then friend let's go inside Scelo is probably on his way so we can plan properly. More heads are better than one right?" He smiles and takes the plate from the dashboard.

"Okay let me eat first." I watch him eat. Even his chewing pattern is amazing. A great distraction from the thousand thoughts running through my head.

He finished eating and pulled out a small packet of tissues from the cubbyhole.

"That was nice. Did you cook?" He asks wiping his mouth.

"No. My friends did." A small smile forms on his lips.

"Can you cook?"

"Not really." He let's out a chuckle and pulls a blazer from the backseat.

"That's okay I can cook so we wont starve. Let's go in." He grabs the plates and gets out of the car.

A part of me wants to stay in this car and not go back to face the reality that is my life right now. I sigh and also get out of the car. We walk slowly to the house just as Scelo's car pulls up. We wait for him as he parks and gets out. He slowly walks to us and I can see him sizing Lulonke up. Any other time it would be funny but Scelo is overprotective and he doesnt like people he doesn't know especially men hanging around us.

He greets and gives me a hug. He holds on to me while starring at Lulonke. I swear the testosterone level right now is high and we are outside where there is fresh air but still. I can smell it.

"How are you? When I left you were sleeping." He says and finally looks at me.

"I'm okay. Why did you let Sne drug me like that?"

"You needed the rest." He says smiling. Lulonke clears his throat and Scelo's smile disappears like mist under the morning sun.

"Uhm Scelo this is my friend Lulonke. Lulonke this is my....." wait how do you introduce your former crush to your current crush maybe potential boyfriend? I see Scelo looking at me a smirk on his lips probably wondering what I'll say. Because honestly as much as Scelo is Sne's big brother and in essence mine too. But we cant deny the chemistry and sexual tension between us. We've been smart enough not to act on it but that doesnt mean it's not there. "This is my friend Scelo."

They shake hands and I can see the skepticism in Scelo's eyes. But I don't have time to deal with that right now. "Let's go in."

I lead them into the house and immediately their presence fills the room. Scelo alone has a presence that's undeniable. Now put him and Lulonke in the same room and it's like everyone else disappears. I see my aunts looking at them jaws on the floor. You'd think in their old age they would know better than to be ogling young men. But here we are. I show them to a couple of empty chairs and they sit. Sne Hlumile

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Sizakele and Sebastian come in from the kitchen followed by my cousins. They pull up the reed mats and lay them on the floor and sit. I pull up an empty chair from the kitchen and sit down. My ass is not built for a reed mat.

"Milani kwentenjani? (What's going on?)" Aunt Ncamsile asks.

"Ncane these are my friends. They are here to help me plan the funeral." I see them exchange looks before looking back at me.

"What do you mean help you plan the funeral? Isn't that supposed to be a family matter?" Aunt Carol asks.

"They are family to me."

"Milani they might be your friends but they are not family. There are things that we need to discuss and they don't need them." Maggie says.

"Ucinsile Mamkhulu Milani this is a family matter. (Your aunt is right.)" Ncamsile tells me. Each time any of them open their mouths spewing the whole family nonsense to me it just makes me want to vomit.

I take a deep breath. For Cebo and Siya's sake I need to keep this as civil as possible. My babies deserve that at least.

"Ncane I understand what you're saying but you also need to understand this. These people....." I point at my friends who are sitting on one side of the room. "They are my family. They have been more of a family to me than any of you combined." I hear them mumble among themselves.

"This is not the time to be discussing this." Nomalanga butts in. She's the quiet one and the oldest among my mother's sisters. Five girls and two boys you'd think the girls would be the closest. But that's not the case. Till this day I don't know what it was that happened in that family that made them

somehow distance themselves from my mother. They failed to show up when dad left they failed to show up when mum had Cebo and they failed to show up when she was admitted to the hospital for months. But one death and all of them are here wanting to play happy families. Over my cold dead body. Excuse the pun.

"Then when should we discuss it Mamkhulu? After the funeral when you go back to your lives and forget about us?" They keep quiet but I see Maggie's nostrils flaring. She's the one with the shortest temper. Anything can set her off. My mum comes after her in fact they are literally ten months apart. I know she can explode at any moment but I don't care. I have to do this for my siblings. I don't have time to be nursing people's egos.

"Anyways the funeral will be on Saturday. Tomorrow I will go and fill out the necessary paperwork at the hospital and then I'll go do the death certificates. Hopefully it will come out early then I'll be able to put in a claim for the funeral cover."

"I will come with you." Lulonke says earning himself glaring eyes from my aunts and Scelo.

"No need. I'll do it." I see Sebastian and Sizakele whispering and I know they can see it. The tension.

"I thought you are driving Sebastian and Sizakele to work tomorrow?" Sne says taking the words right out of my mouth.

"They can use your car. It's not like you'll need it while you're here. We will drop Hlumile off at school and then we will do what needs to be done." Scelo tells her and I see her roll her eyes. I'm sure it's not because those two will be driving it's because her brother is acting some type of way and she can't ask him about it. Not now at least.

"I'll also need copies of the death certificates." Aunt Sbongile says quietly but loud enough for me to hear her.

"Yes we all do." Maggie adds. I chuckle trying to calm my anger.

"Why?" They look at me like I'm crazy. "What are you going to do with their death certificates?"

"I need to show my stokvel and at work." Sbongile says.

"Again why?" In my head I already have an idea why this is important to them but I want to hear them say it. I want them to tell me that they never had enough money to help us with food but they had enough to cover my siblings and possibly me so they can cash out when we die. I need my family to open their mouths and say we are more useful to them dead than we are alive.

"To help out with the funeral." Maggie bellows.

"No need. I'll take care of everything." Its taking every ounce of strength in me to keep calm. But they are making it so hard.

"Really? You'll have enough money for the caskets food the tent the graves everything?" Sbongile asks. You'd think she actually gives a fuck but I know whatever cover she claims to have it's all for her. No matter how much it is I'll be lucky if she gives me a tenth of it. So to save myself the trouble I'll do this myself. For the first time ever I'm grateful for that guy who ambushed me at a pick n pay and made me buy funeral cover. Sure he was cute and all but now it's coming in handy. Plus I also have funeral cover with my bank. I used to hate it each time those debit orders went off. But for some reason I always made sure I had enough money each month to cover those expenses. I actually got both for my mother's sake. I always thought she'd be the one I bury first. But life had other ideas.

"I've already paid for the catering." Scelo says and the room goes silent. "Now that we know the day of the burial they will make sure there is enough food for everyone."

"And I'll take care of the caskets." Lulonke announces. I see the shock on my aunts faces and I know they weren't expecting any of this. I'm pretty sure they thought my siblings would be buried in cardboard boxes. Little did they know that things change.

"I'll take care of the graves." Sne says and I frown looking at her. She avoids eye contact.

Nomalanga claps her hands and as if she cant believe what's happening right now.

"I think we can discuss everything after the certificates are out." Scelo adds and I'm grateful for that because I am tired of these vultures feeble attempt at feigning care.

"Okay then. I will be here early in the morning so we can start working." Lulonke says looking at his watch.

"I will walk you out." Both men stand up and I follow suit. They say their goodbyes and we walk out.

"I have to go get some sleep." Scelo tells me. "I brought you guys clothes earlier Sne has them. I will be back in the morning. And if you need anything call me. I'm booked at a guest house a couple of streets down." He gives me a hug and lingers longer than usual. My guess is thats just his way of pissing off Lulonke. "We got you okay?" He whispers in my ear. I nod my head and he let's go. "I'll see you later." We watch him get in his car and drive off. I turn to Lulonke and see his jaw clenched still looking at the direction Scelo went.

"Are you okay?" He quickly eases his jaw and turns to me.

"I'm fine. How are you?" He pulls me to him and hugs me. His scent is intoxicating and heaven knows I just wish I could get lost in him and forget all my problems.

"I'll be okay. And you don't need to buy the caskets. I have funeral cover and it should take care of that." I say laying on his chest. I feel him kiss the top of my head.

"I want to do it." I pull away from him and we walk down to his car hand in hand. "I'll be back early in the morning and we will get things done. I promise you." He adds hugging me again.

"Lulonke..."

"I want to do this for you." He says cutting me off. I nod my head feeling emotional.

"Thank you." He kisses my forehead before opening the car door.

"You're welcome. Now I have to drive back to Midrand. I'll see you tomorrow." I smile as he starts the car and rolls down the window. "Everything will be Okay. I promise." He drives off.

I head back to the house and the moment I walk in all eyes are on me. I'm in no mood for any drama so I walk past them. My friends are probably already in the bedroom anyway so I don't need to be sitting here with these vultures. I hear aunt Sbhongile call out my name and I flat out ignore her. I get in the bedroom and find Sne and Hlumile sleeping on an air mattress on the floor while Sebastian is fast asleep on the bed. Sizakele is sleeping on another air mattress on the floor. I guess I'll be sharing with her. I didn't know this room was so big.

I put on my pyjamas and get on the mattress. Thanks to Sne drugging me I doubt I'll be sleeping anytime soon. And I don't think that's a good thing for my head.

26

As expected sleep eluded me. It's 4 AM and Sebastian and Sizakele are already up getting ready for work. I wish I could join them a bit of time away from home would be good for me but I have too much to do. An hour later and I'm walking them out. Sne gave them her car keys since Scelo can't drive them to work and still come back here.

"You'll be okay right?" Sizakele asks looking at me.

"I'll be okay. And thank you guys for being here. I really appreciate it."

"There's nowhere else we'd rather be." Sebastian says wrapping his arm around me. "We'll be back after work. And right now we still have to go past our place to change and get clothes for tomorrow. Will you need anything from your place?"

"No. I think I have everything. Drive safe."

"Dont let the vultures bite." Sizakele says hugging me. I watch them drive off before going back into the house. I need to find the envelope with all my policy documents.

I get into the house and find the vultures packing away the blankets. I don't know who even gave them permission to use my blankets any other day I would have pulled those blankets off them while they slept. But that's a fight for another day.

"Milani awubeke emanti stogeza kungaze kufike bantfu labatolila baskhandze snuka. (Boil water so we can bath before mourners get here and find us smelling.)" Nomalanga says folding a blanket. I ignore her and go straight to the bedroom. Hlumile is up and playing with her phone.

"Shouldnt you be getting ready for school?" I ask getting back on the mattress.

"My paper is only at 11. And bhut Scelo spoke to the principal so he agreed that I can come in to write and then leave." She seems calmer than I expected. But it scares me. I'd hate for her to keep things bottled up inside.

"How are you feeling about all this?" She sighs and puts her phone down.

"I dont know. On the one hand I need to focus on my exams. Siya would laugh at me if I failed. And on the other hand I keep replaying that day over and over in my head. And one thing is constant if I had been here I would have dished up for them and none of this would have happened." A tear runs down the side of her face and I wipe it away. "They would still be here annoying the hell out of me. But they would be alive. I cant get the picture of them lying lifeless out of my head. How much pain they must have been in and I wasn't here to make it all better. I should have never left them with her." I pull her to me and she lays her head on my lap silently sobbing. I close my eyes trying not to cry too. One of us has to be strong for the other. Right now we have no one else but each other.

"Its not your fault Hlumile. I'm sorry I put that much responsibility on you when you were just a child. I should have known better." She lifts her head up and looks at me. She roughly wipes away her tears and sniffles.

"Its not your fault. Its hers." I hand her a tissue and she blows her nose on it. "I used to be happy each time she showed some remnants of normalcy. I hoped and prayed she'd fully recover one day but now I wish she rots in jail." She wipes her tears again. "But the crazy part about it is that she wont pay for her crimes because she is crazy. So crazy she killed her own children. Me included because I almost ate that food. If I hadn't checked on them first I would be dead too." I understand

why she feels this way it's like when you miss a bus and then find out a couple of hours later that the bus got into an accident and people died. The only thought going through your mind is that it could have been you. On one hand you are grateful for being late and on the other you wonder and question why you were saved. But there's nobody there to give you the answers.

I decide to hurry up and take a bath before the vultures take over the bathroom.

As promised at 6AM on the dot Scelo knocks on the door. Sne and Kele are busy making breakfast for the vultures. Me I'm not coming to that party thank you very much. Scelo walks in greets and takes a seat at the table. I see Kele eyeing Scelo with a little smile on her face. Shame she should ask about him before she loses herself.

"What do we paste with?" She asks. "The cheese and polony is finished and there are no eggs." She adds looking at me. I bought the polony and cheese for the kids lunchboxes and now it's all gone thanks to the vultures. And now she is looking at me expecting me to pull a rabbit out of some proverbial hat just so those women can be comfortable. I feel my breath hitching and my nostrils flaring. This week will be too long.

I feel Scelo's hand on my thigh under the table. I look at him and he nods his head. I dont know what that means but I'm guessing he wants me to calm down. I close my eyes and take a few deep breaths. I need the powers that be to give me strength because I definitely need it right now. I will need a lot of it to get through this week.

"I'm pretty sure there is jam in the cupboard." She tilts her head as if she cant believe i just said that. What does she expect me to say that I'll run to the shops and buy a wheel of cheese.

"So I must give them bread and jam?" This girl is testing me. Really testing me.

"What would you like to give them? Give them the dry bread if you want. I really dont care." I leave them there and head back to the bedroom. I find Hlumile busy studying. Or more like cramming. But I'm not worried she's smart this one.

"Hey where is the brown envelope I asked you to keep for me?" If I'm going to get everything done today I need to start early.

"Under the mattress." She answers not looking at me. I lift the mattress up and find the envelope. Like all black people this is our safe. I open the envelope and look through the documents. My policy papers are here everyone's birth certificate and mums hospital documents. I make sure I have everything I need. I take one of Hlumile's flip files and put the documents in.

"Will you get to school Okay?" I ask her while pulling out a dress from the wardrobe. I take off my pyjamas and put the dress on. Good thing I took a bath earlier.

"You do know I've been walking to school since I actually started school right?" I pick up the pyjama top and throw it at her and she laughs. It's the first time I've heard her laugh since this whole thing happened. "I'll be fine sis."

I sit down next to her and she looks up at me. I'm not sure if I should even be asking her this but it feels like if I dont she will feel like I am pushing her aside. And maybe this could bring her closure too.

"So I might be choosing the caskets today do you want to help me?" She immediately shakes her head. I guess she's thought about it.

"No. I already have a hard time getting the images of them laying dead out of my head. I cant add coffins to that. I'll pick out their clothes." I sigh and put my hand on her thigh.

"Okay. I'll be out for most of the day so you might not find food when you come back. Your aunts think this is a restaurant."

"Why are they here anyway? Why wont they pull a disappearing act like they did all those years ago." I can feel her frustration. Heck

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I would get rid of them at a snap of a finger if I could.

"Let's just get through this and you'll see they will disappear again." I get off the bed and grab a light cardigan and put it on before wrapping a head wrap around my head. I look decent enough. "I will see you later. Should I bring you food?" She nods her head as I grab my bag and the file and head out. When i get to the kitchen i find Sne washing up the dishes. These women are going to drive my friend crazy. I need to get her out of here. Scelo is probably already in the car.

"Sne go get ready we have to go." She turns and looks at me a smile on her face before she rushes off. Kele comes back from the lounge with a tray filled with cups and places it in the sink.

"What are we cooking for lunch?" She asks. I open the freezer and find two packets of cooked beans and take them out. She looks at me unbelieving. "Beans?"

"Yes beans. There is little meat left in the fridge you can cook it this afternoon or tonight either way these beans will be eaten." I'm definitely not buying food now. This is not a hotel and I am not Patrice Motsepe. She sighs and heads back to the lounge probably to tell her masters that they will be eating beans today.

Sne comes back ready to go.

"Can we please go. I cant stand those women." She whispers and I am tempted to laugh. I hook my arm on hers and we walk to the lounge.

"Milani sesyahamba (Are we going)?" Aunt Ncamsile asks getting off the mattress. I look at her and she seems ready to go. Dressed and all. And her new bestie Sbongile is also ready. They probably decided on this together. Must be nice.

"Niyaphi aunty? (Where are you going)?" I already know the answer but I'm still curious.

"You cant do all this alone. We are here to help you." Sbongile answers.

"No need. We will be fine. Besides Scelo's car is too small for all of us. I will see you later." I try to pull Sne out but Nomalanga stops me.

"Milani this is a family matter you cannot be waltzing around with strangers planning a family funeral when you have family here ready and willing to help." I hate it when they throw around the family term when it's convenient for them. When we needed family they were a no show but now I'm supposed to run to them for everything. It must be a joke.

I sigh and turn to look at her. I can feel Sne's hold on my arm silently begging me to keep things civil.

"Fine. If you want to come you can take a taxi I'll meet you at home affairs. Or better yet drive your own car and let's go." I pull Sne out leaving them with their jaws on the floor. I'm trying to be civil for the sake of peace but they are making it hard. Very hard. I raised these kids alone and I'll bury them alone. If any of them have a problem they can go jump off the nearest cliff.

We find Lulonke and Scelo both parked outside the gate but still sitting in their cars. Scelo sees us first and gets out of the car. Lulonke follows when he hears Scelo's door close.

"Okay so we need to discuss logistics." Sne says looking from Scelo to Lulonke. And I actually

realise neither of them has said anything. I swear men and their testosterone are quite funny to watch.

"We can use my car its bigger." Lulonke says looking at Scelo. He has a point but Scelo is not about to admit to that. Lulonke is driving a range rover sport and Scelo is driving an Audi A3 sportback. Personally I think we can be comfortable in either car so I'm not particular about which car to use. Scelo sighs and looks at me.

"He is right besides mum called she'll be landing in an hour and I need to be at the airport to pick her up." I see a fleeting smile of victory cross Lulonke's lips and I want to laugh but this is not the time.

"She's coming?" Sne asks. I feel Lulonke watching me but each time I look his way he looks away. This is going to be a long day.

"Yeah I told her about yesterday so she's coming. Lani I'm sorry I know I promised to do these things with you."

"Its okay. You've done so much already and I'm grateful."

"No need to thank me. We are practically family. Anyways I'll see you guys later let me know if you run into problems." He says giving me a hug and then moving to Sne. "Take care of them." He adds looking at Lulonke. All he gets in response is a nod. We watch him drive off before Sne clears her throat.

"We should get going. We need to at least have most things done by lunch." Sne says walking to the car. I sigh and follow her. She gets on the back and Lulonke opens the door for me. Such a gentleman. He gets on the other side and stares at me.

"Are you Okay?" I give him a faint smile and nod my head.

"I'll be okay. Thank you for this." He reaches out and holds my hand. Its the wrong time for this but I feel a bout of electricity running up my arm. He starts the car and we drive off.

27

I'm in pain my soul is shattered and my heart is numb. Today I had to sign my siblings death certificates. And not only that I had to pick out their coffins. I never in my life ever thought I'd ever have to go through this. But here I am I dont have any more tears to cry. I'm just numb.

"How are you feeling?" Lulonke asks pulling me out of my daze. I force a smile onto my face and

look at him.

"I'll be fine." I look at the backseat and Sne is no longer here. "How long have we been sitting here?"

"Not long. Sne already went in." I close my eyes and lay my head on the headrest.

"Thank you for today. I know you're a busy man." He takes my hand in his and the warmth washes over me.

"Some things can wait. How are you feeling really? I know today was hard." I shake my head trying to get the picture of Cebo and Siya laying on that cold steel table out of my head. They were so cold even touching them felt like running my hand on an ice cube tray. I don't think I'll ever be able to forget that sensation. It will forever be engraved in me.

"I'm numb. I don't know what to think or feel. I feel like I've run out of tears."

"That's understandable. It will take time for you to get used to this. But it gets better." He says reassuring me. Maybe I do need to hear that things will get better. I don't see it now but maybe it's there in the horizon.

"They do say time heals all wounds right?"

"That's a lie actually. Time heals nothing. It just teaches you to live with the pain." Even though our hands are intertwined I see his eyes looking at the distance like he is thinking of something. Something painful. I squeeze his hand and he turns to look at me his cute smile on his face. I could ask him what he is thinking of but I'm sure when he is ready to tell me he will.

"I should go in. I'm sure the vultures are fuming since I refused to let them come with me." He laughs.

"Why do you call them that? I know family can be a mess but why call them vultures?" He questions his brows furrowed.

"Because they are. The only reason they are here is to pick up whatever scraps they can find. Speaking of...." I pull the envelope with the death certificates and their copies out of my bag and hand it to him. "If you don't mind please keep this for me. I'll get everything from you as soon as the funeral is done." He takes the envelope his eyes still glued on mine.

"Of course. I'll guard this with my life." He says holding the envelope close to his chest like something very valuable.

"Thank you. And thank you for today. It really meant a lot to me." He lifts my hand up to his lips and places a kiss on it sending tingling sensations up my arm.

"Anytime day or night. Call me if you need anything. I have to go to KZN for a couple of days but I

will be back before the funeral." I nod my head and give him a hug.

"Konke kuzolunga MaPhangela. Ngyakuthembisa. (Everything will be Okay. I promise you.)" He whispers in my ear awakening tears I though had dried up.

I pull away from him and wipe my tears. For some reason his reassurance sets my heart and soul at ease.

"I should go."

"I will call you later Okay?" I nod my head and get out of the car. I watch him drive off before taking a deep breath and taking in my surroundings. There are a couple of cars parked outside the gate I don't know them Scelo's car is parked inside the yard together with an old beat up opel Cora with a canopy. I'm not sure I'm in the mood for visitors.

I walk up to the house and the first thing I hear are people singing a sad song. That's another thing that seems to depress me. The sad songs people sing as if it comes from their heart when we all know it's just for show. I walk in and find the school principal sitting right by the entrance together with a few women whom I assume are teachers. I guess that explains the cars outside. On the other side of the room sits a man I haven't seen in thirteen years. He looks older. *Of course he does Milani its not like he stopped growing in the thirteen years he has been gone.* My conscience reminds me.

He is looking straight at me even with the teachers passing their condolences. I walk in and go into the kitchen my eyes not leaving his. I feel myself getting hotter with each passing second. I take a seat on the kitchen table where Kele Hlengiwe and Hlumile are busy chopping vegetables. There's a bowl of chicken sitting in the sink. I'm really not sure what's going on right now.

"Are you Okay?" Hlumile asks sitting next to me. I look at her and her face is enough to distract me from all the thoughts and questions running in my mind.

"How was your paper?" She frowns but she indulges me anyway. I need this to get my mind back to the present.

"It was okay. I'm sure I'll score a sixty if I'm lucky." My heart breaks a little. A sixty is a fail for her. She set the bar so high for herself and now her aiming for a sixty at most means she's not doing okay.

"I'm sorry." She shakes her head while the two cousins watch us as if they are watching a theater show.

"It's okay. As long as it's a pass I'll be fine. How did everything go?"

"As well as can be expected. I saw Scelo's car outside. Where is he?"

"Taking a nap. His mom is in the lounge and Sne is changing into something comfortable. Sebastian and Sizakele are on their way." I look at the time on my phone and it's past five already. I didn't realise it was already so late.

I sit there for a while until I hear the guests saying their goodbyes. Sne is already helping with the cooking. I need to go and change too. It's been a long day and I'm sticky and sweaty. But I need to greet MamCebekhulu first. I get off the chair and go into the lounge. I see her her smile and her open arms propel me to her. I get on my knees and crawl to her. She pulls me in and again tears stream down my face. I've concluded that my tears only show up when I feel safe and comfortable. Other than that they are a no show.

"I'm sorry nana. I'm really sorry." She whispers. Instead of calming down her words seem to evoke more tears from deep inside me. I sob on her chest with everyone watching us. From the first day I met her MamCebekhulu has been warm kind and welcoming to me. So much so we've spent the past two Christmases with her family in KZN. When schools were closed and the kids had nothing better to do she made me ship them off to her. It was nice for them to have somewhere to go for the holidays. For the first time in a long time they could also write about their holidays when they went back to school. This year was not going to be any different. Until now. I pull away from her wiping my tears.

"Thank you for coming." She smiles at me but I can see her pain too. She had grown to love my siblings. They had that effect on everyone. You couldn't spend a day with them without falling in love.

"I wouldn't be anywhere else Sthandwa sam." She says rubbing my eyes.

"Milani you didn't greet your father." Aunt Zodwa says pulling me out of my comfort zone.

"How is Bab'Cebekhulu?" I say ignoring my aunt. I'm not about to play this game with her. Not today of all days.

"He's okay. He'll be here on Friday." I nod my head and wipe more tears away. "Did you get everything done today? I know Scelo was supposed to help you."

"Most of it. I just have to go and see the gravesite tomorrow and then I have to wash them before they come home." She nods her head while rubbing my hand.

"Well I'm here now I'll help you anyway I can." I hear someone clap their hands. I turn to look at them and see my aunts staring at me like they've never seen people having a conversation.

"Your disrespect is astounding." Sbongile says. "You have a whole entire family here ready to help you but you want strangers knowing our family business." She adds.

"And you've never asked yourself why that is?"

"Milani singumndeni. (We are family). Some things dont need outsiders. Especially things like this." Ncamsile says. If I didn't know better I'd say they are one huge family. Each of them coming with some bullshit about family but when it counted most none of them were here.

"Umndeni Ncane? (Family) Where was family when we had to eat pap with sugar because there was no food in the house? Where was family when we had to go to school barefoot or with torn shoes because we had nothing? Today you're quick to remind me about family but we all know the only reason you're here is to get the death certificates so you can go get rich. None of you gave a fuck about us before so do me a favour and keep that same energy. I don't even know what you're doing here. I will bury my siblings the same way I raised them." I get off the floor and stand up. And my dear father stands up blocking my way.

"Is that any way to speak to your aunt?" He says

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"Is that any way to speak to your aunt?" He says his nose flaring. I swear today is the day satan has chosen to test me. "Show some respect." He hisses at me. I give him a slow round of applause.

"For a moment there you almost sounded like a father. My father. But we both know that ship has

sailed. I take care of this home therefore I will speak to whoever that's eating my hard earned money any which way I want. Aunt father same difference. Trash."

I push past him and walk to the bedroom. I can't even mourn my siblings properly because I keep having to fight stupid battles with my family. I get in the bedroom and I find Scelo sitting on the bed. He looks like he just woke up.

"Hey sorry did I wake you?" He shakes his head and puts his phone away.

"No I've been up for a while. How did it go?" I sit down next to him and stare at the wall in front of me.

"It went okay. We got the certificates paid for the graves put in a claim with my insurance I hope their 48 hours payout actually comes through Lulonke paid for the coffins everything seems to be in order."

"That's good. The caterers will be here from tomorrow they will be cooking for mourners so you can rest." I turn to look at him and he smiles.

"I thought they would be cooking for the funeral only."

"I figured you need rest. Plus it doesn't help having to fight your family for stuff. This way they will just have to eat what's in front of them whether they like it or not. And if they don't like it they can buy their own food." One less thing to worry about and it certainly brings a smile to my face.

"Thank you I don't know what I would have done without you guys."

"That's what family is for." He says wrapping his arm around me and giving me a hug. The door opens and my deadbeat of a father stands there.

"We need to pick out the coffin." He says. "Come to the lounge." He walks away leaving the door wide open.

"This man is going to be the death of me." I whisper. Scelo stands up and helps me stand. We walk out of the bedroom and go to the lounge. I stand by the door while Scelo sits down.

"Sit down." My father commands. He thinks he still has a right to order me around. Someone hand him the memo please.

"No. I'm fine standing."

"Milani!" He yells.

"Yes Peter." I say starring right back at him.

"Myeke bhuti. (Leave her.)" Sbongile says. I see my father's nose flaring and I'm sure if he could

he'd connect my face with his fist.

"Fine. We need to discuss how my son will be buried." Did he somehow forget that two kids died? "I am going to make a death certificate for him tomorrow so I can make a claim and pay for the funeral."

"Unless the government gives out two death certificates for one person dont waste your time. I've already done that." He looks at me and I can see he is still angry. If he thinks he can disappear then come back here and call the shots like nothing happened he must think again.

"Fine I'll need it so I can put in the claim tomorrow. We need to choose a casket. Here's what I was thinking." He hands me a mortuary brochure with different caskets. He points to the one he wants. "I've already spoken to your aunts and they approve." He adds like he just won a battle.

"That's nice. However I dont know who you're going to bury in that because I've already chosen a casket for my brother and my sister. And both have been paid for." I see him shake his head and I know his anger is starting again.

"What gives you the right to make those kinds of decisions without your elders?"

"What gives me the right? Are you seriously asking me that Peter Mahlangu? Have you forgotten that Siyabonga was one when you left. One years old. That's how old he was. And now at 14 you think you can walk in and bury him like you raised him? I dont know where you've been or what you've been smoking but it seems to have messed with your head." Before I can swallow my words I feel a sting on my face. This fucken man just slapped me. The gasps in the room are proof of that. I touch my face and i must say it hurts. But I'm not going to let him see that. I blink my tears away and look back at him.

"This is not the time for this." MamCebekhulu says standing between us. I dont even know when she got off the mattress.

"I will not be disrespected in my house." He says and I laugh.

"Your house? This house is registered under Grace Mbokazi my mother. And since you two were never married....."

"I bought this house." He hisses.

"I have the title deed if you want to see. And to be on the safe side I made sure it was registered legally even the municipal government has this home registered under Grace Mbokazi. So unless you're her you don't call the shots around here." He chuckles and takes a step back.

"You've grown some balls I see."

"Well I had to. Seeing as your soft balls disappeared a long time ago." I feel another slap fly across my face and Scelo stands up and plants himself between my father and I.

"Do that one more time and I swear you will regret coming back here." He tells him.

"And who the fuck are you? This is my house." My father says.

"Its fine Scelo leave him. No matter how many times he slaps me it won't change anything. He is and will always be a deadbeat father who thinks burying his son will make him a man. It wont. Deal with your conscience Peter I will bury my brother the same way I raised him."

I walk back to the bedroom tears streaming down my face. My life has been a battle since that man walked out on us and even when he comes back I still have to battle him because of his oversized ego. I fought for my siblings while they were alive and I will fight for them even in death.

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Tension has been the order of the day. I've been trying my best to avoid my so called elders and keep my distance from them. They've already labeled me as disrespectful and rude not that it matters but I do feel like my actions disrespected the memory of my siblings and the guilt has been gnawing at me since then. But apologizing to those vultures is the last thing I will do.

I've always heard that your father's side of the family is the one that's always fucked up and evil but not for me. Both sides of my family have shown me how much they dont care about my mother or her children. None of them can even pretend that they came here out of good faith. Just yesterday I found aunt Zodwa going through my stuff probably looking for the birth and death certificates. Thank God I gave everything to Lulonke.

Today is the eve of the funeral. My deadbeat of a father didnt want Cebo buried here because she's not his child. Unfortunately for him I have the law on my side. I dont know how Scelo and Lulonke did it but they got me a letter of authority since the house is in mum's name and mum is in a mental institution so I decide what happens here. For some reason they put their differences aside whatever those are and made sure everything goes according to my plans. Even after claiming he paid lobola and married my mum my aunts were quick to dispute that. For once they actually came through. Although they did tell my father to pay lobola if he wants to marry my mother. And of course Lulonke told them in no uncertain terms will that happen especially because my mother is not sane enough to

agree to a marriage. So those plans died a painful death.

I've been in this room trying to decide what to wear for the service. There wont be a night virgil thank God so right now we are going to have a small prayer welcoming the kids back home. Then tomorrow there will be a service in the morning before the actual burial. I finally decide on a black maxi dress with a cardigan on top. Someone knocks on the door while I'm putting on my shoes. I ask them to come in and MamCebekhulu walks in with a plate in her hand.

"Hey nana I brought you food." She says sitting on the bed. I havent had much of an appetite these days. If it's not Sne forcing me to eat its MamCebekhulu. I take the plate from her.

"Ngyabonga ma. (Thank you.)"

"So how are you feeling? I know today has been a long day."

"Its been hard but life goes on right?" I have no appetite but I know she won't leave until I eat something. It looks good though. I wonder how much Scelo is paying for the round the clock catering. Today its cabbage pap and livers. I wonder what my aunts said about this because they have been complaining. The last time they had proper meat was days ago.

"So I saw your boyfriend earlier." She says with a smile on her face.

"Boyfriend? I dont have one." I try not to look at her but I cant help my cheeks burning. Lulonke got back yesterday even though he was supposed to come back today and he has been amazing.

"Yeah right. I've seen how he looks at you. The man is in love." My cheeks are painful from all the blushing. But I dont want to get my hope's up

"Hhay ma I'm sure he is just being kind."

"Kind? Okay. Sne tells me he is your client."

"Of course she did she cant keep a secret that one." She bursts out laughing.

"So he is a secret?"

"No. We are just figuring things out. He is a client and I'm pretty sure it's against the rules for designers to date clients. But he he is so sure of everything that sometimes I think maybe he is speeding a bit and it scares me." She puts her hand on my thigh and the comfort it brings eases my mind.

"What's so scary about it?"

"Everything. What if somewhere down the line he realizes I'm not what he wants or what he expected. And what if I hurt him? Or he hurts me? The idea on paper is nice but I dont know if its

viable in real life." I say.

MamCebekhulu is easy to talk to. I used to wish my mother was like her easy going and attentive. There's been plenty of times when she's got me out of some rather scary dark situations simply by listening. It seems banal but sometimes that's all I need. An ear.

"Listen to me stop worrying about the future and enjoy now. You're young Lani enjoy your youth. Date and have fun. If it doesn't work out then it doesn't. But right now just enjoy it. Dont think about tomorrow and if it will make you feel better get him on the same page. He knows what he wants and that's you. So give yourself permission to be loved nana. You deserve it." I sigh and she pulls me in for a hug. I don't know how much of what she's saying I can do but I can try right?

The service is short and simple. Seeing the caskets sitting there brings fresh tears rolling down my face. By this time tomorrow they will be on the ground and I will officially never see them again. I decided on white caskets with gold trimmings. Cebo's has a pink mini mouse drawing on the sides and Siya's has Barcelona colours and his favourite number on it Messi's number 10.

When the service is over the caskets are opened so we can see them. Its the first time my aunts are seeing them. I watch them slowly walk by the caskets sniffing and shedding crocodile tears. Ncamsile goes as far as 'fainting' because she is that distraught. I should have her nominated for an oscar. She'd win hands down. I watch as everyone gets their turn. I cant bring myself to join the queue so I wait on the side as everyone gets their turn. I see Hlumile standing on the other side not joining the line. I get up and make my way to her.

"You don't want to see them?" I ask and stand next to her. She shakes her head.

"No. I dont think I'm strong enough for that." She says.

"It might bring you closure."

"Or it will be the last memory I have of them. No thanks

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i already have recurring nightmares from finding them. This i can't do." She turns and walks to the bedroom.

"She will be Okay you know." Someone says next to me. I look up and see my uncle Thomas. I met him yesterday and he doesn't seem like the rest of his family. He looks like my father but a somewhat younger version of him. I still dont trust him though.

"I know."

"And you how are you doing?" I chuckle and turn to him.

"You dont need to be doing that. I know you dont care about me so dont start now." I try to walk away but he grabs me with my wrist making me stand still.

"Milani I know this week hasnt been easy for you....."

"This week? Try this life." I interject. "I haven't had it easy for years now and none of you showed up. But the moment something bad happens that you all feel you can benefit from you come running. And dont tell me we're family because I throw up a little each time someone says that word. So please dont tell me you know anything about me or my hardships because you have no idea." I pull my arm away from him and go to the bedroom.

'God's will' 'God's plan' God this God that. Honestly I'm beginning to think people just use God's name for anything even when its unnecessary. This is not God's plan or his will. Because I refuse to believe a merciful God can be this cruel. Me and him dont have that close of a relationship but I'm pretty sure this is not his plan. But try telling that to literally every person who has stood up front and made a speech.

Aunt Nomalanga takes the stand and honestly I am curious to hear what she has to say. She didn't know Cebo and I am certain that she wouldnt be able to recognize Siya if she saw him in the street. "I'd like to greet you all in the name of Jesus Christ our savior." She starts and everyone mumbles an Amen. "Firstly as a family we would like to thank all of you for being here. It really means a lot to us to see the support you have given us. Losing a life is never easy especially when it's a child. We have lost two of them at the" I zone out the more she speaks.

I hear someone wrap their arms around my shoulders and I come out of my daze just as my aunt starts sniffing on the microphone. I hear there are acting classes in Johannesburg maybe I should sign her up for one of them.

"Are you Okay nana?" MamCebekhulu asks. I nod my head and give her a smile.

"I'll be okay." I don't know when or how but I'll get there eventually. Sne starts a song and gets on the podium since my aunt is crying so loud and using the microphone to make sure even those in town can hear her. Her sister's pull her away cause apparently even her legs have stopped working.

"Before we start the journey to the cemetery who else would like to say a few words?" Sne asks. She's the designated MC and Sebastian and Sizakele have ushering people into the tent.

MamCebekhulu pat's my thigh before she stands up and takes the microphone from Sne.

"Good morning. My name is Nomsa Cebekhulu. I know Milani through my daughter Snethemba. When Sne told me about Milani's situation I was touched. It's quite heartbreaking for a child to have to take on the responsibility of having to raise children when she is just a child herself. For the longest time I didn't think Milani had any family. But when I came here to find a house full of her aunts and supposed family I was shocked." I look around the tent and see my aunts glaring at her like everything she just said is a lie. "I know this is probably not the time or the place to talk about this but I'm pretty sure many of you have seen how Milani struggled to raise her siblings. How hard it was for her to have to worry about what to feed the children and still concentrate on her school work. Ever since I got here I've wondered how a child can go through all that when there are people calling themselves family. Even her father suddenly popped up from wherever he was." I see aunt Ncamsile stand up and walk towards her.

"I don't know who the fuck you think you are but this is not the time." She hisses at her. Unfortunately for her the microphone is still on and we can hear her.

"Why? You don't want people to know that the only reason you came here is to get the death certificates so you can benefit from the death of two children?" I hear gasps and for some reason I am happy someone has the guts to stand up to them. Especially in front of the same people they've been pretending to.

"I'm pretty sure I can see smoke coming out of your aunts pores." Hlumile whispers.

"Yeah well they deserve it. Putting on a show like they cared."

This is it. The end. Someone said once that the smallest coffins are the heaviest. I see what they meant. After throwing in rose petals in the graves I watch as they add soil. I feel my breath hitch each time they toss the soil in. It feels so final. Permanent. I feel tears stream down my face but no sound comes out of my mouth. I ball my hands into fists digging my nails into my palm until I feel blood. I don't want to think I don't want to feel not right now. I close my eyes and look up at the glaring

sun. It's so warm but it fails to melt my cold insides.

I thought I had forgiven my mother I had to right? For my brother and sisters sake I had to. But right now i realise i probably never will forgive her. I dont think I'll ever be able to forget this moment. This moment that she created this moment that has turned our lives upside down. No. I'll never be able to forgive her.

By the time I open my eyes people are gone except MamCebekhulu and Lulonke each holding my bloody hands. All that's left are the mounds of dirt as a reminder that there are people laying beneath the earth. I look at my hands and notice they are covered in tissues bloody tissues. I dont even know when that happened.

"Everyone is gone." I exclaim as if they didn't see them leave.

"Yeah. But if you want to stay we can stay as long as you need to." Lulonke says.

"Hlumile where is she?"

"She went home with Sne and the others. She's not doing so good." MamCebekhulu answers. I have to be with her. She's the only one I have left and i need to make sure she's okay.

I try to stand but I feel dizzy and sit back down.

"Are you Okay?" MamCebekhulu asks I can see the worry in her eyes.

"I'm okay. I just need a moment alone. If you dont mind."

"Of course. We will wait by the car." She says. They get up and slowly walk to the car. I can see the hesitation from them but they oblige me anyway. I get up and walk towards the graves. They are side by side. I kneel down between them looking at each cross with their names and the grave numbers. This is all that's left of them. Mounds of dirt and their names on wooden crosses.

Maybe this is God's will. But if it is then its painful. It's a painful punch in the gut. I break out in a painful sob. Intando kaThixo Ibuhlungu.

I swear I feel like I am in a neverending cycle of bullshit. I'm exhausted and I dont think I have any

more fight left in me. After the burial yesterday people ate and then went back to their daily lives. Except of course the vultures who call themselves family. They have called a 'family meeting' to discuss only God knows what. Sizakele and Sebastian have gone back to Joburg they have work tomorrow so they need to rest. Sne Scelo and Lulonke refuse to leave. And MamCebekhulu said she'll leave when I do.

"This is a family meeting." My deadbeat father says when he sees Scelo taking a seat.

"Until Milani tells me otherwise I am not going anywhere." Scelo tells him. I see Lulonke chuckling and I know my father will have a hard time getting rid of them.

"Leave it alone my brother." Sbongile says. He shakes his head and sits back on the chair with his arms crossed on his chest.

"Before we leave we decided to have this meeting to discuss the way forward." Nomalanga starts.

"Firstly we need to clean up the locked room. We have to figure out what we are going to do with the kids clothes."

"We are not going to do anything with their clothes." I say cutting her off. For some reason my voice is calm and for a moment I think she didn't hear me. But the silence in the room and the eyes glaring at me tell they heard me.

"Milani we cant keep that room locked up. And you wont be wearing them so why should we keep them?" Ncamsile asks.

"Unless you forked out money and bought those clothes you not getting rid of shit." Hlumile says and literally everyone gasps. Including me. This is the first time she has said anything remotely 'disrespectful' to them. I look at her and I'm impressed. Even with all eyes turned to her she seems to be holding her own. She's starring right back at them. One by one even.

"Hlumile since when are you so disrespectful?" Carol questions with her face scrunched up.

"Call it whatever you want Aunty but you're not getting rid of anything unless you paid for it." She says holding steadfast. I want to kiss her right now. Carol claps her hands and crosses her arms over her ample bosom.

"Well that room needs to be cleaned because I am moving back next weekend." I dont even have the energy to tell him to fuck off so I just keep quiet. I was actually planning on renting out the house because Hlumile is writing her last two papers this week and I am taking her with me to Joburg.

"I am actually renting out the house so unless you have money for rent you're not moving in here." I hear him chuckle.

"Actually I am moving in here. Since this is my wife's house." He says so confidently it makes me slightly dizzy.

"Your wife? Since when?" Scelo asks the question I am too stunned to ask. I don't know if I want the answer but I know it won't be good. Not even close.

"Since yesterday." He states. "After the funeral the Mbokazi's and I had a conversation and they accepted payment for ilobolo. So as of yesterday afternoon. Grace is my wife which means this is my house now." I turn to look at my aunts and neither one of them can even look at me. I wonder how much this man paid them.

"Wow. I've always known you were pathetic pieces of shit but this this is a new low for you." I say looking at them. "Why do you hate your sister so much? What did she ever do to you?"

"We did what we felt was right. You are children. You can't stay here on your own you will need an adult around." Sbongile says making me laugh. I laugh so hard I feel my stomach starting to hurt.

"I almost believed you. For just one split second I almost thought you actually give a fuck."

"It doesn't matter what you believe Milani I am moving in here next weekend and I expect the house to be clean and the main bedroom to be cleaned out. I have a long drive to Richard's Bay and that car can't drive properly at night." My father says getting up. He shakes his new 'in laws' hands before his sisters walk him out. I'm still stuck in a daze when they stand up and leave. We all sit there no one speaking and in a way I am hoping that someone will pinch me and I will wake up from this dream or nightmare. Or whatever this is.

"Please tell me I didn't dream what just happened?" She says breaking the silence.

"I thought my in laws had drama but they don't hold a candle to these people." MamCebekhulu laments clapping her hands.

"Is this marriage going to hold up in a court of law?" Hlumile asks. I don't have the energy to fight him. If he wants this house he can have it. I am going to build us a home. A better home with no drama or squabbles.

"It doesn't matter. If he wants the house he can have it."

"Milani this is our home. We can't just let him come in here and make demands. The man doesn't

even know how much it cost to put these tiles down or paint the walls and now he wants to just move in and watch a big screen tv as if she knows how much it cost? No ways. Its clear he is struggling wherever he stays and now he thinks he has hit the jackpot." As much as I understand her frustration I am just all out of fighting data bundles.

"Hlumile home is wherever we are. Even if it's a shack it will be home. We will put everything in storage. If he thinks he will be sitting in leather couches and sleeping in a queen sized bed alone then he has another thing coming."

"You do know we can always fight this. This marriage wont stand up in a court of law. He will lose." Lulonke says. I shake my head.

"Nope. Someday mum will be released from the hospital if she is lucky and if daddy dearest is still around then she will be his responsibility not mine. So maybe he just unknowingly took a burden off of me."

The week goes by pretty quickly. Even though everyone was telling me to not let my dad walk all over me I just decided to give up. That man will never know how much it took for this house to be what it is right now. He knows when he left it was barely livable roof leaking windows broken holes on the floor doors that held on by their last teeth. Now he comes back and there are tiles on the floor a ceiling every bedroom looks decent and the kitchen has built in cupboards thanks to pinterest. Am I really going to let him do this?

Its Friday and Hlumile is writing her last paper. She left early in the morning to meet up with her classmates and do some last minute cramming. I found a storage unit Pretoria and paid for it for the next six months sponsored by Nkazimulo and his watch. A moving truck will be here soon. Hlumile Sponsored

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Sne and I spent the past few days packing up. If daddy dearest wants to stay here he will have to buy his own furniture.

"The truck is here." Sne says walking in with a plastic bag in her hand. The smell alone tells me the

vetkoeks are still hot and fresh. And her oily lips show she has already started eating them. "About time. I hope everything fits in there." I take the plastic bag and pick out a nice fat cake. "So vele you wont leave him with a spoon even?" She sarcastically asks. I shake my head and she bursts out laughing.

The movers take everything into the truck. There are about six men walking around the house picking up couches and beds and boxes. The way they carry everything it's like they are machines. In just two hours all that's left are a few boxes. They get in grab those and they are done. The house is empty. They will take everything to the storage unit and Scelo offered to be there to supervise and make sure they don't break anything. Our bags are in Sne's car. I packed Cebo's minnie mouse blanket and Siya's Barcelona replica shirt in my bag. For now those are the only things I am taking with me. I need a little reminder of them with me until I figure out what I will do with their clothes and stuff.

Sne and I walk out the house and sit on the stoep. All we are waiting for now is Hlumile to come back from school and we will be on our way. I look at my friend next to me and wonder what I did right for the universe to bring her into my life. The girl comes from a perfect family they live in a double storey house with a patio balconies all around a pool and a driveway with a fountain right by the front door and yet here she is sitting in a stoep eating fat cakes with me like this is normal for her.

"Take a picture. It lasts longer." She says and we burst out laughing. We used to make fun of all those wattpad novels where every hero had that line.

"I can't believe you just said that." I say and she shrugs her shoulders.

"Well you are starrng what was I supposed to say."

"I was actually thinking how blessed I am to have you in my life. You are amazing Snethemba Cebekhulu." She looks at me blinking and pouting her lips.

"Yeah I think my tears are dry let's do this some other time." Again we burst out laughing. "On a serious note though I'm the lucky one. I know I say this all the time but if my sister hadn't seen you in that line on registration day I don't know where I would be. You saved me unknowingly so. And I am truly grateful." We hug getting all emotional.

"You two sound like lesbians." We break the hug and look up to see Hlumile staring at us.

"Why isn't your shirt decorated the way all school leavers do?" Sne questions. I know Hlumile is a

little lady and she doesn't do 'childish things'. Although most people see her body and think she's ready for picking because unlike me when puberty hit it left her with curvy hips medium sized perky boobs and a round ass I wish she could share. The only thing we have in common is our flat stomachs. I need to invest in a gun to make sure she doesn't lose her virginity until she has her white coat and DR before her name.

"I ain't got for that." She says and sits down between us. "So everything is gone?" I nod my head and she just rolls her eyes.

"I don't know why we have to do what that man wants. This is our home." She's been complaining about this the whole week.

"I was thinking the same thing." She chirps in. "Imagine his ashy ass walking around like he is the big dog."

Usually I am petty operative word being usually. Not always. But right now I feel the need to be extra petty. I don't see myself coming back to this house. I actually decided a few days ago that one day I will buy a piece of land and build a home our home that my father cannot finesse us out of. I wish I could level this house down with a TLB tractor. But that would be a bit extreme. But there is always option B.

I get off the stoep and rush to the neighbors house. I know the husband is in construction and I've seen him carrying one of those huge hammers. Lucky for me I find him home. He is more than happy to borrow me his hammer. This shit is heavy though. Probably heavier than me. I lift it up and throw it over my shoulder. I hope my shoulder blades stay intact.

"And now?" These two ask seeing me with the hammer.

"We are going to redecorate and make sure the house is ready for daddy dearest." They follow me into the house and we stand around in the empty lounge.

"I'll take the bedrooms." She says excitedly. I look at Hlumile and she has a smile on her face.

"I'll take the lounge and the bathroom." She says clapping her hands. I guess the kitchen is mine.

"Okay I'll start." They follow me to the kitchen. I start by the back door I lift the hammer up and send it back down to the floor with all my might. The moment it hits the tiles they crack and splatter all over. I keep going with these two hyping me up till the entire kitchen looks like a delition site. I pick up the hammer and start on the cabinets. They break and fall all over the floor. Everything is just a mess.

I hand Hlumile the hammer and she runs to the bathroom. Sne and I stand by the door and watch her smash everything in sight. She stops and takes a breath.

"This is actually therapeutic." She says before going at it again. When she's done she hands the hammer over to Sne and she goes in hard. By the time we are done the house is a mess. Tiles broken ceiling with holes in it and the walls with bigger holes. Hlumile was right it's quite therapeutic.

We walk out just as Hlengiwe walks up to us. I quickly lock the door just to make sure she doesn't see the mess inside.

"Hi. Mum sent me to come and tell you that your father is on his way. He has decided to come early so please make sure there is food for him to eat when he gets here. It's a long drive." She states while chewing on a bubblegum that probably lost its sweetness a long time ago.

"Of course. There will be a three course meal when he gets here." Sne says. Hlengiwe just rolls her eyes turns and walks away.

"A three course meal? Anganya! (He'd be so lucky.)" I walk back to the neighbors house and give back the hammer.

I leave the key under the mat in the front door and officially say goodbye to the only home I know. Oh well it's just mortar and cement we can always rebuild. We will rebuild.

30

It's late in the evening and the sun has retired to its resting place. Peter's car pulls up to the house he left thirteen years ago and never looked back at only to return to bury his son. He wasn't supposed to be gone this long. He knows it too. But life doesn't always work out the way one wants. When he left a friend had promised him a job at a mine in Johannesburg. Of course that came after he had blown every penny he got when he was retrenched from the coal mine.

When things were rosy he bought this house as a way to convince Grace to move here with their children. Milani was four years old and Grace was pregnant with Hlumile. She lived in Nelspruit while he was here. The long distance wasn't working for him anymore he wanted his children and his woman close by. Her falling pregnant again was all the confirmation he needed to bring them close. Grace was reluctant to leave her family behind sure they were not that close but they were family and she had their support in some way. They also were not happy about her moving. Peter was

adamant that she should move here and as a sign of good faith and a promise to marry her he had the house registered in her name. Seeing the title deed with her name on it Grace decided to move and be close to her man.

So at eight months pregnant she packed up her entire life in Nelspruit and came to KwaMhlanga to be with the man she loved. The house wasn't so bad but it wasn't good either. It had two bedrooms a lounge and a kitchen. She worked hard to make it a home. They fixed it where it needed fixing and it became a home.

After Siyabonga's birth they decided to extend the house and add another bedroom. Since the girls shared one bedroom and the parents had their own Siya would need his own bedroom too. The room was built but halfway through it Peter lost his job in the mine. Instead of using his severance package to finish the room he drank the money with his friends and of course his sister's were also there taking and taking until there was nothing left.

Peter was left to rely on Grace for everything even underwear. When his friend promised him a job at a mine in Johannesburg he didn't hesitate to follow his friend. He got the job but like most things in South Africa he had to pay the people who had gotten him the job. For a while he told himself as soon as he is done paying those people he would be able to send money home. But as the famous song goes 'eGol' eGauteng wemntanami kwandongazaduma kwanyama kaypheli kuphela amazinyo endoda vuka vuka sthobhala.'

He forgot about home. He forgot about his children and the woman he left behind. He forgot everything that was a reminder of his old life. Life was great but as they say nothing lasts forever. He lost his job and started doing piece jobs here and there. His girlfriend at the time suggested they move to Richards Bay her hometown. He got a job as a security guard and life started looking up. Two kids later he was happy his past was the past until a little over a week ago when he received a call telling him that his son is gone. It was hard for him to believe it especially when he was told how he died.

He drove from Richards Bay to KwaMhlanga mulling over the past wondering what he could have done differently. Maybe if he had been here his son would still be alive. His guilt was eating him up inside. He knew he did not leave his family in a good place. He kept wondering how his absence

contributed to Grace doing what she did. Maybe she was being vengeful after all Siyabonga was his only son. His new girlfriend only gave him daughters and now the son who was meant to carry on his legacy is dead.

When he drove up to the house it was way different than how he left it. The yard was fenced there were burglar bars on the windows the walls were freshly painted the room he had left halfway through was finished and the roofing had been redone. It was everything he wanted to do but failed. His pride and ego took a knock thinking in spite of her being sick Grace had taken care of their home.

When he walked inside the house he was shocked to see how vastly different it was to how he left it. There were ceramic tiles from the front door all the way down to the bedrooms there were no longer holes on the concrete floor he left there was a ceiling with recess lights going down the passage. The kitchen cabinets were built in and there was even a bathroom with a shower and a bathtub. It was like walking into a different house all together.

When he sat down and looked around the lounge seeing the leather couches piled up in the corner and a tv twice as big as his old 32 cm one. He realised life hadn't been that bad while he was gone. His guilt slowly started to take a back seat and pride took over the front seat. This was his home. It wasn't just a house it was a home. And right then and there he made a decision it was time he came back home.

He was looking forward to seeing his children. Hlumile was the first one he saw. Everything about her reminded him of his mother. From her face to her body. She was beautiful but she passed him by like he was a stranger. It was only after his sister told her who he is that she noticed him. He smiled at her but all he got from her was a cold stare. He wasn't expecting for a red carpet roll out but he expected some warmth and he got nothing. Not even from Milani. It hurt but he figured if he was here

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but all he got from her was a cold stare. He wasn't expecting for a red carpet roll out but he expected some warmth and he got nothing. Not even from Milani. It hurt but he figured if he was here it would be easier for him to rebuild his relationship with his children.

He gets out of the car as his sister walks up to the house. She's been expecting him. She is happy he is back. Two girls jump out from the back of the van they look a little under ten years old. Behind them is a teenage girl who doesn't seem pleased to be here. The passenger side opens and a woman gets out. Her yellow and white two piece set sits nicely on her round body. A white church hat sits on her head slightly covering her short yaki braids. A blue doek runs across her body. She is a respectable woman there is no doubt about that.

"Bhuti I'm so happy you're home." Sbongile says giving her brother a hug.

"Its good to be home." He says pulling up his brown pants while his girlfriend stands next to him her head hung low. He calls the kids over to introduce them to his sister. "Sisi this is Nonhlanhla Miya isthandwa sam (my love.) And these are our children Bongiwe the oldest and these two Yoliswa and Xoliswa. They are twins." He says proudly. Sbongile greets them a huge grin on her face.

"Let's go inside it's dark already and we cant be talking out here. Milani said she left the key under the mat." They follow her up to the house. She notices the windows dont have curtains but she quickly pushes the thought to the back of her mind. Peter gets the key from under the mat and opens the door. He switches on the light. And before anyone can react he slides down the wall to the floor and sits on his butt. This is not the home he remembers from a week ago. Sbongile stands there her jaw on the floor and her hands on her head.

"Please dont tell me you packed us up so we can come to this mess Peter Mahlangu. Please!" Nonhlanhla says looking around the messy room. Peter sits on the floor taking everything in. The holes on the walls the broken up tiles and the holes on the ceiling. He wants to speak but words seem stuck in his throat.

"Jesus Christ what happened here?" Sbongile asks walking further into the house inspecting the damage. Each room she goes into seems to be worse than the previous one.

She walks back to the front of the house she sees how angry Nonhlanhla is. She would be too but this is not Peter's fault she thinks. She takes out her phone and dials Milani's number. It rings for a while before she answers.

"Aunty." Milani says so casually it makes Sbongile more angry.

"Aunty aunty woknuka. (My foot). How are you this evil Milani? What did you do to the house?" Milani bursts out laughing. Sbongile cant believe her ears. She's actually laughing she finds this funny.

"What happened to the house Aunty?" She asks between giggles. "I was just redecorating. I thought daddy dearest would love it."

"You are evil just like your mother."

"I know. I am my mother's daughter."

"You will not see heaven." She hisses making Milani laugh harder.

"Okay gatekeeper yaseZulwini." She takes a few deep breaths trying to calm herself down.

"Milani this is my brothers house. Where is the furniture? Why would you do this? Huh? How could you? Are you that heartless and evil that you'd destroy a house and take away the furniture because you're trying to punish him?"

"Punish him? Aunty he wanted his house I gave it back the same way I found it. I paid for everything there so I can do with it whatever I want. As for the furniture well its safely in storage. Tell your brother good luck. I would say dont let the bed bugs bite but..." she laughs again irritating Sbongile even more. "He probably didn't even bring a sponge. Get to cleaning Aunty I am going to sleep in my bed. Yes I have a bed." She bursts out laughing and hangs up the phone.

"Is anyone going to tell me what's going on here?" Nonhlanhla asks again and gets no answer.

Sbongile squats down next to her brother. She pat's his shoulder as he tries to hold back his tears.

This is not the plan he had. This is not the house he promised Nonhlanhla and his children.

"Bhuti let's go home. We will come and clean up tomorrow." She says helping him up.

"Yey someone explain to me what the hell is going on." Nonhlanhla shouts.

"Hhay man shut up." Peter barks at her.

"Yey yey ungazongjwayela kabi Peter. You took me from my home and promised me a house. This is not a house. Even my two room that you made me leave behind is better than this." She screams back at him. "Where are my children supposed to sleep? Mhmmm. In this mess?" The siblings ignore her and walk out of the house defeated and not sure where to go from there.

MILANI

You can call me crazy if you want but I don't regret what i did. Not one bit. My father has no idea what it took for that house he conveniently wants to claim as his to be what it was. So no he is not going to come and benefit from my hard work just because he has balls and he is my father. Not on my watch.

The only regret I have right now is not being a fly on those walls just to see him faint from shock. Sne and Hlumile decided to go buy food leaving me alone in the house. Sitting here alone with a glass of wine in hand brings everything back. I keep thinking about Siya and Cebo and wondering what they would be doing right now. I miss them.

My phone rings again and I see a number I don't know. I hesitate on picking up the phone but I do it anyway. I put it on loudspeaker and place it on the couch next to me.

"Hello." The first thing I hear is someone sniffing. For a moment it brings back memories I'd rather not remember. My heart skips a beat until I hear my father's voice.

"Milani how can you be so cruel?" He is asking me? Is he for real? I am the one who is cruel?

"I don't understand. How am I the one who is cruel? You said you wanted your house and I gave you back your house. What's cruel about that?"

"Did you have to destroy it first before giving it back? That's your home why would you destroy it?"

He sounds a little calmer than he was when he literally told us that is his house.

"Baba do you know what it took for that house to be what it was? Do you remember how you left it? For you to come back now and make demands? If you had humbled yourself and shown a bit of remorse maybe just maybe I would have been more welcoming." I take a sip of my drink as he sighs.

"How do you think your mother would feel seeing the house like that Milani? All her hardwork....." I burst out laughing. So that explains him walking around like a peacock he actually believes mum did all that work.

"Do you actually believe that mum did all that work? You seriously believe that everything you saw was because of her? Let me tell you something she just like you didn't contribute a cent to renovating that house. It was all me alone. That's why you will never benefit from anything that has to do with me. You wanted your house you have it."

"Do you know the bible in Ephesians 6 verse 2 says honor your mother and father so that your days may be long on the earth." He says just as I am about to cut the call.

"Ephesians 6 verse 4 says 'Fathers do not provoke your children to anger but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.' If you're going to quote the bible to me make sure you quote the whole scripture and not what favours you. Enjoy your house." I hang up the phone and take a deep breath.

I feel a ping of guilt wondering if I am inviting bad luck into my life by doing this. What if God punishes me for it? But then a little voice reminds me that I didn't do anything wrong. I really didn't. Right?

31

Today feels like a first day on the job kind of day. I woke up way before my usual time and now I can't decide what to wear. Sne is done with her school work so I'll have to take an uber to work. I'm nervous and I don't even know why. Okay I do know why it's the pity and the smug look on Mapaseka's face since they got the contract we were pitching for. I'd even forgot about it until Sebastian told me a couple of days ago.

I keep looking through my closet trying on clothes and taking them off. I try to find the brightest clothes I can find as if they will improve my mood but nothing. I finally decide on a black pencil skirt with a black and white striped knit top. It's a bit chilly outside so this one should be fine. I pair the outfit with a pair of black gladiator strap sandals and gold stud earrings. I put my curly wig on and hope to God I can hide the dark under eyes with make up.

As soon as I'm done I leave Hlumile sleeping and go to make myself a lunchbox. I find Sne in the kitchen and she hands me a bowl of muesli yogurt and some fruits. I'm not even hungry right now but I know she won't let me go without eating so I sit down.

"Why are you up this early? You're not going to school mosi." She sits down with her own bowl and starts eating.

"I wanted to make sure you eat." She says. I shake my head and stuff myself with the muesli. I'm already full but I'm not in the mood to fight her.

"I'm not a child you know that right?" She rolls her eyes and sticks her tongue out at me.

"I know. But I also know you don't eat when you're supposed to eat so a girls gotta do what a girls gotta do." She says shrugging her shoulders. My phone rings and I see Lulonke's name on the screen. I feel the heat invade my cheeks while the butterflies wake up in my stomach. I see Sne looking at the phone and smiling.

"Answer the phone." She whispers as if Lulonke can hear her. I didnt even realise I was just watching it instead of picking up.

"Shandu KaNdaba." I hear him laugh while the idiot I call my friend is busy clapping her hands with a huge grin on her face..

"That's not fair." He says.

"What? Did I get it wrong?"

"Oh you got it right. But it's too early for you to be working your way into my soul." I dont know the feeling that engulfs me as he says that but it makes my heart tingle.

"Isn't it supposed to be your heart?" I cant believe I am flirting so early in the morning. Maybe he is right it's too early for this.

"No. Uyishiye phansi inhliziyi manje uhlasele umphemfumulo. (You've gone past the heart and now you're going for my soul.)" Jesus Christ what is this man doing to me? This should be against the law honestly.

"Well in that case Sontshikazi how is your morning?" I hear him sigh. Sne has resorted to resting her face on her hands watching me. Her face is the literal definition of the heart eyes emoji right now.

"Its good. But it will be better when I see you."

"See me? Right now?" I go from flirt mode to panic mode.

"Yes. I am downstairs waiting for you. I know today is your first day back and Sne is done with school for now so I figured I'd take you to work." Deep breaths. My nerves are back a hundred fold.

"Uhm okay I will see you just now." I hang up the phone and look at Sne. "He is here."

"I know. He did say he will take you to work." How is she so relaxed about this. I need to change my outfit.

"I need to change." I get off the chair but Sne blocks my way.

"You're not changing anything. You are perfect just as you are. Besides you're going to work not a date. Now dont keep the man waiting." She picks up my lunch box and hands it to me. "Now go Hlumile and I will be just fine without you. Hamba Milani. (Go.)" She pushes me out the door with my bags and literally slams the door in my face.

"Go get your man girl!" She shouts. I swear this one has a screw loose in her head.

I take a deep breath before taking the lift. I see him standing outside his car in the parking lot. I swear and I'm not exaggerating because of the tingling sensation happening between my legs but he looks like he is posing for a car ad. Even the car is giving what it's supposed to give. I walk out the

gate and he lifts his head up from his phone and a smile fills his face. A gorgeous panty dropping okay I need to stop this before I get to work with my panties dripping wet.

"MaPhangela. You look beautiful." I give him a hug and take in his scent. He smells like money. Yes I love money and anything that smells like it is a turn on for me.

"Thank you. You look nice yourself." He holds me at arms length and runs his hands up and down my arms.

"Ukahle kodwa? (Are you Okay?)" I nod my head and give him a smile.

"I'll be fine. Taking it one day at a time."

"Good. Are you hungry? We can get breakfast before I take you to work."

"No thanks Sne made sure I had breakfast before I left. But I can do with a cup of coffee." He smiles and opens the car door for me.

"Okay then let's get you coffee."

We drive past a McDonald's and he orders coffee and a breakfast burger. I get a flashback of the last time I was in this same drive through. I was in the back of a Mercedes Benz mini bus making out with Nkazimulo. I quickly shove the thought to the back of my mind as Lulonke hands me my coffee and sachets of sugar.

"Ngyabonga. (Thank you.)" We drive in silence for a while. The only sound in the car coming from the radio. Ukhozi FM is on and I see him tap his fingers on the steering wheel when a song plays.

"So I might be done with your house by the end of the week." I say my voice penetrating through the sounds of Sjava.

"You dont need to hurry to get it done. If you're not up to it yet." He says extending his arm to hold my hand. I am always amazed at how hard his hands are. I mean they aren't rock hard but they are enough to show he uses them. Dont ask where my mind just went but I am back now. Focused and ready for the day.

"No you've been waiting for too long. I need to get it done so I can focus on other projects." He nods his head as he pulls up to our building. He parks the car and turns to look at me.

"Okay. Whatever you want. Ready to face the day?" I sigh and look out the window. I'm not sure I'm ready for anything right now but life waits for no man right? So I have to be ready.

"I am. I have to be."

"Okay. I will be in court for most of the day but I will pick you up after work." He tells me and judging by his stern voice he said what he said and I can't argue with that.

"Okay." His eyes shoot up in surprise. Was he expecting a fight?

"Just okay?" I laugh.

"Yes what were you expecting?"

"An argument." He says revealing his white teeth. Speaking of which it is normal for one to crush on a person's teeth right? I am not crazy?

"Well no argument here. I think Sne spoils me she literally drops me off and picks me up so I will not argue if you want to pick me up." He pinches his nose like he wants to say something but he doesn't know how to say it. "What?"

He clears his throat before holding my hand tight. Maybe he thinks I will run away. Which then makes me wonder what it is that he wants to say.

"Okay she literally drops me off and picks me up so I will not argue if you want to pick me up." He pinches his nose like he wants to say something but he doesn't know how to say it. "What?"

He clears his throat before holding my hand tight. Maybe he thinks I will run away. Which then makes me wonder what it is that he wants to say.

"Okay I know this might be weird to ask but you and Sne are you related in any way?" I don't know how many times I've heard this question. Maybe I should start saying 'yes we are long lost twins. One of us was stolen at birth.' And then leave whoever it is to wreck their brains trying to solve the mystery of who between us was stolen.

"It's not weird actually. We get that a lot. Literally everywhere we go someone always thinks we are sisters."

"And you've never thought to look into it?" Okay he is going into lawyer mode right now and I need to be at my desk in about ten minutes. I take both his hands into mine.

"Sthandwa sam according to scientists every person in the world has a doppelganger somewhere in the world. Me I just got lucky and found mine right here and she's my best friend." His smile widens and fills his face. I don't know if what I just said is worth that smile but Okay.

"So ngisthandwa sakho? (I am your love?)" He questions. I scrunch my face up at him and then replay the conversation I just had in my head. I did just call him sthandwa sam. What the heck.

"I have to get to work." I quickly get out of the car and he laughs. He rolls down the window and

sticks his head out.

"You can't take it back. From now on that's how you call me." He shouts as I rush into the building. And weirdly enough it makes me smile.

I get to my desk and find a huge bouquet of white roses. There is a tiny card sticking out of them and another huge one right next to the vase. I look around and not everyone is here. There is like four people here and they are the third year apprentices. I'm tempted to ask about the flowers but I decide against it. I take a seat and open the tiny card.

'Thinking of you during this difficult time. So sorry for your loss. Sending you love and courage to face the days ahead. Love Dave.' The message reads. Its quite sweet. I make a mental note to go up and Thank him. I open the big card and its words of comfort from everyone in the office. Nice. I don't know what the protocol is when I have to thank them.

I decide to get an early start on my work. I still have Lulonke's place to finish. Since most of the furniture is already there its the majority of the work done. So a week will be enough to finish it off. I check everything that I ordered and see that it's been packaged and delivered to the house. It's even been signed for. I see Sebastian's signature at the bottom of each delivery note. I should get him lunch just to say thank you.

I feel his arms wrap around my shoulders. His sweet floral scent is distinctive and nice. I hold on to his arms as Sizakele sits on the desk.

"We missed you friend. I'm so happy you're back." He says before planting a kiss on my cheek and standing up to sit on the other side of the desk and picks up the small card from the flowers.

"I missed you too." I try to grab the card from him but he pulls it away from me. "Sebastian?"

"Ooooooh Icy Dave is melting." He says handing the card to Siza.

"Does Shandu know he has competition?" She asks. Instead of digging into them I actually smile. I missed this. I missed them. As nervous as I was this morning seeing them has made me happy.

By lunch time I am done catching up on what I needed to do. I decide to go up to Dave and Thank him for the flowers because after lunch I am going to Waterfall to check on the house. I know Lulonke refused for anyone else to continue where I left off but I still need to check on what's happening today so that tomorrow I can have a clear idea of what I need to do.

I find him on the phone. He motions for me to sit down while he finishes with his call. He says his goodbyes and smiles at me.

"Welcome back."

"Thank you. And thank you for the flowers. They are beautiful." He sits back on the chair and clasp his hands over his abdomen.

"So how are you holding up?" I don't know how many times I've heard this question today and it's not even lunchtime yet. I take a deep breath before giving the same answer I gave to everyone.

"Taking it one day at a time. I will be Okay though."

"That's good. How is work going?"

"Its okay. I actually wanted to ask if I can go to Mr Mbatha's house after lunch. I need to be done with the house by the end of the week and i need to make sure everything i will need is there."

"Of course. If you need anything let me know. And I'm sure Sebastian and Sizakele will be more than happy to help." I get off the chair and pick up my phone.

"Thank you. And thank you for coming to the funeral. I didn't get to thank you then but I saw you. Thank you." He nods his head and smiles.

I find Sebastian and Sizakele in the cafeteria. Again I have to deal with the looks and people going silent when they see me. They even stop laughing as if that is going to make any difference. I take a seat and open my lunch. Sne left a little note saying I should have a good day.

"So Dave said I can go to Waterfall. Want to come with me?" These two quickly pack their lunchboxes and stand up. I havent even taken a bite of my food.

"Let's go." Sizakele says.

"I'm still eating."

"You'll eat there. Let's go before Dave changes his mind. I need a nap. My hangover is killing me." Sebastian pulls me up and I let him. Yep I missed them alright.

We get to Waterfall and Sebastian throws himself on the couch and before we know it he is out like a light.

"I still cant get over how amazing this place is. The pictures don't do it justice." Siza says looking around the lounge.

"Tell me about it. I think I need to start upstairs cause it looks like everything I will need is here."

"Okay i will start down here. The cabinets need to be cleaned before we pack the plates."

I start with the main bedroom and place everything where it needs to be. By the time I'm done it actually looks good. We just need to mop and vacuum the floors before Lulonke moves in. I wonder where he has been staying all along. I move to the kids bedroom and set it up with a little play area in the corner. Two desks on each side and a mini library with all the kids books I found online. Those unfortunately were paid for by me. My own little gift for my future nieces and nephews. Yes I am fast. If I've learnt anything these past couple of weeks life is too short.

By five PM the main bedroom and the kids room are done and dusted. Tomorrow I will start on the guest bedrooms and then move on to the bathrooms and the lounge.

He is here. How did he even know I am here? He is chatting and laughing with Sebastian who is now awake. He stands up when he sees me walking down the stairs.

"You're here." I say as soon as I reach him. He gives me a hug.

"I called your phone and Siza answered. She told me you are here so I decided to come here. I would have gone upstairs but apparently I can't do that before the work is done." He says giving Sebastian a side eye.

"Yes you cant. In actual fact you don't even need to be inside the house until the day of the reveal. Speaking of which I will need your keys." He lowers his eyebrows squinting his eyes.

"Why?"

"Because I need to make sure you wont sneak in here before we are done." His face relaxes and he reaches into his pocket pulling out the keys. I take the keys and toss them into my bag.

"Okay now that I've been banned from my own house how about dinner. My treat." Before I can even say anything these two are already headed to the door.

"We will wait for you in the car." Sebastian shouts over his shoulder making Lulonke laugh.

"How is it that you seem to attract crazy friends?" He turns to look at me and I feel tingles going down my spine. Besides the fact that he looks good in a suit I think I am falling for him. Hard. And that alone scares the shit out of me.

32

"So what do you think?" He is quiet. His eyes roaming around the entrance. He takes a step and with each one I feel my heart rate rise. This is officially my first finished project as an interior designer and its nerve wracking. Even though its Lulonke and he will probably say everything is nice but that

doesn't seem to make my nerves any better.

He walks in and stands right in the middle of the lounge. I decided on a black and nude color palette with pops of color here and there. There is a cream two seater couch on the left side of the fireplace with another one right in front of it and on the right are two cream chairs with bright yellow cushions on them. Grey yellow and white printed cushions sit on the couches surrounding a glass coffee table that sits on a black and white geometric rug. He turns to the huge picture of him above the fireplace. It's him in his Zulu attire sitting on a log somewhere. I stole it from his Instagram account. Actually it's the only picture he had there. Even with his name on the handle the picture is him facing the other direction away from the camera with his shades on. I turned it into a black and white art piece and now it looks like someone actually painted it.

He stares at the picture for a while before turning to the dining area. Again the nude and black palette is carried through with the black wooden table with white chairs around it. There was nothing much to be done in the kitchen but the nude palette is also there.

"Its perfect." He says a smile on his face. I let out a deep breath I didnt realise I was even holding.

"This is far better than I thought it would be." He walks up to me and pulls me in for a hug. I take his scent in and get lost in it for a moment before I remember that at this moment he is a client not a potential boyfriend.

"Thank you. I'm glad you like it."

"I love it." The smile doesnt leave his face even with every room we walk into. I decided not to put the TV in the lounge since there is a designated TV room downstairs. I put the biggest tv I could find down there and added a lot of comfy seating including recliners and lazy boys.

Upstairs he is taken by the kids room. There are two bunk beds with character linen. He even loves the little reading nook I added. When we get to his room he nods his head a lot and his hands seem to touch everything he comes across. The smile on his face tells me he is happy. He sits down on the edge of the bed and pat's the side next to him. I sit down and he takes my hand in his.

"This is amazing. Ngyabonga MaPhangela. Kuhle impela. (Its beautiful.)" He says rubbing his thumb on my hand.

"I am glad you like it because the invoice has been sent." He throws his head back laughing. I actually thought the money issue would be awkward but I'm glad he is laughing.

"I know. Let me check my emails." He pulls his phone out of his pocket and checks his emails. "I know I said there's no budget but did you have to bankrupt me?" He asks his hand on his chest dramatically. Thank God for the smile on his face otherwise I would be shaking right now.

"I told you that was a dangerous thing to say to a woman. And you didn't believe me. So...." He chuckles while typing away on his phone.

"Well payment done. I've sent you the proof of payment but I'm sure the accounts department will have it on their records by Monday."

"Thank you." I get off the bed and hold out my hand to him. "Its been a pleasure doing business with you Mr Mbatha." He smiles takes my hand and pulls me to him till I'm standing between his open legs. My eyes quickly dart down to his lips. I'd give anything right now to feel them on mine. He leans his head in and rests his forehead on my chest.

"So now I dont have an excuse to call you anytime i want or come see you." He whispers its almost hard to hear him but we are so close it's hard not to. All I want to do is push him back and christen the bed right here right now. But I still have to go to the office to finish some paperwork.

"You can call me anytime you want. I like talking to you." I say running my hands on his hair. The project might be over but I dont want them to be over between us. Not that there is anything to be over.

He wraps his arms around me and looks up at me his chin on my torso. He looks like an innocent little boy ready to beg for some sweets.

"I'm happy to hear that. So how about we grab lunch before my flight." He is leaving? And here I was thinking he will want to spend time in his house. Especially now that its finished.

"You're leaving?"

"Yeah I have to go to KZN for work. I will be back on Sunday." I nod my head and take a step back. He always goes to KZN on weekends I wonder if that wife theory wasn't such a far fetched idea after all.

"Okay. I'd love to get lunch but I have some paperwork to do before the weekend. I hate taking work home so I need to do this before I knock off."

"Alright so we will do lunch when I get back right?" He asks as we walk down the hallway. He stops next to the many picture frames lined up on the wall with no pictures in them.

"Is this a form of art?" He is staring at me and I am trying hard not to look at him. I hate how much he

has an effect on me. Even him just innocently staring at me sends tingles all over me.

"Not really. Actually you are going to put pictures on each frame. Pictures of your family from your parents down to your nieces and nephews. Who knows maybe one day you will add your kids." I see his smile widen through the corner of my eye.

"So why didnt you just put them up? I could have given you their photos." I turn to look at him. His eyes are shimmering I'm not sure if its tears or just pure undiluted happiness. Either way I like it.

"Because I want you to do it. I want you to pick photos that mean something to you that are sentimental and that will make you happy each time you look at them. You just need to make sure that the pictures are in black and white." He takes my hand and sandwiches it between his.

"You never cease to amaze me." Okay he is easily impressed. Noted.

"Its just pictures Mbatha."

"Not to me. Ngyabonga for making this house a home. I love everything about it."

He drops me off after canceling our lunch because he has to move his flight up. Some emergency or another. Or maybe his wife is going into labour with their fifth child. Who knows. How else do you explain this?

"I will make it up to you when I come back." He says while parked in front of the building. I can feel his eyes on me but my mind is on overdrive right now and I keep playing a whole movie of him running into her arms and holding her hand while she pushes out another one of their big headed babies.

"Sure." I feel his hand on my chin and he pulls me to face him.

"MaPhangela." Even that is pissing me off. I see concern and maybe hurt in his eyes. Why is he hurt? I'm the one who is being ditched for some other woman. Or man. You never know these days.

"I'm sorry. I'll see you when I come back." His voice is soft and tender but it does nothing to put my mind at rest.

"I heard you. Have a safe flight. I have to work." I grab my bag from the backseat and open the door. I hear him sigh just before I close the door. I walk into the building and dont even bother myself with looking back.

As soon as I sit at my desk these two are already sitting on either side of me watching me. I havent even had time to put my happy face on.

"He hated it?" Siza questions. "Dont worry about it this is your first project. It will get better nana."

She continues.

"Please that place is amazing. If he doesn't like it then he has zero taste and style." Sebastian argues. As much as I would love to hear Sebastian tease him and all I don't want to think about him.

"He likes the place." I say and they stop their bickering.

"Okay. So what's with the long face?" Siza asks. I sigh and sit back on my chair.

"I think the wife theory might be true." I say and they give each other questioning looks.

"What makes you say that?" Siza asks her arms crossed on her chest perking up her already perfect full B cup boobs. I can only wish.

"We were supposed to have lunch before he flies out to KZN but then he gets a call and all of a sudden he has to take an early flight. I think maybe the wife is in labour. Why else would he just have to leave just like that." I glance at them and I can tell they are trying so hard to hold in their laughter. The disrespect. "It's not funny." They burst out laughing and I'm the only one sitting there like an idiot with a frown on my face.

"You have a very active imagination friend. Have you ever considered writing books? I think you would be good at it." Sebastian says mocking me. The friends we keep.

"Seriously Milani? The man is a high flying lawyer probably with clients all over the country. Stop getting your panties in a knot for nothing. For all you know he actually does have an emergency." Sizakele says. I hate that they are right but my mind refuses to be wrong.

The day seems to drag on and on and on. All I want to do right now is go home and drown my self inflicted sorrows in a bottle of wine. By the time we knock off I am drained. And weirdly enough it's not because of work. My mind refuses to rest. I take a cab home and no one is here. I find a note on the fridge from Sne saying they went out for groceries. And I bet my last money their 'shopping' is at Scelo's place.

I decide to take a shower and change into my pyjamas while waiting for them. I pour myself a glass of a wine from an expensive bottle of chardonnay courtesy of Scelo. I'm hungry but these two didn't cook. Take out it is. But first I need to know what they want before I order too much food.

"Hey I want to order food what do you guys feel like?" I send the text and wait for a reply. I scroll through the channels while waiting for a reply.

"We are bringing food." The reply comes in. I would set the table but I'm too tired for that so we will

eat on the couch. I pour myself another glass of wine gulp it down way too quickly. I switch to a cider and lay down on the couch. I get a text from TK our resident photographer telling me to check my emails. I check my emails and find a file with the photos of Lulonke's house for my portfolio. Looking at the pictures I will say I did good. I should take everyone out tomorrow to celebrate. Or maybe I should wait till my commission comes through. Yeah I think I'll do that. I will wait.

Sne and Hlumile return just after eight as I am trying to concentrate on Generations and failing. They drop the bags on the counter and honestly I feel sorry for Scelo.

"Did you have to clean the man out?" I get up and help them unpack.

"He will be in Cape Town for the next couple of weeks the food will spoil. We are just helping him."

Sne replies. There's even a Tupperware filled with what looks like a proper home cooked meal.

"So what are we eating?" Hlumile hands me the Tupperware and as soon as I open an aroma of perfection and everything soul soothing fills the room. "Oxtail?"

"Yep probably made by some girl trying to worm her way into Scelo's life." Sne says rolling her eyes.

I turn to Hlumile and she is hiding a laugh. I'm guessing they met the girl.

"And what if there's some love potion in there?" I ask even though I already have a piece of meat in my mouth.

"Then we will all be obsessed with the girl. Well she is pretty though." Hlumile answers earning herself a look from Sne. Hlumile just laughs.

"She's not pretty she is ugly. From deep inside too." Sne counters making Hlumile ball over with laughter. "That girl is mean and rude." Now I need to know what happened. I ask and Hlumile narrates the whole thing between laughs.

"So she thought one of you was Scelo's girlfriend?"

"Not one of us her." Sne says pointing at Hlumile. "Apparently I am too skinny to be Scelo's type. Mhm. As if." She sounds more agitated with each minute.

"Really? Has she seen the girls he dates?"

"Exactly. And besides that she should be sucking up to me instead so I can put a good word in for her. But no she decides to insult me." Okay this really did rub her up the wrong way. I need to change the subject before she combusts.

"Forget her I saved you some wine." I hand her the bottle I opened earlier. She takes out two glasses and fills them up. Hlumile watches me as Sne slides the glass over to her. I know she's

eighteen and legally she is allowed to drink but as her big sister I say she has to wait until 21 atleast. She sees the glaring look I give her and she ignores it and picks up the glass.

"Hlumile!" Again she ignores me and takes a sip.

"This is nice." She says not glancing my way. I swear this child wants me to ground her. I see Sne hiding a laugh.

"Wena since when do you drink?"

"Lani please she's eighteen and it's better she learns from us how to drink and not out there where she'll get drunk and be taken advantage of. Besides it's one glass." Sne defends her.

"And it's a celebration since I got a job." She says.

"A job?" I didnt even know she was looking. "Aren't you supposed to be resting? You just completed high school."

"I know but being alone all day with nothing to do is boring. Plus I need to keep my mind occupied with something and I get to make extra cash for when I start school next year." You'd think by the way she is trying to convince me I would say no. I know Sne has been helping out at Scelo's office so it makes sense for Hlumile to have something to do as well.

"Okay I guess that works. So where will you be working?"

"In the coffee shop downstairs. I saw a post there and I convinced the lady to hire me and she did."

The proud smile on her face makes me happy. One step forward that's all we can do.

33

"Remind me again why we had to come to Small street on a Saturday when every slay queen is here in their disguise because they 'shop in Paris and Dubai.'" Trust Sebastian to complain even though he is getting a free shopping spree. Yes even in Small street it is still a shopping spree.

"Because we need clothes." Sizakele reminds him. I pull them to the side just before we cross over to the 'busiest mall' in the country.

"Okay game plan. We hold on to each other. We cant afford to lose sight of each other because if one gets left behind we won't be able to find you." I tell them. The three nod their heads but Hlumile is standing there glaring at me like I just told her to jump over a stream filled with crocodiles.

"Why did we have to leave our phones in the car again?" She questions her arms crossed on her chest. I know she wanted to take pictures but this is Small street photoshoots dont fly.

"Because nana we would like to have our phones by the end of the day." Sebastian tells her. All she does is roll her eyes.

"Okay we've sorted that out remember....."

"Stay close to each other." They say in unison like a high school choir. This is so much easier when I do it alone.

We hold hands and cross the street into the abyss that is Small street. Five hours later we leave with plenty of clothes and shoes. I feel a tinge of guilt since this shopping spree is courtesy of the payout from the funeral. Since I didnt spend much on the big stuff there was a lot left over. So I decided to treat my friends as a Thank you for their support. I know you cant put a price on support but I prefer showing gratitude to people while they are alive. I dont want to wait until their funeral to sing their praises.

Everyone is complaining about being tired I am too but not enough to complain. We catch a taxi and head back to Sandton cause thats where we left the car.

"Can we get food before we head back home. I am hungry." Sne offers.

"We can get takeaways and go eat at home." I suggest.

"Nope. We sit and eat I am tired." Sne shouts from the back seat of the taxi. I turn to look at her and she quickly sticks her fingers in her ears. That's her childish way of saying she wont listen to me. I turn back and face the front and this idiot laughs.

We get to Sandton and put everything in the boot and take our bags out. We head to Nandos and order two full chickens with their flour rolls chips and drinks. We find a table and gather around it and wait for our food. I take my phone out of my bag and check for missed calls and nothing. I actually thought Lulonke would have called but he hasnt. I spoke to him last night and he said he will call today but nothing. This whole wife theory is really messing with my head. I don't even know why I am stressing myself about this its not like he has asked me to be his girlfriend. Come to think of it he hasnt even claimed me as his. Sure we flirt but that doesnt constitute anything. Just two people joking around. Right?

"Penny for your thoughts?" Someone says and my mind drifts back to the present. I look around and see my friends staring at me.

"What?"

"He will call you." Sizakele says. I sigh and rest my arms on the table.

"Am I being irrational for thinking he is married?"

"YES!" The choir sings.

"Lani you will drive yourself crazy thinking about that. I'm pretty sure if he was married he would have told you." Hlumile says. What a pure heart she doesn't understand men are a whole different species.

"Besides he is a Zulu man you know those ones have multiple hearts that's why they can love ten women at the same time." Sebastian adds making us laugh. Maybe they are right there is absolutely no need for me to worry. But I can't help that little voice inside my head saying 'it will end in tears.'

A waiter brings our food and we dig in. It feels nice to just be in the present and not think about Siya or Cebo. I love them to bits and if I could I would bring them back in a heartbeat. But I can't. Even though the guilt is there I still have to learn to take one step at a time.

By the time we get back to the flat after dropping off Sebastian and Sizakele we are tired now I can complain. The first thing I do is get myself a glass of wine and soak myself in the tub. I relax and completely forget about Lulonke and his imaginary wife. My phone rings just as I'm about to drift off into a beautiful slumber. It's an unknown number. I'm tempted not to answer but it might be work.

"Milani Mbokazi."

"MaPhangela." I swear my heart just skipped a few beats hearing his voice. The man has too much of an effect on me and it scares me. And right now I am angry at him for taking too long to call. Why didn't I call him you ask? Have you ever seen an antelope chasing a lion? Although I did chicken out a few times from dialing his number.

"Lulonke." I hear him chuckle. He thinks this is funny.

"Hawu what happened to Sthandwa sam?" I can hear him trying to hide his laugh.

"I don't know it got lost while waiting for you to call." He laughs. Like really laugh and somehow it makes me smile. The day he breaks my heart even heaven will mourn I swear.

"So you were waiting for me to call? You could have called me." He says.

"Eh I didn't want to disturb you. What if you're with your wife?" That's my subtle way of asking if he is married. I keep my fingers crossed hoping he isn't. I would block him right now if he says he is.

"How can I be with my wife when you're there?" He asks and I feel a whole sense of something that feels like peace wash over me. I know Sebastian said something about Zulu men having ten hearts but I am choosing to believe that he is single. If he isn't then I guess it's welcome to the second wives club.

"You're not as charming as you think." He laughs again.

"Well I wasn't trying to be. I was just being honest. So how are you?"

"I'm okay. I went shopping and now I'm just relaxing."

"Lucky you. I've been in a meeting the whole day and we are not done." He sounds tired.

"What are you working on? Or is it a top secret?"

"Well for now it is. But let's just say once it's done it will be amazing and it will create a lot of jobs."

Now he sounds enthusiastic. Somewhere between this project being a top secret and him being enthusiastic about it

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he ends up telling me all about it. The joy in his voice is unmissable. I guess this is what they mean when they say do what you are passionate about and it won't feel like work.

"I thought you were a criminal lawyer." I tell him.

"Well I am more corporate than criminal but I do venture there when I need to. My late big brother was more of a criminal defence lawyer." His voice went from tired to happy and now it's sad. Maybe I shouldn't have ventured down this road. Now I don't know what to say. I've always been awkward when it comes to comforting people. I never know the appropriate thing to say.

"You miss him?" What kind of question is that? Of course he misses him. It's his brother. I palm myself on my forehead at my stupid question.

"Yeah he was amazing." Silence falls between us. Now I really have no idea what to say. After a while I hear him chuckle.

"What's funny?"

"I was just thinking about Bukhosi and the fact that I didn't actually shela you the right way. I'm pretty sure he would make fun of me." He says and I laugh.

"In that case you need to get to work Baba. We can't be disappointing big brother. Plus I'm not that easy."

"Well I have my work cut out for me then. Operation shela Milani is a go. Starting with dinner tomorrow. So MaPhangela Lwandle aluwelwa luwelwa zinkonjane. Ngokukhulu ukuzithoba bengicela udle nami isidlo sakusihlwa kusasa? (I humbly plead with you to have dinner with me tomorrow?)" If I was two or three shades lighter I'm sure my cheeks would be scarlet red right now.

"I can't promise anything but I will definitely see if I can slot you into my busy schedule. We will see." I did say I am not that easy so I might as well play along.

"I guess I will have to call you again to plead my case. I have to go our little break is over. I will hopefully call you before you sleep. But if I don't ulale kahle MaPhangela. Sey'yobonana emaphupheni. (Sleep well. I will see you in my dreams.)"

I hang up the phone with a huge smile plastered on my face. The water is cold and my glass is empty. I get out of the tub and throw a robe on. I float all the way to the kitchen with a renewed spring in my step. I can't wait for tomorrow.

"You're still alive. We thought you were eaten by the bathroom monster." Hlumile says. I have no idea what a bathroom monster is but whatever it is it can't take away my joy right now. I pour myself a glass of wine and throw myself between them on the couch.

"He called didn't he?" Sne says seeing the smile on my face. I nod my head and they clap their hands. "And? What did he say?"

"He wants to take me to dinner tomorrow."

"That's great. What are you going to wear?" The cloud I was floating on just a minute ago suddenly disappears at that realization. I do have clothes it's not like I don't have any but I don't know if anything I wear is appropriate for me to wear around someone like Lulonke. My style right now consists of Jean's maxi dresses I wear to be relaxed in and my professional clothes that double as church attire.

"I don't know. What am I going to wear?"

"We will raid your closet in the morning. Me I am going to shower and then sleep. I am tired." Hlumile announces standing up. As soon as she disappears I sit there trying to wrap my head around everything. And now it's not just about clothes. Lulonke seems like an important person and with my colorful history he might not be as welcoming or accepting of it. Not that I regret it everything I've done was for the good of my family.

"What are you thinking about?" Sne asks staring at me. I glance down the hallway to make sure we are alone before turning to her.

"Do you think I should tell Lulonke about my past?"

"No. Not yet anyway. Get to know him first. He will find that out later."

"Sne what if he finds out from other people? I'm pretty sure he runs in the same circles as some of

my bags. If one of them even whispers to him he will hate me." The excitement has completely vanished and panic has taken over. I should have thought of this before allowing myself to even get close to him.

"Hey stop stressing get to know him first and then tell him. Unless his past is as clean as Jesus' then he wont judge." I sigh and stare at the tv. Maybe Sne is right maybe once he is in love with me it will be easy for him to look past everything. Or it will make him hate me more. One way or another I will have to tell him but it doesnt have to be now.

I go to bed with my mind relatively at ease. I'm not planning on burying my past but when the time is right I will own it and tell him. For now I will enjoy dinner and see where this budding relationship takes us. My phone beeps just as I'm about to switch the light off.

'These people dont want to sleep. Save me.' His text says with a couple of crying emojis to emphasize his point. Its almost midnight I wonder how long the meeting has been going?

'Tell them I say they should let you rest. I need you fresh for our dinner tomorrow.' I press send and wait. I feel giddy like a teenager texting her boyfriend when its way past her bedtime.

'So we are going to dinner?' As if I would have said no.

'I'm still thinking about it.' He sends a bunch of laughing emojis.

'Okay then keep thinking so I can focus on this meeting. Have a goodnight.' I send a goodnight and lay on the bed with the phone on my chest. Yeah I am a going girl. I'm not gone yet but its getting there.

34

There's something to be said about excitement and lack of sleep. Today I get to go on my first official date. Usually when I go on 'dates' it's with people who have no interest whatsoever in what's in my head but rather what's under my dress. Not that I've ever had a problem with it. They get what they want and I get what I want. It's a simple transaction that works. But today is different. I get to have a guy pick me up maybe with a bouquet of flowers open the door for me pull out a chair the whole nine yards.

I get off the bed and head straight to the kitchen. They say breakfast is the most important meal of the day and today is a very important day so I need to make sure I have a hearty breakfast to

prepare for the day. By the time Sne and Hlumile wake up the table is decked out with oats and cereal. I am too lazy to cook but that's as hearty and filling as it gets for today.

"You know when I heard you in the kitchen I was expecting a full English breakfast not oats and cereal." This ungrateful child.

"Do you know there are children in America who would kill for that food. Be gracious." She rolls her eyes and dishes up the oats.

"Too excited to sleep in?" Sne asks.

"Yep. I need to pick an outfit."

"So what are you thinking? A dress or pants?" She continues.

"Definitely a dress." Hlumile answers. And here I was thinking I'm the one going on a date. They spend the next ten minutes discussing what I should wear as if I'm not here. I figure since I am not needed here I might as well eat my food and let them be.

"So what do you think?" They ask staring at me. So now my opinion matters.

"About the outfit. We decided on your green sleeveless A-line dress with the green and yellow heels and a yellow bag. I have one you can use." If any of them thought they could make a career by being stylist I'll say it now I wouldn't hire them. My legs are skinny and wearing A-line or puffy anything makes me look like I'm about to float away.

"No!"

"That dress will look good on you." Sne argues. I should just give her the dress because she's the one who forced me to buy it.

"Fine. I'll try it on and see. If I don't like it we will pick something else." Hlumile rolls her eyes again. I've always heard that Joburg changes people but I didn't think she would change so soon.

"You've always lacked style wena." She says Sne breaks out into fits of laughter.

"I'll send you back home to stay with your father. You're disrespectful now." She joins Sne and they crack up.

"Hawu but it's true mosi."

"You know what else is true I'm not buying you that phone." The laughter stops and she stares at me her eyes bulging out.

"You're going to buy me a phone?"

"I was but since I have no style I might as well go buy style." I don't know when she made it to my side of the table so quick. She wraps her arms around me almost breaking my bones.

"I was joking. You have the best style in the entire universe. In fact Beyonce should take styling tips from you." She says kissing and tickling me.

"You're an idiot."

"I know but you love me anyway."

We spend the day trying out outfits to wear. I tried the dress they suggested but I felt like i was going to church so that option is out. Some time around lunch time I get a text from Lulonke saying he has landed in Joburg. My nerves take a toll on me suddenly. I've never had a boyfriend before not even a high school crush. More than anything I am scared of not being what Lulonke expects. I know some motivational speakers will say I am the price and I should act like it but it's hard. When it comes to work and fighting for what I want I can easily do that. But when it comes to love let's just say I've never had a clear perfect picture of what a good love story should look like.

I know I am falling for Lulonke and I know that at some point my past will come up. My biggest fear is seeing the hatred and judgement in his eyes. Most people will tell you they are not judgemental or they don't care about one's past but what they forget to say is that is dependent on how deep or dirty your past is. My screwed up family isnt helping in the matter. Hlumile couldnt even attend her matric dance because we were mourning our mother is in a mental institution my father well that's just an entire mess all on it's own. My other fear is finding myself so dependent on a man that when things go South I'll be so broken I'll follow the route my mother set.

Eventually I decide on a white midi lace dress with spaghetti straps and peach heels.

"You look amazing." Hlumile says as soon as Sne is done with my make up. I look at myself in the mirror and she's right. I look good. As if on cue we hear a knock on the door. I look at Sne wondering how he made it up here.

"He called I gave him the code." Sne says walking out of my room. I take a deep breath and a part of me wonders if I am doing the right thing.

Sne pokes her head back in the room a grin on her face.

"He is here. Let's go." I follow her out and there are flowers. A whole bouquet of red Rose's he clearly did not come to play. And he looks good too. He is wearing a pair of dark slim fit pants with a crisp white shirt tucked in and sleeves rolled up. On his feet are black Chelsea boots. The only accessory he has on is a gold watch. He looks at me from head to toe a smile on his face revealing

his crispy white teeth.

"Wow you look beautiful." I give him a slight hug then step away.

"You dont look too bad yourself. How was your flight?"

"Not bad. But my day just got a whole lot better. I got you these." He hands me the flowers and I do what every girl in the romantic movies does I smell them. I dont know if I'm too uncivilized but I dont smell whatever scent people smell. But I'm not about to embarrass myself.

"Thank you. They smell amazing."

"I'll put these in a vase." Sne says taking the flowers from me. I dont even think we have a vase in this house. Maybe it's time to invest in some proper vases if I'll be getting flowers like these.

"We should get going our reservation is in forty five minutes." We say our goodbyes and he leads me out. I don't know if I should make small talk on our way down to the car or just keep quiet. I choose the latter. I see him checking me out every chance he gets. If I ever needed a confidence booster that's it. He opens the car door and I get in. He gets on the other side and drives out of the complex.

"So how did your meeting go?" I ask once I realise the silence is not helping my nerves.

"It was okay. We are still negotiating with some of the chiefs in the areas that will be affected but they seem to be untrusting. So it might take a while for us to convince them that this is a good opportunity." He seems to relax when he speaks about his work.

"So what's the way forward now?"

"We keep trying. That's all we can do." He drives to a quaint little restaurant just outside of Joburg.

He helps me out of the car and we walk up a few steps. A waiter leads us to our table. He pulls the chair out for me and I take a seat. I look around the room and my eyes land on a guy I've been involved with a few times. He sees me and I pray to God he doesnt make his way here. It would ruin my entire night. Lulonke sits down across from me his back on the guy. Thank God.

"What would you like to drink?" He asks going through the drinks menu.

"Just wine please

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his back on the guy. Thank God.

"What would you like to drink?" He asks going through the drinks menu.

"Just wine please red." He closes the menu and a waiter is right there in the blink of an eye. Their service is impeccable.

"Can we have a bottle of cabernet sauvignon please." The waiter writes the order down and walks away. I look up to see him starring at me and I feel my cheeks heat up.

"What?"

"You're so beautiful." I blush and lower my eyes. He reaches across the table and raises my head his hand feels warm on my chin. I hate how easily he affects me. Even with just a mere touch I feel the walls I've built up around me silently crack and fall. Yes it's scary yet it brings me peace. I can feel even the Goliath inside me who is ready to fight at the drop of a hat slowly retreating. And right at this moment looking into his hazel eyes I allow my feelings to take over. I allow myself to love him and not hold back.

We are interrupted by the waiter placing the bottle of wine on the table. He opens the bottle and pours the wine onto our glasses. He takes our food order and walks away.

"So where were we?" He rests his folded arms on the table watching me.

"You were telling me about yourself." He laughs and takes a sip of the wine.

"Okay I am 29 going on 30. I am from eNquthu originally but I grew up in Hillcrest. I am a partner in my father's law firm together with my brothers. I enjoy cooking and hanging out with my friends."

"Well you're hired." He breaks out into a laugh revealing his pearly whites.

"Wow I just poured my heart out to you." He argues acting hurt.

"No you just gave me your CV. Its impressive by the way. But I want to know you. The man behind the suits." His smile slowly fades away I dont know if its pain I see in his eyes. The waiter returns with our food and it's like a curtain just dropped and his eyes and his entire demeanor are back to being playful and relaxed.

We have our dinner quietly with little chatter between us. Maybe I crossed the line by asking who he really is. I feel bad but if I am going to be with him I need to know who I'm dealing with. We order our dessert. I excuse myself and go to the ladies room. I pee and wash my hands in the sink. I touch up my makeup before checking my phone. I find two missed calls from the guy I saw earlier. I put the phone back in my bag and walk out of the bathroom. The past needs to stay in the past where it belongs.

I get to the table and find a plate with a round chrome cover on it. I glance at Lulonke and he has a

smirk on his face.

"And now?" I sit down and the waiter shows up from somewhere behind me. He gently pulls the chrome cover away and disappears again. I look at the plate and there is a very appetizing chocolate dessert. On the edge of the plate are the words "will you be my girlfriend" written in chocolate sauce. Okay I know he went all out but I wanted him to say it. You know pour his heart out.

"You dont look impressed." He says. I look up realizing I'm not as giddy as most women would be. Maybe something is wrong with me.

"Its beautiful." That's all I can say really. He reaches over the table and takes my hand sending all sorts of tingles and fire burning all over me.

"MaPhangela Lwandle aluwelwa luwelwa zinkonjane zona ziphapha phezul'emafini. Phangela kobhongo koqhoqhoqho." He goes on to recite my entire clan praises. And I am fully ashamed to say I did not know half the words that came out of his mouth and yet hearing him call on my ancestors sends tingles down to my core. I throw my leg over the other trying to stop the throbbing down there. Yeah I am not as hard to get as I thought I was. Who gets turned on by clan names? Jesus needs to come back now.

"Ngiyakuthanda MaPhangela. (I love you.) It might seem to soon for me to say it but its my truth. I love everything about you even your moments of jealousy for a nonexistent wife." I roll my eyes making him laugh. "Seriously though Milani I know how strong and fearless you are. I also know how vulnerable and weak you can be. I cant promise you that this journey should you choose to be a part of it will be easy. But I can promise you we will walk it together. I will be there for the lows just as much as the highs. I will be your strength when you feel weak i will be your light when you feel it's too dark. I want to spend my life with you so I am asking you to take this journey with me see how far it takes us. All I want to do is love you the way you deserve to be loved. So MaPhangela will you take this ride with me?" Everything he just said sounded more like wedding vows than a girlfriend proposal. I dont know if I should make my own promises but I'm not very good with words. So I opt to let my actions speak for me instead.

"Yes I will be your girlfriend." His smile widens. He brings my hand up to his lips and kisses the top of it. He needs to kiss my lips instead. As if he can read my mind he gets off the chair and leans over the table. His lips feel soft and warm on mine. Every second that passes feels like we are just zoning into our own world where we are the only ones who exist. With my eyes closes I savour and etch

every part of this kiss into memory.

He pulls back leaving me wanting more. I open my eyes and see the smile on his face his eyes are twinkling and happy.

"Ngyabonga MaPhangela ngyak'thembisa ngeke uzisole. (Thank you. I promise you wont regret this.)" He says my hand still in his. I'm not one to believe promises but I believe him. Do I now wear those 'he asked I said yes' tshirts? No? Too soon? Okay. Its official I have a boyfriend.

35

My man! Indoda yami! Umunt wami! Iphakade lami! However you refer to your man well I have mine too. The past three weeks have been nothing short of amazing. Lulonke has been amazing. He picks me up every morning takes me to work brings me lunch if he is too busy to sit in the parking lot and eat with me we've had to buy more vases because he's been buying me flowers every other day.

I feel like I'm floating on a cloud. I've spent nights at his place and all we do is talk. The most intimate we've been is kissing and cuddling. Not that I'm complaining its given me a chance to know the man. His likes and dislikes his dreams his fears. Every time we talk its like a new layer of him is pulled back to reveal someone amazing. Sometimes I think he is too perfect. But maybe that's just my over active imagination taking over.

Today is a Friday Lulonke is going to KZN for another meeting. If I'm lucky I will see him tomorrow evening or Sunday morning. So I will be without a man for two days. After our dinner I had to block a few people. I dont know if it's the Universe or the people I've slept with have a secret WhatsApp group where they share things about me. The moment Lulonke and I became official people I hadn't spoken to in a while started crawling out of the woodworks. Some were gracious enough to accept that I was out of the game while others were begging for one night 'for old times sake' they would say. But I'm a gone girl now and I'm addicted to one man and I dont know what his dick feels like yet. That's the most dangerous kind of addiction.

"You'r e neglecting us." Sebastian says throwing himself on my desk with Siza right next to him. He is right though I have been neglecting my friends. If I'm not with Lulonke physically I am usually on

the phone with him texting and calling.

"You need to make it up to us." Siza says adding to Sebastian's statement.

"You're right. I definitely have been neglecting you guys." They stare at each other almost shocked that I am agreeing with them. "What? I can take accountability for my mistakes."

"Good girl." Sebastian says.

"Okay so how about this let me call Sne we can meet at our place and then decide whether we are going clubbing or movies." I suggest. Lulonke wont be here so I can definitely make it up to my friends. I'm hoping they suggest the club because chances of me spending too much money are slim.

"Okay let us know what she says." Siza says and they head back to their cubicles.

I text Sne asking her if we can meet up and she agrees. She's also been doing some neglecting herself. Her situation with Kumkani has evolved into a full blown relationship and I'm here for it. I text these two and tell them we are on for tonight. I get down to work trying to create a mood board for a client we are working on with Christine. Which is kind of difficult since the client is still house hunting. We've seen a few houses and I have some ideas of what to do. Most of the houses were empty when we saw them which gave me an idea for a side business. All I need to do is conduct some research on it write a proper business plan and once I'm sure of the viability of the business i will find investors and get it off the ground. Fingers crossed.

By the time three o'clock comes its Friday and that's our idea of a half day I am ecstatic. My work with Lu's house is up on our website. And I've been added to the list of junior designers. Its heartwarming but scary at the same time. I know I should be optimistic but I cant help but leave room for disappointment. Sometimes when things seem to be going too good I worry. But hopefully this time there wont be any bumps on the road.

Sebastian and Sizakele take an uber home to get their things before we meet up. Today I also have to take an uber home. Lu is not here to be my chauffeur. Speaking about him my phone rings just as I'm about to send my request.

"Baby." I answer.

"Sthandwa sam where are you?" He asks. As much as he sounds tired his raspy voice sends tingles all over my body. I'm pretty sure the salt in my body can fill a 1kg container by now. And Lulonke doesn't seem to be in a hurry to do anything about it. I just hope he is not expecting a virgin because

that ship has long sailed.

"I'm about to leave work."

"Dont go. I'll be there in five minutes." And here I was thinking he is already in Durban.

"Okay." I hang up the phone and wait. Lulonke is too punctual for his own good. In less than five minutes he is pulling up to the parking lot. He gets off the car and walks around to the passenger side. He is in casual clothes now. This morning he had on a three piece suit and now he is in black skinny Jean's white sneakers and a white hoodie.

"You have to stop undressing me with your eyes." He says a sly smirk on his face.

"I am not." He laughs.

"You're drooling. And I've been standing here for ten minutes with you looking at me like you're ready to devour me." He says and my face flushes with embarrassment. And he is right. I haven't moved one inch since he parked the car. But he is exaggerating when he says it's been ten minutes. I take a deep breath and propel my jelly legs forward.

He pulls me into a hug I close my eyes and take in his scent. Its intoxicating and another thing I have added to the list of things I love about him.

"You look beautiful." He said the same thing this morning and I'm still wearing the same clothes but I still blush anyway. These butterflies floating around in my stomach sure do feel nice.

"Thank you. You look good in casual." He looks down at his outfit and then up at me a frown now masking his face.

"You've seen me wearing casual clothes." He argues. Of course I have but I am allowed to compliment him still. Even though he can't seem to take a compliment.

"I know but still you look....." before I can complete my sentence he takes my lips in his. Number something something on the list of things I love about him. His soft full kissable lips.

I wrap my arms around his neck and stand on tippy toes for a little more comfort. I should have worn heels. His hands slowly go down my waist till he cups my tiny butt in his hands and squeezes. The closer he pulls me to him the more I feel his bulge on my stomach. I can only imagine what he can do with it. I just pray that I can add it to my list.

I moan in his mouth and he smiles my lips still on his. He takes my bottom lip between his teeth gently biting while I try to catch my breath.

"We should go before things get out of hand." He says his forehead on mine. I dont want to go. I

want things to get out of hand. But we are in a parking lot at my work place. He is right things can't get out of hand.

"Yeah we should go." We stand there our bodies stuck to each other our bodies stuck to each other our body heat raising the temperature neither willing to end our connection.

Someone clears their throat behind me pouring ice cold water on the inferno we've created. I don't know who it is but I know I hate them right now. I turn around and come face to face with Mapaseka. Great. By Monday my relationship will be the main topic in the office.

"Maps." I say unable to hide my annoyance. Add my sexual frustration to that and I'm ready to blow.

"Aren't you going to introduce me?" She asks staring at Lulonke.

"No!"

"Mapaseka Mokoena." She says her hand held out to Lulonke. I pray he doesn't take it but he takes it anyway.

"Lulonke Mbatha. It's nice to meet you."

"Mbatha as in Mr Mbatha? Milani's very first client?" She questions her eyes back on me. I can see the puzzle pieces coming together in her head. I know what she's thinking. And I want to tell her she's wrong but this is Mapaseka as far as she's concerned she is never wrong.

"Yes. This is Mr Mbatha my former client." I say taking his arm and making sure it's fully wrapped around me. This is me marking my territory. It doesn't seem to help my case because Miss Maps has a smirk on her face and I know she already has a beginning and an end for whatever story she's going to feed people on Monday.

"Maps we would love to stay and chat but Lulonke has a flight to catch. I will see you on Monday. Have a great weekend." I get in the car and watch Lu go around the car to get on his side. He closes the door and gives me a side eye hiding a smile.

"I take it that's your arch nemesis?" He is quite observant.

"I thought you'd be on a flight to Durban by now." I'm not about to let Maps ruin my day further than she already has.

"My flight leaves at six. I wanted to see you before I go." We drive through a Nandos drive thru and he gets some food. He is not a big fan of meat which is quite ironic because as far as I know Zulu men and meat are like fish and water. Remove one from the other and one will die. Guess I was wrong.

We park outside our complex. He has two hours left before his flight. We chat and laugh while

keeping a close eye on the clock. With each passing second I miss him. I know he is here but he is leaving in just a few minutes and I won't see him for more than 24 hours. See this is why I don't like getting my emotions attached sometimes makes it hard for me especially when I think something will go wrong. I have abandonment issues don't blame me.

We say our goodbyes an hour before his flight leaves. For his sake I hope he gets to the airport in time.

"Where have you been?" Sebastian asks as soon as I walk in the house. "You were supposed to be here before us." He adds. I place the takeaways on the kitchen counter and join them in the lounge.

"I was with Lu he just dropped me off now. So what are we doing movies or the club?"

"Movies. My treat." We all turn to look at Hlumile. I know she's miss independent now but I don't want her spending money any which way. She should be saving. "Stop looking at me like that. I have a job now." She adds.

"That's nice and all nana but you should be saving your money. Trust me you will need it." Sizakele chimes in.

"Relax I won't go broke just because of movies. Besides I also want to treat you." She argues.

"In that case movies it is." Sebastian says bringing an end to that. I know I should object but she seems excited about this so I won't burst her bubble. Besides Hlumile is not a reckless spender.

"But just so we are clear I'm only paying for the movie tickets and popcorn. I'm not that rich yet." I love the yet part.

"So the popcorn must choke us?" She asks.

"You'll drink water." She says making us laugh. Movies it is then.

My phone rings just as I'm getting ready for our outing. I grab the phone from the bed and answer without looking at the caller ID. In my head I am thinking it's probably Lu instead a female voice answers my hello. I pull the phone away from my ear and see an unsaved number. I put the phone back in my ear and hear the person calling out my name. I guess I've been silent for longer than necessary.

"Can I help you?" I hear her chuckle. I don't even know who it is. I silently count them down from ten to one. If they don't say what they need to say I'm cutting the call.

"You've definitely changed." The person says. The voice sounds like Hlengiwe's but I can't be too sure.

"I'm sorry who are you?"

"Wow okay. Its Hlengiwe." The devil is testing me right now.

"What do you want?"

"I'm fine Milani how are you?" I know she's trying to be sarcastic but I am not in the mood.

"That's not what i asked you. Ufunani Hlengiwe? (What do you want?)" I hear her sigh. I dont know what she was expecting for me to squeal and jump in excitement because she decided to call me? Please!

"Fine. Mum asked me to call you." I swear this girl is five to ruining my night.

"Hlengiwe if you dont say what you need to say I'm cutting the call."

"Okay okay. Your dad needs help." I cut the call throw the phone on the bed. She lost me at dad.

Our outing starts at a steakhouse where we have dinner before heading to the cinema. The way these people eat you wouldnt think we had a whole full chicken before we left the house. Hlengiwe keeps blowing up my phone. My phone has a block option but I'm a big believer in letting your enemies see the table being set in front of you so I only block when its necessary. I post the photos of our dinner and movie tickets on my WhatsApp status and in five minutes she's viewed all fifteen pictures and videos. See dont block everyone. I see Lulonke has viewed a picture that Sne just snapped. I'm not looking away from the camera but it's a pretty good picture. Next thing I know the picture is on his profile.

"Sir why are you stealing my pictures?" I send the text just as we get in the cinema. The movie will start in about ten minutes so I can chat with my boo.

"Whose pictures am I supposed to steal? I like being able to look at you even when you're far away from me." He replies. I send him a couple of selfies before putting my phone on silent to focus on the movie and my besties and just enjoy this upward trajectory I am on right now.

'Until everything comes crashing down.' The pessimistic bitch inside me says but I tune her out. Today I am happy. And she's not about to steal my joy.

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"Lani someone is here to see you." Nomsa says. I look at the time it's not lunch yet so I know its not Lu. Sne would have called or texted first. I wonder who it is. Maybe it's a delivery.

I get off my desk and head downstairs. The moment I walk out of the lift I see her. She's looking around like this is the first time she's seen a fancy place. I take a deep breath and prepare myself for whatever bullshit will come out of her mouth.

"Aunty." She turns around a grin on her face and pulls me into a hug. There is literally four people in the foyer I don't know why she is putting on an act. I stand there like a statue till she finishes her little scene.

"Milani. This place is nice." She says breaking the hug. "I always knew you'd go far in life." Okay she's definitely campaigning for an oscar.

"Aunty what can I do for you?" She swallows and looks around. Probably to make sure no one else felt the cold breeze that seems to be emanating from me.

"Is there some place private we can talk?" This must be serious. I think about taking her to the cafeteria but I quickly discard that thought. I don't need to be introducing her to my colleagues.

"We can go to the parking lot."

We stand under an open parking bay. I have to go back to work and I need her to hurry this up.

"Khuluma (talk) aunty what's going on?"

"You're not even going to offer me a chair atleast?" Today must be test Milani's patience day. If it's not Mapaseka making snide comments every chance she gets it's Sbhongile acting brand new around me. I look around the parking lot and see a plastic chair sitting a distance away. It probably belongs to one of the security guards.

I grab the chair and head back to my aunt. I hand her the chair and she sits down. I hope she doesn't ask for a glass of water too.

"Aunty I have to go back to work so can we get this over with please." She sighs and rests her hands on her lap.

"Milani your father is struggling. What you did was cruel you not only took the furniture out of the house did you have to destroy it too? Did you even stop to think about your siblings? They sleep on the floor they have to cook outside that's not a good life for them." She keeps quiet probably waiting for me to answer her but I have no answer for her. "Aren't you going to say something?" She questions seeing my silence.

"Oh I'm sorry I'm waiting for the part where you explain to me how that is any of my business."

"Milani when did you become this cruel?" Yoh this woman was sent here by the devil himself.

"Trust me Auntie you dont want me pointing out when exactly I became cruel. It might just have been the time you made me wash your dirty underwear for a loaf of bread." She swallows and looks down at her hands.

"Lani I am sorry about that." I dont know how I feel about her sudden apology. Right now it just seems too I dont know forced perhaps. But one thing I know for sure is that she doesnt mean it.

"You still haven't told me why you are here. I need to go back to work and I can't be standing here going back and forth with you the whole day." She sighs and looks up at me.

"I am asking you to help your father. He got a job as a security guard at the school. He will try to save money to fix the house all I'm asking for is help. If you can send them money even if its R500 every month. Do it for your sisters." She begs. I need to put an end to this bullshit once and for all.

"Auntie I'll say this once and once only. God gave me three siblings that I had to raise alone. Two of them are dead and one is here working. I dont care if my sperm donor father showed up with a truckload of children I raised two of his kids I'm not doing it again. So no I will not be sending money anywhere. Especially not to that man."

"Milani that's your home." She argues. I chuckle and take a step back.

"My home auntie? The very home you were all quick to remind me belongs to your brother?" She keeps quiet. Her eyes roaming around the parking lot. "Do you know what I had to do to get the house to what it was? How hard I had to work? But the moment Peter shows up I'm supposed to step aside and let him benefit from all my hard work? Never. So you can go back and tell him that it will be a cold day in hell before he receives even a penny from me." I walk away and quickly turn back to her with her mouth wide open. I walk back to her and she clears her throat. "And one more thing home for me is wherever Hlumile and I are. So this little emotional blackmail game you're trying to pull forget about it it wont work. And lastly dont ever ever set foot here ever again." I walk away more angry than relieved. The nerve she has showing up to my work place unannounced. Mxm.

My whole day just took a nosedive to hell. I've been replaying the whole scenario in my head all day. And the more I think about it the angrier I get. Mhm. Me? Help that man? Tjeses.

"Ungjwayela kabi lo."

"Who?" I look up and see Lulonke staring at me. I shake my head and take a sip of my shot. I dont know what I was thinking even suggesting we play poker with shots to boot.

"You haven't been yourself since I picked you up. Kwenzenjani? (What's wrong?)" I sigh and will my mind to expel Sbongile and her stupidity. I've allowed her enough time in my head to last a lifetime. She can go jump off a cliff.

"It's nothing I can't handle. Let's focus on the game." He takes my hand almost knocking the candle down. Fuck Eskom and their corruption.

"I think you've had enough shots for tonight." He says taking the vodka bottle away with his free hand.

"I only had two." I remind him. He is the one who has been pouring shots for me. Even when I lose and I'm supposed to take one he won't let me.

"And that's enough. I don't want you drinking too much." And here I was thinking I left Peter back home.

"Yebo baba." He smiles.

"That sounds nice coming from you." Of course he missed the sarcasm.

"How much longer will the electricity be out? I'm hungry." He laughs. Even in the dim light his smile is still gorgeous.

"We should have just eaten when we came back. I told you it will take a while for electricity to come back. But you refuse to eat cold food so....." He shrugs his shoulders as if he would have eaten cold mogodu. No sane person eats it cold. If he had listened to me and got us pizza or KFC we wouldn't be having this problem right now.

"Tell you what since we have nothing better to do let's play strip poker." He frowns trying to hide a little chuckle.

"If you want to see me naked just say so no need to trick me into it." Do I want to see him naked? Most definitely. Am I going to voice that out loud? Heck no.

"For all I know I'm the one who would end up naked. You seem to be better at this game than me." His eyes move from my face down to my boobs. My push up bra gives me enough of a cleavage to make my boobs look somehow bigger. A win for me.

I know he is probably being a gentleman and doesn't want to rush me to having sex but it's been a few months since I got some and a girl needs some relief. Just a bit. I pour myself another shot and see the disapproval in his eyes but I don't care. I down the shot letting a few drops drip down between my boobs. I see his eyes following the movement of the drops. If I play my cards right no pun intended I might just get some loving tonight. And thanks to Eskom we have the perfect candlelit

ambience right here.

"Are we going to play or not?" I say running my fingers between my boobs and wiping the vodka his eyes watching my every move. He clears his throat and his eyes make contact with mine. I can see his eyes are darker than they were a moment ago.

"I have a better idea. Let's steer away from things that will get us in trouble." This boy scout lane he is on will be the death of me.

"Why? Are you afraid of trouble?"

"Nope. But I do want to know what got you in a bad mood today. What happened at work?" And here I was thinking I'd just forget about today all together.

I figure there is no point in hiding anything so I tell him everything. I pour another shot his eyes watching my every move. He clears his throat and his eyes make contact with mine. I can see his eyes are darker than they were a moment ago.

"I have a better idea. Let's steer away from things that will get us in trouble." This boy scout lane he is on will be the death of me.

"Why? Are you afraid of trouble?"

"Nope. But I do want to know what got you in a bad mood today. What happened at work?" And here I was thinking I'd just forget about today all together.

I figure there is no point in hiding anything so I tell him everything. I pour another shot as if that is going to erase the bitter taste S bongile's name just left in my mouth.

"I know I'm supposed to tell you that family is important and all that other bullshit but truth be told I understand your point in this. And having witnessed your family first hand I dont blame you." He says not that i was seeking his validation or anything but hearing him say this eases my mind a bit. I know I'm not overreacting.

"So tell me about your family I'm sure they are way more normal than mine." One of the things that bring me joy is seeing people light up when they speak about their own families. I know mine is a hell of a mess but I know not all families are like mine. You'd think I'd be jealous maybe a little bit but it's also something I look at and pray to give to my children one day. If I decide to have them.

"Well my dad is a bit of a control freak he is obsessed with education and he will literally disown you if you decide not to get some degree or certificate. Mum is a sweetheart she makes the best beef curry. My siblings are idiots every single one of them. And then I have two nieces and two nephews.

They are two mature for their ages but you'll love them." I watch him as he animatedly tells me about the kids. Its easy to see the love in his eyes. And I'm sure one day he will make a great father.

The lights flicker back on and like every black person we cheer and celebrate.

"Thank you God. We almost died of hunger." He says throwing the cards in the air. I get up and head to the kitchen to warm up the food. I dish up and serve him on a tray. I see the smirk on his face as I walk towards him. He is probably just as surprised as I am but what can we say the things we do for love. I get my food and join him in the lounge.

"So I've been thinking a friend of mine is getting married this weekend. Would you like to come? It will be a white wedding on Saturday and then umembeso will be on Sunday." He is staring at me like I have horns on my head. I guess it doesnt help that I've stopped chewing my food and I'm staring back at him like he is crazy. I mean he might be we've only been together for a few weeks I dont know if I should he meeting his friends. But to be fair he has met my friends and my entire dysfunctional family.

"Okay. I'd like that." Lie. Relief washes over him. I guess he didn't think I'd say yes.

"Great. I will book our tickets." He says and goes back to his food.

I take my phone and send a text to Sne. I need an outfit for a wedding.

"So who is getting married?"

"Mpumelelo. He is marrying a girl he met four months ago." Ok that is fast even for me.

"That's quick."

"That's what we said but he seems to be in love so we have to be there. In that way when it falls apart we will gladly say 'we told you so'." He says laughing.

"It might just work out you know. There's been marriages built on less."

"Maybe. But I doubt it."

"I thought I was the pessimist in this relationship? When did you take my role?" He laughs and clears the table.

"I'm not a pessimist just a realist. She moved in with him a week after they met. A month later she wrote a letter to her family saying Mpumelelo was coming to pay lobola she literally gave him the money for lobola. Trust me that's just a recipe for disaster." Well now that he puts it that way I guess I understand the doubt.

As soon as we are done cleaning up I take a quick shower and change into short silk pyjamas while

Lu gets some work done. I chat to Sne on the phone discussing what I'm going to wear to this wedding. Hopefully I can get something decent before then. Lu walks in an hour later his shirt off and his naked upper body on full display. He is not bodybuilder ripped but there is some definition there.

"Our tickets are booked and ready for Thursday." He announces heading into the bathroom. He takes a quick shower and walks back to the bedroom with a towel wrapped around him and another wiping down his head. He changes into a pair of shorts and joins me on the bed. He pulls me to him and I lay my head on his chest.

"So what do I bring to the wedding?"

"Just your beautiful self." He switches off the lights and pulls me closer till my face is nestling on his neck. I throw my one leg over his. He grunts as my knee makes contact with his manhood. From the feel of it it might just be a decent size. But time will tell.

I wrap my arm across his chest slowly pulling my knee deeper into his happy place. He leans down and places a kiss on my head.

"Milani."

"Mhmm." I push my knee up further and I feel him hardening a bit.

"Lala. (Sleep.) You have work tomorrow." He says his voice a tad bit deeper.

"I'm just trying to get comfortable." He laughs.

"Trust me you're not going to get comfortable doing that. Sleep." I look up at him through the dim light from the moon and place my knee directly over his manhood. I see his jaws clench and something else getting harder.

"I'm pretty comfortable right now." He grunts his eyes are closed and his jaws are clenched tight while my knee works its magic. I feel him holding in his breath before slowly breathing out. Seems I'm on the right track.

Just as I'm about to put the final nail on the coffin I am flipped over and my hands held over my head. Okay kinky but I like it. He leans over me staring down at me. I feel his manhood poking my stomach even through his shorts.

"You're not playing fair." He says his eyes travelling down to my slightly open lips before going down to my heaving chest.

"Then let's play fair so we can both get what we want." I whisper and take his bottom lip into mine. They are soft and moisturized.

"And what exactly do WE want?" He asks letting go of my hands and resting on his one arm while

the other travels up my thigh his fingers like burning embers leaving a trail of goosebumps.

I feel my heart threatening to jump out of my chest. If it beats any harder it might just rip my skin to shreds. He leans down his forehead on mine and his eyes still glued on mine. I close my eyes as his breath fans my face. His lips silently make contact with mine. Every move he makes sends my blood running down to my core leaving it throbbing and begging for more. His tongue parts my lips and greets my own in a way only they understand. He quickly pulls his lips away leaving my lips cold and begging for his touch again.

His lips travel down my neck biting and possibly leaving mark's on my collarbone. He goes further down burying his face between my boobs. His one hand goes under my pyjama bottoms making contact with my dripping wet core while his lips slowly make their way down my stomach. I close my eyes preparing myself for what's to come. His fingers stop moving on me and his lips suddenly pull away from my skin. I wait anticipating what's next. A few seconds in and I open my eyes to find him leaning on his one elbow looking at me a wide grin on his face.

"You're cute when you're horny." He says his grin getting wider seeing my frustration. For his sake I hope that statement is a prelude to something better. He leans down pulls me to him till my back is on him and my ass is tightly nestled right on his crotch. I know he is hard I can feel it. He places a kiss on the side of my face and lays back on the pillow. No he did not!

"Babe!"

"Sleep Milani."

"Are you for real right now?" I can feel my anger steaming out of my pores. He cannot do this to me. He doesn't reply. Instead I feel his steady breathing and I know he is sleeping. Jack ass.

I slowly lead my hand down to relieve the tension I'm feeling but he holds my hand and leads it back up to rest on my tummy.

"Dont even think about it." He whispers and I feel like telling him where to get off.

"I dont like you very much right now." He chuckles his one hand holding tightly to mine. 'Have a boyfriend' they said 'it will be fun' they said. This is not fun.

"That's okay baby I love you enough for both of us." Mxm. I'm taking applications for a new boyfriend.

Work is officially closed for the year. I doubt Dave got the memo though because he was pretty clear when he told us we would be on call in case a client pops up during the holidays which means he will be working. Too bad for him.

"You're definitely taking this one." Sne says picking up a green printed bikini with its matching top and a sarong. I take it from her and throw it into the luggage. Its almost full and we are only going for a few days. If Hlumile wasnt working we would all be heading down to Tongaat for Christmas I'm pretty sure MamCebekhulu is expecting us soon. But we have to wait for Hlumile to close and then go down for Christmas.

"Dont you think this is too much clothes for a couple of days?" I ask looking at the almost full luggage. Sne stands next to me and we look at the suitcase as if it will speak and say 'I'm full.'

"No. As a woman you need to have clothes for every occasion. What if it gets cold? You need a cold outfit if it's raining you need to be prepared and the most important thing....." she runs out of the room excitement all over her face. She comes back a few seconds later with a black velvet paper bag and hands it to me.

"What's this?"

"Open it." She says laughing. I pull out a box from the paper bag and open it. This is from Sne so I'm not even surprised. There's a black see through robe with a matching bra and thong set. Next to it is a white version of the same set.

"So I figured depending on your mood you can be devilishly seductive or be as cute and innocent as an angel." Mhmmm. After his little tease the other day maybe this will be a great way to get back at him.

"Thank you. I think I'll take them both."

"Perfect. Now hurry up and get dressed Lu will be here soon." She walks out leaving me to find a nice outfit to travel in. An hour later and I'm ready to go. My bag is packed and waiting by the door. My outfit is nice and comfortable. And punctual Lulonke knocks on the door. I open the door and he

looks so different without a suit on. I'm still trying to get used to his laid back style. But I like it.

"You look nice." He says walking into the house. I do a little twirl for him and he laughs.

"Thank you. You look good too." He wraps his arms around me slightly lifting me off the ground.

"Are you ready?" He asks placing me back on the floor.

"Yep." I point to my luggage and he raises an eyebrow with a smirk on his face.

"You do know we are coming back on Sunday evening right?" He asks. I roll my eyes and grab my carry on bag.

"A girl can never be too prepared. Let's go. I still have to say goodbye to Hlumile and Sne." He grabs my bag and leads the way out.

We go past the coffee shop and find Sne having a muffin. I say my goodbyes and we head out. The drive to the airport is eerily quiet. Not even the radio is on and from the looks of it Lulonke seems like he has a lot on his mind. He has one hand on the steering wheel and the other keeps tapping his thigh if he is not using it.

When we get to the airport he takes my hand and leads me to check in still not saying anything. I need to ask him what's going on.

"Do you want something to drink while we wait to board?" He speaks. Hallelujah. I've never been on a plane before and I'm not sure what flight protocol says but I'm scared to drink anything what if I need to pee mid air. I know there are toilets but as far as I'm concerned they are no different to public toilets where everyone goes in and out leaving all kinds of messes in there. Yes I'm bougie and judgy like that.

"No. I'm good." He stares at me his brows furrowed and a small smile on his face.

"Are you sure? We can get food too if you're hungry." I shake my head and he pulls me into a hug.

"Are you Okay though you were quiet all the way here?" I look up into his eyes and see worry in them.

"I'm okay. I just cant wait to get this wedding over and done with. Plus I have this big case that's going on trial soon I need to be prepared for it and I'm not sure I am." We take a seat on one of the benches and he holds my hand.

"Define soon." He smiles cause he knows where I am going with this. I've come to learn that Lulonke is a perfectionist and he likes to be prepared for every scenario that may come up. A good trait to have as a lawyer but a bad one for a boyfriend. I wouldnt be surprised if this trial starts in September

next year.

"Its three months away." He answers playing with my fingers.

"And how long have you been preparing for it?"

"Almost a year." See what I mean. I take his face in my hands and make him face me.

"Lulonke Mbatha if you're not prepared now then you'll never be prepared. Besides you've had a year to study this case and get your ducks in a row. Right now you shouldn't be worrying about anything. It's the festive season forget the case and enjoy yourself. You will worry about it again next year. And I know you will kick ass in that courtroom so the people who should be shaking in their boots are the opposition. If they are going to go up against you then I'm sorry to say they are screwed." He takes my hand and kisses my palm.

"Who needs a motivational speaker when I have you." He leans in and plants a long slow kiss on my lips. Somehow the bustling of the airport slowly fades away as we get lost in each other. His hand wraps around the back of my neck as he pulls me closer and closer. We pull apart gasping for breath as the call for us to board rings all over the airport. I look around and see some curious eyes staring at us making me blush. He leans into my ear planting small kisses.

"We will finish this later." He whispers sending goosebumps all over me. Maybe that little set will come in handy after all.

We get to Durban and there's a car already waiting for us. And judging by the excitement on the guys face he must be one of Lulonke's friends. They hug before Lulonke introduces me to him as his girlfriend. Turns out it's the groom himself.

"MaMbokazi I have heard so much about you." He says before engulfing me in a bone crushing hug.

"Good things I hope?"

"Oh most definitely." He hooks his arm with mine and we walk to the car with Lu following behind us.

"So how are you?"

"I'm okay. Congratulations on the wedding." He tenses a bit at the mention of his wedding and I wonder what that's about. I know his friends aren't necessarily on board with it but he should be happy.

"Thank you." He opens the backseat for me while Lulonke loads our luggage in the boot. I scroll through my phone while the two catch up in the front seat. The moon and the stars are already out illuminating the sky I watch the stars and even see a shooting star. I make a wish like I've done every single time I've seen one. I'm not sure if it works but I keep doing it anyway.

We pull up to what looks like an estate a security guard does a security check on the car before we are let in. It's not an estate it's a house or rather a mansion with a long driveway with lights illuminating the concrete driveway. On either side of the driveway is green grass cut so perfectly I'm sure no one is allowed to step foot on it.

We round up to the front of the house with a huge water fountain that seems to be a standard requisite in any mansion. Mental note my mansion will not have a water fountain in the front. Mpumelelo kills the engine and a gentleman walks out of the huge French doors. He's in shorts and a tshirt with flops on his feet. The closer he gets I realise he looks familiar. Lu opens the door for me and I get out. He greets his friends before shaking my hand.

"Babe this is my other friend Nhlendla dude this is Milani." Lu says. Nhlendla smiles at me and I realise who he is. He is some big chief

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a step lower than the actual king. I cant seem to remember who his people are but I know he has gained popularity for being a shrewd businessman and a working doctor. I remember reading about him saying he wont give up his career as a doctor to solve petty squabbles and yet somehow people still love him.

"Nice to meet you." I am trying to be as respectful as I can be.

"And it's nice to finally put a face to the name. Lu has told me so much about you." He says flashing his smile. He leads us into the house and the inside is a work of art. The high ceilings open plan first floor with huge accordion doors at the far end of the house which open up to what looks like an Olympic size pool.

"Everyone is outside let's go." Nhlendla says leading us out to the backyard. And sure enough the pool is the focal point of a huge backyard that is an entertainers dream. There are plenty of places to sit with a fully functional covered outdoor kitchen with not one but two gas braai stands that are

currently sizzling with meat. There's even a pizza oven and a wine cooler filled to the brim.

"This place is amazing." I whisper looking around.

"It is right. Come let me introduce you to some people." His idea of introducing me to some people is him going around introducing me to everyone. It makes me feel giddy inside that he wants to show me off.

We end up in a sitting area close to the outdoor kitchen with a fire pit in the center. There are a couple of people sitting around while Nhlemdla and Mpumelelo man the braai.

"Babe this is Zinhle the bride that's MaNduli Nhlemdla's wife." He says. Zinhle smiles at me while MaNduli stands up and gives me a hug.

"I'm actually his fiancée." She says rolling her eyes at Lulonke.

"Same difference." Lulonke argues.

"Dont mind him. Until I have a ring on my finger I am a fiancée." She tells me completely ignoring Lulonke.

"But the Zungu cows are already in your father's kraal." He says wrapping his arms around us and standing between us. "That makes you a wife."

"Not according to the law." She argues. She goes on to quote some court judgement to support her statement and then it clicks. She's a lawyer too. Honestly now this is a bit intimidating. Lu told me Zinhle is an accountant MaNduli is a lawyer Mpumelelo and Nhlemdla are doctors Lu is a lawyer right now I feel like I am at a brainiacs convention and I'm not sure how I fit in here.

"Babe do you need a drink?" Lu asks.

"A glass of wine please." I say trying to calm myself down. In actual fact I need a shot of whiskey or vodka but these women are drinking champagne so they might look at me funny. So wine it is. Lu disappears into the house so I sit down and wait for him.

"So Milani how did you meet Lu?" Zinhle asks as a couple more girls gather around us. One thing is certain these girls look like they bath in milk and use money to wipe themselves. Not only are they beautiful but even their clothes scream designer. Zinhle is wearing a free flowing blue maxi dress with gucci slides. MaNduli is wearing a brown ruched asymmetric cut out midi dress that hugs her curves just right with the same kind of Gucci slides as Zinhle. Their weaves scream quality. Now I feel small with my small street dress.

"We met at work. He needed an interior designer and he found me." I say trying to keep my voice calm and sweet.

"Oh you're the one who designed his house in Waterfall?" One of the other girls asks and I nod my head. "We need to have a proper housewarming party there soon." I look at this girl inviting herself to my man's house and the other ones agreeing with her. Who do they think they are?

Lu returns and places a wine cooler in front of me with a bottle of red wine then hands me a glass. Everyone goes quiet as he opens the bottle and pours the liquid in my glass before placing the bottle back in the cooler.

"Ngyabonga. (Thank you.)" He leans in and places a kiss on my cheek.

"Tell me if you need anything else." He says before walking away to join the guys. I don't miss the way Miss invites herself over watches him. She better not test me.

"You know I'm happy Lu found you. For a while there we thought he'd marry his work." MaNduli says. Speaking of her I need to find out what her actual name is.

"Well we are not at the marrying stage yet but I'm happy and he seems happy." I say and actually believing it. I am happy. I just hope Lu is as happy as I am.

"Trust me he is happy. He never stops talking about you." MaNduli says.

"Well looks can be deceiving." Jezebel says. Yes that's what I will be calling her from now on seeing as she is determined to act like one.

I decide to ignore her and focus on the gathering and not drag myself into unnecessary cat fights. Jezebel spends the night trying to get me to stoop down to her level but I'll give myself a tap on the back for ignoring her. A little after midnight Lu says we have to go and rest. Thank God for that now I can get out of the lions den. We say our goodbyes and take the car we arrived in since our luggage is still in the boot.

We drive to his house that's overlooking the beach. It's a bit windy but the view even in the night it's amazing. I stand by the huge French doors that open up to the balcony and watch the waves dancing and kissing the beach. I feel his arms wrap around me and his chin rests on my neck.

"It's perfect right?"

"Yeah. Sometimes nature can be really beautiful."

"Isn't it late for you to be standing there like Romeo and Juliet?" Someone says behind us. I almost

jump out of my skin hearing an extra voice in the house but Lu doesn't seem to be affected. He sighs and turns around to the person.

"Dont you have your own house? What are you doing in my house?" Lu asks the person and they laugh.

"I missed you too brother." I turn around just as the two of them hug. And then our eyes meet. I blink a few times hoping this will be nothing more than a nightmare but it's not. It's real.

His face goes from anger to amusement. I feel my energy drain from my body I dont even have the strength to move from where I am standing.

"Bafo this is my girlfriend Milani baby this is my brother Nkazimulo." He says wrapping his arms around my waist and pulling me towards him. If it wasnt for him holding me I'm sure I would have made contact with the floor by now.

He walks towards us his hands in his pockets. The sweats sitting loosely around his waist make him seem nice but I know better. I can feel his eyes boring into me.

"Milani! Nice name. I knew a Milani once upon a time. It's not a popular name but its beautiful. It's nice to meet you." He says a smirk on his face. My tongue feels like its doubled in size inside my mouth and I can't speak.

"Baby I know he is intimidating but he doesnt bite. I promise. Let me take our bags upstairs." I'm too tongue tied to even stop him so I just stand there like a statue. We stand there no one willing to say anything till Lu disappears upstairs.

"So the money from my watch is now finished you've resorted to scamming my brother?" He says. I open my mouth to say something but nothing comes out. "Don't worry you don't have to say anything you'll be out of my brother's life by the end of the weekend. I'll make sure of it."

I watch him walk up the stairs and as soon as he disappears I crumble on to the couch. This is bad. Really really bad.

38

He is in the kitchen making breakfast humming a song. Nkazimulo stands on the stairs watching his brother move about he looks happy but Nkazimulo is not sure how to feel about it. Sure he wants his

brother happy but it's hard to believe that Milani has something to do with it.

"Shouldn't your girl be making breakfast for you?" He asks taking a seat on the highchair his elbows resting on the countertop. Lu smiles and dishes up placing the food on a tray with a flower he picked up from the garden.

"You've never been the romantic type so I wouldn't expect you to understand breakfast in bed." Lu says and the brothers laugh.

"I have to tell you something." Nkazimulo starts. He figures there's no time than the present to tell his brother about Milani. He's been thinking about this the whole night. Trying to find a way to even utter the words. When Lu told him he had met a girl and he was in love it never crossed his mind that it could be the same girl who is responsible for his missing watch.

"What?" Lu questions. "For your sake I hope you're not ditching your studies. You know your father would kill you." He chuckles as Lu places a cup of coffee in front of him. For some reason he is getting nervous. Until three years ago their relationship was nonexistent. For two years no one said a word to the other. Even when they were in the same room it was no different to them being worlds apart. Not even their family intervening would help. It took Bukhosi dying for them to fix their relationship. But even then it was a bit shaky. And in some way it still is.

"No relax I am not ditching school. I'm just here for the Christmas holidays then I'll head back."

"That's good. So what's up?" He sighs. For the sake of their relationship he has to be honest with him.

"Okay it's about Milani. Tell me how long have you known her?"

"A few months. Why?"

"I think you should do a background check on her. I know Joburg girls they aren't the most honest and for your sake I think you should find out about her as much as you can before you even think about making her a part of your life." Lu nods his head. He is not entirely surprised by Nkazimulo's words he is the one who will dig up any dirt he can find on a person. It's one of the reasons he is such a shrewd lawyer. And person in general. He trusts no one. Sometimes it seems he doesn't even trust his own family.

"Thank you Bafo but I'm good. I know all I need to know about her. Besides Milani is not a client or a witness I'm going to put on the stand. Her past is hers and hers alone. All I care about is our future." Nkazimulo shakes his head. He knows this won't be easy. Blurting out that he slept with her might

not be received as easily as he would like. Especially if Milani denies everything. He needs proper proof and having someone credible to support him will be a better idea.

He watches his brother walk up the stairs before taking his phone out and dials a number.

"Smilo hey it's me. Listen I need a favour I need a background check done on someone." He says his eyes glued to the stairs.

"Sure man give me a name."

"Milani." He answers. He didnt catch her surname but Smilo will know who he is talking about.

"Milani who? The watch girl?" Smilo asks.

"Yes that one. I need you to find everything you can on her. I need that information before I leave."

"Okay but you do know you wont get your watch back right? It's gone." Smilo says hiding a chuckle.

"Dude forget the watch. She's dating Lulonke." Silence. "Smilo?"

"I'm here dude. What do you mean she is dating Lulonke? I know Kumkani is dating her friend but where does Lulonke fit in this mess?"

A thought crosses Nkazimulo's mind. Maybe this isnt a coincidence. Maybe Lulonke just didnt meet a girl and fall in love maybe this is part of a bigger plan. Seeing as she got a whole lot of money with his watch maybe she figured she could get more. Maybe he is not the only one doing background checks on people.

"Dude I need that check ASAP. I need to get that girl out of Lulonke's life before she digs her claws deeper into him. I need to save my brother." He hangs up the phone pacing up and down the kitchen. One way or another he needs to get Milani out of Lulonke's life.

MILANI

I have to tell him the truth. It will be better if he hears it from me. He will probably hate me but hearing it from me will be better than him hearing it from someone else especially Nkazimulo. He walks in humming a song he is in a good mood I'm guessing Nkazimulo hasnt gotten to him. Good. This is my chance to tell him.

"You're up. Perfect. I made you breakfast." He says placing the tray on the side table. I dont have much of an appetite. I doubt I'll have it anytime soon. I watch him take a seat on the bed his beautiful

smile lighting up the room. A few weeks ago I thought he was the one. Maybe even my soulmate. But now that dream has to end.

I walk towards him and stand between his open legs. He wraps his arms around my waist placing kisses on my stomach. I feel a tear drop but I quickly wipe it away. My heart is heavy but this is something I have to do.

"Baby what's wrong?" He asks his lips still on my stomach. I wrap my arms around his neck and kiss the top of his head. I try my best to hold in my sobs. I hold on to him whispering I love you's so quietly that I doubt he can hear me.

"Baby what's wrong?" I take a deep breath and sit on his lap. "You didnt sleep last night and now you seem down. What's wrong?" I kiss the side of his face going around till our lips meet. For a moment he doesnt return the kiss until he pulls me up to straddle him. Our kiss deepens and emotions take over. I feel my tears run down my cheeks but I cant let go of him. This might be the last time I do this so i want to savor every moment of it. When everything comes crashing down around me I want to have this moment to remind me this wasnt a dream. That I had him that for a moment I got to be loved and taken care of for a moment I got to get a glimpse of what happiness looks like.

I gasp for breath as his lips leave mine and go down my neck. Sucking and nibbling leaving mark's that go far deeper than just my skin. His hands travel up my thighs till they reach my core. I close my eyes and take in deep breaths as his thumb makes contact with my throbbing clit. He brings his face up taking my lips in his again as his tongue invades my mouth. The tears running down my face refuse to stop.

"Milani what's wrong?" He asks his lips slowly kissing my running tears.

"I have to tell you something but I'm afraid you will hate me." I say trying to hold in my sobs. He sticks his one finger inside me and I gasp then he sticks another one gently stretching my muscles. "Tell me." He orders. I cant seem to formulate the words so I just cry. He allows me to cry both from pleasure and pain as his fingers thrust into me hitting every spot it can find until I feel my stomach knotting with tension. He thrusts a few more times before I feel my body release.

He pulls his fingers out and pins me down on the bed. I pull his face down and kiss him he returns the kiss just as hungrily. He untied my robe revealing the black set Sne gave me. And just like that he loses his mind touching and fondling every part of me. He pulls a pack of sealed condoms from

the side drawer. I take the packet and open it while he pulls off his t-shirt and shorts. I help him slide the condom on. He watches me as I push the latex down.

I don't have the strength to look into his eyes so I look down at his dick as he rubs it up and down my wet slit moaning each time he makes contact with my clit. He leans down kissing me as he slowly enters me.

"I could never hate you Milani." He whispers as his dick stretches me. "I love you way too much to hate you." He says opening a fresh waterfall of tears. At this moment nothing matters not my past and certainly not Nkazimulo. At this moment all I want is to engrave this moment in my memory for the rest of my life.

His strokes are gently slow and lethal because it feels like with each one he molds himself into me. "I love you." He whispers over and over again. He moans and grunts on top of me as he speeds up his thrusts. I feel my climax build up again and the faster he goes the more the feeling grows. I feel my insides clench as I reach my peak. A minute or so later I hear him groan and I know he is done. He pulls out and drags the condom out. He gets off the bed and heads to the bathroom. He returns with a towel and cleans me up before getting on the bed again.

"Your breakfast is cold." He tells me as I lay on the pillow watching him.

"Did you mean it when you said you'd never hate me?" He turns and rests on his elbow looking down at me.

"I couldn't hate you even if I wanted to Milani. I love you you complete me. You're the best thing that's happened to me in a long time hating you would be like hating myself." He says running his hand over my cheek. I should believe what he is saying but I'm more of an action type of girl. Words no matter how sincere mean nothing to me without actions to back them up. And his words I will believe them when his actions support them.

"Okay so you know how I grew up right?" He nods his head. "Well you also know I've been a breadwinner at home since I was 13. Growing up I did all I could to make sure we had food and whatever else we needed. I'd wash people's clothes clean their houses and whatever else they needed done. But when I went to Joburg to study I had to take up stable jobs. I" his phone rings but he doesn't pick it up.

"Go on I'm listening." I take a breath and continue but his phone rings again. He sighs and takes it.

"Nhlemla what does he want? Sorry baby let me see what he wants." He says before answering the

call.

"Bafo." I hear one side of the conversation but what I hear is enough to tell me that he has to go. "Okay I'm coming. Relax I'll be there soon." He hangs up the call and looks at me. "I'm sorry Sthandwa sam can we finish this conversation later?" I sigh and nod my head. He kisses me on the forehead before rushing to the bathroom.

I watch him disappear into the bathroom. I close my eyes silently rewriting my speech in my head. It doesn't matter how hard these words will be to utter I'm not going to let Nkazimulo beat me to it. If Lulonke is going to hate me then I'd rather he hate me for my own version of the truth not the spiced up version Nkazimulo is probably cooking up right now.

I fall asleep before Lulonke even leaves the bathroom. And by the time I wake up he is gone. But there is a note on the pillow next to me telling me he loves me.

"Cute note." Someone says. I look up to find Nkazimulo sitting on a chair with a tub of yogurt in his hand. He takes a spoonful and watches me as I pull the duvet up to cover myself. "You know of all of us Lulonke is the most romantic. It's a pity his romance is misplaced when it comes to you."

"What do you want Nkazimulo?" I'm not in the mood to fight with him but he seems to be looking for a fight.

"I want my watch but we know that's not happening. So option two you out of my brother's life." He says taking a spoonful of yogurt and stuffing his ugly face. I can't believe I ever thought he was cute.

"Lulonke is a grown man I think he can decide for himself what he wants." I don't know if provoking him is a good idea but if I'm going down I'm going to get a few punches in myself.

"It's really not about his age or what he can or cannot do for himself it's about you. You're not good enough for my brother you're not worthy to have the Mbatha name or even carry any Mbatha heirs. So I am going to do my brother a favour and snip this little romance in the bud." He says.

"I don't think it's your place to decide that." He laughs.

"Oh sweetie you do remember you and I spent a steamy night together. I'll say this though that was the best farewell gift I ever got. And if I know my brother once I whisper that little information in his ear he will send you packing. That's what I would like to happen but I'm a nice guy so I will give you a lifeline." I don't think I've ever hated anyone as much as I hate Nkazimulo right now. Not even my deadbeat of a father comes close.

"Are you going to ask what the lifeline is?" He asks his eyebrows raised as he plays with the spoon.

"No. Because I am sure whatever it is its bullshit." He chuckles and gets off the chair. He leans down on the bed his face inches away from mine.

"Maybe. But I will pretend our little night never happened and Lulonke will never know about it if and only if we relive that night. For old times sake just one more night and I will forget about it or my watch." He pulls himself up and stands smirking at the disgusted look on my face. "Oh come now we had fun last time. I'm sure we will again. Especially after this mediocre session you just had." Is it too soon to diagnose with narcissism or maybe he is just a psycho.

He walks to the door and turns around.

"Don't worry I dont need an answer today I'll give you till Sunday night. For now enjoy the wedding and then give me an answer. I'm sure it will be a good one." He walks out closing the door behind him. I watch the door still not believing what he just said. I'd rather die than hurt Lulonke again. He will be hurt enough when he finds out about Nkazimulo and I I cant add to that. The door opens again and Nkazimulo pokes his head in.

"By the way a little warning. There are cameras all over the house and I've briefed the security to make sure they search your bags before you leave. We dont want a repeat of the last time." I grab a pillow and throw it at the door. Nkazimulo walks away laughing his laugh sounds like a haunting noise in my ears. I hate him that's for sure.

39

I've always had a love- hate relationship with God. I would thank him each time my siblings and I had a plate in front of us. But then I'd hate him again when I wake up in the morning realizing I'm still stuck in the shitty life he placed me in and again I have to beg for something as simple as food.

I've always found him to be some comedic genius who finds joy in my pain. That's why nothing good ever lasts in my life. Just when I think I've tasted happiness he is always ready to pull the rug right out from under me. I'm sure he cracks up in laughter each time he does that.

Today is one of those days where I hate him. I cant seem to get Nkazimulo out of my head. I've always known my past would catch up with me never did I imagine it would be in this way. I couldnt sleep last night I was tossing and turning wondering how I am going to fix this mess I'm in. Of course

God is having the time of his life while I'm here facing the possibility of losing the man I love. Why else would God let me fall in love with Lulonke? Of all people why did it have to be him? Why did I have to fall so hard for him so soon. It's like God knew the faster and higher I climb the harder my crash will be.

I gently untangle myself from his arms and get off the bed. The one thing I am grateful for right now is that we spent the night at the hotel and I don't have to see Nkazimulo. I know Lulonke is tired. Him and his friends had a mini bachelor party last night. He came back at 3:37 and now he is sleeping soundly. The good thing about it is that the wedding is in the afternoon so he can sleep in a bit. I watch him his breathing even and consistent his curled eyelashes fanning his cheek and his perfect lips slightly opened. I am going to lose him. No that's not me being a pessimist it's me being realistic. Nkazimulo might say one night with him will save my relationship but I can't risk it. Lu means way too much to me. I just wish I could have seen it earlier maybe I would have locked my heart away and not allowed myself to fall in love with him.

Looking at him now I can see the resemblance. The sharp nose chiseled jawline and the almost similar almond shaped eyes. I should have paid more attention before but Nkazimulo was nothing more than a one night stand gone wrong. Not once since then has he crossed my mind except when I was spending his money or looking at my bank balance and realizing I should thank him for it. In my head that was just an inside joke I used to laugh at because I knew I'd never see him again. But lo and behold he is still haunting me.

"What are you thinking about?" I look up and see him staring at me I don't know when he woke up. My heart constricts like someone has their hand around it squeezing. I blink away the tears forming in my eyes plaster a fake smile on my face and shake my head.

"Nothing. I'm just wondering if we can go to the beach before the wedding?" He smiles squinting his eyes with a tint of red. He is hungover and yet he looks nothing like me when I'm hungover.

"Of course we can. Come back to bed." I get back on the bed and lay my head on his chest as he wraps his arms around me.

"You're tense. Are you sure you're okay?" He questions. "Is it about what you wanted to tell me yesterday?"

"I just had a nightmare." I lie. Although technically I am not lying my nightmare started the night I got to his apartment and it's been on going. Not my normal nightmare but a nightmare nonetheless.

"You seriously need to see someone about these nightmares."

"I will think about it. Let's order room service I'm hungry." I get off the bed again and pick up the phone. I call and order room service before jumping in the shower.

For the first time since we got here I allow my tears to fall. I don't know yet if I'm mourning the end of my relationship or I'm crying because I can never seem to catch a break. It doesn't matter though because I have to deal with both anyway at some point. I get off the shower and wipe myself down before going to the bedroom. I get a short white summer dress from my luggage and put it on. Perfect for a walk on the beach. I can feel Lulonke watching me as I move about the room fixing my hair. I turn to him and he has a smile on his face with his arms crossed on his chest.

"Stop staring it's rude." He chuckles his eyes roaming the length of my body.

"I am not staring I am just admiring what is mine." He gets off the bed and envelops me in his arms kissing me. He lifts me up and I wrap my legs around his waist exposing myself to him he sits on the bed so I'm straddling him. "I missed you last night." He says pulling out of the kiss.

"I missed you too." I plant small kisses all over his face making him giggle. It's quite a beautiful sound hearing him laugh. I've decided to take in every memory of him to keep me going when this relationship crumbles. The smoothness of his skin that's only broken by tiny scars here and there the sound of his laughter the feel of his lips on mine his touch and the way his eyes glow each time he laughs. I've decided to embed each of these things in my subconscious maybe they will ease the blow when this relationship falls apart.

I feel my lace underwear being pushed to the side as his thumb caresses my throbbing clit. I hold his face up taking his lips in mine. With every stroke of his finger on my nub the kiss intensifies my body begging for release. We pull apart panting and trying to catch our breath just as someone knocks on the door. I feel his smile on my lips.

"Saved by the bell." He says fixing my underwear and placing me back on the ground. I need to change my underwear. He heads to the bathroom while I open the door. I greet the gentleman and he walks in and sets up the breakfast on the small dining table. I get 20 rands from Lu's wallet and hand it to the guy.

"Breakfast is here." I shout. I pick out a pair of shorts for him and a Golf tshirt and place them on the bed. I take a seat and go through my phone while waiting for him. If he doesn't come out in the next two minutes I am eating without him. This coffee is getting cold. He walks out in the nick of time with

a towel wrapped around his waist and droplets of water forming a dewy effect on his skin. I watch him as he roughly wipes his hair and face before moving to the rest of his body.

His phone rings just as he is getting dressed. He picks it up and places it between his ear and shoulder.

"Okay I'm coming." He ends the call and quickens his pace. I guess I can forget about the beach. I decide to eat since he is already on his way out.

"Everything okay?"

"Not really. Apparently Mpumelelo is missing." Okay that's not a good sign.

"That's not good."

"Yeah. I have to go help find him. For his sake I hope he is not getting cold feet." He grabs a piece of bacon and stuffs it in his mouth. "Sthandwa sam I have to go. Hopefully we will find him before this wedding has to start. I will update you Okay." He kisses my forehead before walking out.

I could go to the beach all by myself but I don't think I will. I take the 'do not disturb' sign and place it outside the door. That should keep housekeeping away for a bit. I finish my breakfast and clean up. I make the bed then take pictures from every angle of the room. I move to the balcony and take a few selfies before I hear a loud banging on the door that sends my nerves spiraling out of control.

I tiptoe to the door as the banging starts again.

"Who is it?" I hope I am not about to be killed in here.

"Its me." A male voice says. Its not Lulonke that's for sure. And whoever it is sounds frustrated and impatient.

"You who?" I ask dialing Lu's number ready to press call.

"Milani its Mpumelelo." He says. I take a deep breath and open the door. He marches into the room sweat dripping all over his face. And thanks to his light hue he is red and it looks like he has been in the sun too long.

He throws himself on the bed breathing heavily I'm terrified to get close to him.

"Are you Okay?" I ask after a while seeing as he is far from speaking. He takes a deep breath and wipes his face with his hands. He stares at his watery hands and looks around for something to wipe on. When he finds nothing he wipes his hands on his tshirt leaving wet mark's on it.

"I'm sorry where's Lu?" He asks not looking at me.

"He went out to find you. Everyone seems to think you are about to miss your own wedding." He laughs and gets off the bed opens the bar fridge and pulls out a bottle of cold water and proceeds to pour the liquid down his throat. Either he is really thirsty or he is angry. As soon as the bottle is empty he crushes the it and throws it inside the small bin. I guess he is angry. And his jaws clenching and joints popping supports that.

"I don't think there will be a wedding." He says and sits back down on the bed. I sit on the chair I'm not sure if I should ask questions or just listen. His silence propels me to actually ask questions because the silence is just plain weird and awkward.

"Why is that?"

"Well my fiancée is pregnant." The smile on his face doesn't seem to be one of actual joy. Shouldn't he be happy? I'm even afraid to congratulate him.

"I take it there is no congratulations necessary then?" He shakes his head his smile not leaving his face.

"No. I don't think I was meant to find out. Not yet anyway."

"So how did you find out?"

"I decided to go for a jog this morning. When I came back I found Zinhle's sister and best friend out smoking. I decided to go greet and since I was coming from behind they didn't see me. I overheard them saying Zinhle is going to tell me after the wedding about the pregnancy." I'm still trying to figure out how exactly that would be grounds for the wedding to be called off.

"Okay I know this is probably a stupid thing to ask but you can always pretend to be surprised when she tells you." I don't even know why I have to tell him that. It's common decency to act surprised if you find out about a surprise before the actual surprise day or event. Everyone knows that.

"The only problem with that is I had a vasectomy three years ago." Oh shit. Okay that explains everything.

"Wow okay now that makes total sense."

"Yeah. And as far as I know my vasectomy was a success so how did she end up pregnant?" I don't know if vasectomies are a hundred percent effective but this is life nothing is fully guaranteed. Heck I have an IUD on but I still use condoms. Sometimes these sperm will find an egg even if one puts up every type of security available.

"Maybe it malfunctioned." Okay that was stupid. But he doesn't seem to think so because he laughs.

"I doubt that. Besides the vasectomy we always used condoms." He stares far off into the distance like he is thinking of something. "You know everyone told me this wedding was happening too fast. I should have seen the red flags. You know she moved in with me a week after we met? Uninvited and unprovoked. A month later hands me money and tells me her family is waiting for me to come pay lobola. I was so in love I didn't even question it. But now I'm wondering if this wasn't a trap all along?" I'm sure if Lu was here now he would be more than happy to say I told you so. But I doubt that's what Mpumelelo wants to hear right now.

"I wish I had the answers. But the only way to get to the truth is to speak to Zinhle. Sit down and speak honestly because I'm sure she doesn't know about the vasectomy. And for all you know the baby might be yours. Speak to her and figure out what's going on and then you can make a decision based on rational and full information because right now you're going to drive yourself crazy with hearsay. They might have been talking about someone else all together." He stands up and stands on the balcony door.

"That baby is not mine. That I'm sure of. Which means she's been cheating on me or this was her plan all along to pawn her baby to me." Yeah this is some fucked up shit.

We stay silent for a while. I don't know what else to say to him. I send a text to Lu telling him Mpumelelo is here.

"There is definitely no wedding happening today." He says walking back into the room.

"Talk to her before you make drastic decisions." He nods his head and walks to the door.

"Thank you for listening. And I'm sorry for disturbing you." He says before walking out.

I know there is always drama at weddings but this is beyond drama. Lu walks in a few minutes after Mpumelelo leaves.

"Where is he?" He asks looking around the room.

"He is gone. I doubt there will be a wedding today." He stops moving around and looks at me.

"What do you mean?" Before I can tell him the whole gossip his phone pings. He looks at it and sighs. "You might be right there's drama upstairs. I'll be back." Oh heck no. I am not staying here alone.

"I'm coming with you." I rush out of the room with him behind me.

"So what did he say to you?" He asks as we are waiting for the lift.

"His fiancée is pregnant." He freezes between the lift doors stunned.

"That's impossible Mpumelelo....."

"Had a vasectomy three years ago? Yep. That's what he said." He presses the button and we ascend up to the bridal suite. We hear the commotion before we can even get out of the lift. Both families are here and there are words being thrown all around. Nasty words. We walk in to find the bride crying on the bed. The bridal suite is bigger than our room which explains why there are so many people here.

"You're not going to embarrass my daughter like this." A woman says. I'm guessing she's the mother of the bride.

"Embarass her? Imagine the embarrassment my son would have to face raising a child thats not his. Your child needs to say whose child she is carrying because it's certainly not my son's." Mpumelelo's mother yells. One bridesmaid is busy comforting the bride while the mothers throw words back and forth.

"EVERYONE SHUT THE FUCK UP!" A man bellows in the room sending everyone back to their little holes and silence fills the room. Me being the gossip monger that I am I've snuck all the way to the other side of the room to get a better view of the whole mess. I should be recording but it would be awkward since no one else is.

"Now that we are back to our senses. If you are not part of the bride or groom's family get the fuck out. NOW!" The man screams and people scramble out. I am one of the last people to walk out. Lu holds out his hand for me and I take it.

"Lulonke who is the beautiful lady." The commanding man says. Shouldn't he be focused on everything going on here? Lulonke hesitates a bit.

"Uhm this is Milani my girlfriend. Baby this is Mr Beda Mpumelelo's father." I shake his hand as politely and respectfully as I can.

"So you're the reason for this mess." Zinhle's mother says drawing the attention back to her. How did this become my fault?

"I'm sorry?"

"I'm hlorry I'm hlorry where do you get off putting nasty ideas about my daughter in Mpumelelo's mind." Shes back to her shouting. Except this time I'm not even sure why shes shouting at me. All I did was listen to Mpumelelo nothing else.

"Okay ma what you will not do is blame my girlfriend for your daughters choices. Deal with your daughter and leave my girlfriend alone." He pulls me out of there so fast Zinhle's mother doesn't get a chance to reply.

"When did I become Jesus?" Lu chuckles as we wait for the lift again.

"Dont worry about it shes just looking for someone to lash out on. But one thing is for sure i wont let that be you." He says wrapping his arms around me. As minute as this may be it's nice to have someone fight for me. But like everything else in my life I will have to give him up sooner than later.

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I know weddings are usually filled with drama but this one takes the cup. It turns out Zinhle is five months pregnant which means Mpumelelo cant be the father. Both families are trying to do some damage control. It's been hours and Lulonke is not back. After the commotion in the bridal suite he brought me back to our room and left with the key good thing I can open the door from inside. The only downside I've been stuck here alone. I've even had dinner without him.

The matrimonial was supposed to happen four hours ago but it didnt happen. Zinhle's mother has apparently been asking for the ceremony to go on saying they dont have to sign anything but just to save face. I guess if you've invited people to an event like a wedding a wedding must happen. I think her mother is also operating from a place of desperation right now. Lu sent me a text saying Zinhle's mum said Mpumelelo can marry Zinhle's little sister atleast she is still a virgin and she has certificates from being tested at the reed dance to prove it. Yes Lu has been keeping me updated. I love other people's news too much to not want to know what's happening. Its also a nice escape from my own drama.

It's been twenty minutes since Lu last updated me and I am anxious to know what's happening. To pass the time I decide to call Sne. While Lu has been away I've been thinking of ways to tell him and I've decided to write him a letter. Tomorrow morning I will go to Tongaat instead of going back to Joburg with him. Not that he will make the offer after he reads the letter. Sne picks up when I call her the second time. She sounds out of breath. I hope I didnt disturb a lovemaking session with

Kumkani.

"Hey babe aren't you supposed to be fighting for the bouquet by now?"

"Before I answer that please tell me why you're out of breath?" She laughs.

"Relax I just came back from jogging. I've decided to get my body right."

"In December? With Christmas around the corner? How brave are you?" Could never be me. I love food way too much. As much as I know exercising can help me gain some weight the thought of giving up some foods will not work for me. Especially at a time like this.

"Relax I'm just trying to get my body used to the idea. The real work will start in January. So what's happening with the wedding. Any drama?" She answers still panting.

"Drama? That's an understatement. This is the stuff of reality tv. Boma love and hip hop so." I go on to spill all the tea and it's like she can't stop saying yoh.

"So the girl wanted a father for her baby not necessarily a husband?" She asks.

"Yep. If the groom hadn't overheard the sister and some friend he would be a baby daddy by now."

"Tjo wena this is some drama. It's a good thing he found out today. Imagine if the marriage lasted a few weeks because of the lies." She exclaims.

"Tell me about it. And I have my own drama to share. You won't believe who I ran into."

"Not one of your bags right?"

"Something like that. I ran into Nkazimulo." She gasps.

"The watch guy?"

"The one and only. And it gets worse. Nkazimulo and Lulonke are brothers." I tell her. I can almost see her shocked expression in my head.

"No! Babe this is bad really bad. What if he tells Lu about you guys and the watch?" She exclaims.

"Milani I know I said before that you don't need to tell Lu anything about your past but now you need to forget all that. You need to tell him everything before Nkazimulo does." I let out a deep sigh trying to imagine the horror that would be.

"I know. I've tried telling him but something always comes up. Like now he is trying to fix this mess and Nkazimulo wants me to sleep with him if I want him to keep his mouth shut."

"He what? That's blackmail." She says. I don't think Nkazimulo gives a fuck about that.

"I know. I've actually decided to write Lu a letter and then in the morning I will go to Tongaat before he reads the letter. I don't think I want to be here to see him go from loving me to hating me."

"So you're not even going to try and fight for him? Milani Lulonke loves you and I'm sure he will forgive you for this. It's not like you cheated on him. It happened before you two met." I know she's right about me not cheating on him but I doubt that will make a difference. If it was some stranger maybe I would fight for him but this is his brother his blood brother. And we all know blood is thicker than water.

"I know but that's his brother Sne trust me it wont be that easy for him to forgive that let alone trust me again." I've thought about this hard and there is no other way. Lulonke's family is important to him and if I tell him about Nkazimulo's proposition it might just create a rift between them. So the best thing is to remove myself from the equation.

I get off the phone and take a deep breath. I need to write this letter before I lose my nerve. I get a notepad and a pen from my handbag and take a seat on the small dining table and get cracking. In every piece of paper I pour my heart out. With every word I leave a piece of myself on the paper pieces of me I hope one day Lulonke can look at and remember the good times no matter how little they may be.

By the time I'm done I have four full pages in front of me. Now all I need is an envelope. I go through Lulonke's carry on bag but there is no envelope. I go through his laptop bag and find one that looks like it had a bill or something. I fold the letter and place it in the envelope. I know the first place he will look is the carry on bag abuse thats where his phone charger is. I place the envelope right next to the flight tickets and the charger.

Now that that is done I need to find a way to get to Tongaat. My phone rings just as I'm thinking about sleeping. My bags are packed my outfit for tomorrow is ready. I glance at the phone and see its Sne.

"Hey. What's up?"

"Hey I just spoke to my brother he says he is in Durban but he is on his way home. He is taking the kids there right now. So I've asked him to come get you. I wish you could speak to Lulonke face to face but if you're done with your letter I'll ask him to pass by there." Okay that's one less thing to worry about.

"Okay let me get ready. Thanks babe."

"No worries. He should be there in an hour. So be outside by then." She says before hanging up the phone.

I get off the bed and get ready making sure all my belongings are packed. And then the wait begins. My nerves are on overdrive. If Lulonke shows up before Bongani does then I'll have to explain everything to him face to face and I'm not sure I'm ready for that. The time seems to be ticking in slow motion. I keep looking at the time then the door and back to the time but that doesn't make much of a difference.

At long last Sne sends me a text to go down to the lobby. I grab my bags and head out. The lobby isn't as busy as it was earlier. I make my way out of the hotel and wait in the parking lot. Ten minutes later I see Bongani's car pulling up. And the screams from the kids announce their arrival. Bongani gets out to help me with my bags.

"What are you doing here so late." He asks when I get in the car.

"I was actually meeting a potential client." He bursts out laughing.

"Yeah right. That might work with ma but no me. So what happened? Did you fight with your boyfriend?"

"Something like that." I reply.

"Do you want me to punch him in the face? Because I will gladly do it. I really don't mind." Bongani is a talkative somebody and as much as I would like to get lost in my own thoughts I know that's not going to happen. Not with him.

As expected the trip is filled with chatter. I'm actually grateful to Bongani and the kids for keeping me out of my head. I still haven't got a call or a text from Lulonke so I'm guessing he hasn't come back. When we get to Tongaat the kids are already fast asleep in the back seat. MamCebekhulu is already waiting for us or rather the kids judging by her pout when she realizes they are sleeping.

"Oh they are sleeping already." She says kissing them before Bongani carries them inside the house.

"And wena I thought you guys were coming next week." She exclaims hooking her arm to mine and leading me to the house.

"I know. I just needed to get away."

"Get away from what exactly? What happened?" She asks concern evident in her eyes.

"Let's just say it's time I made peace with the fact that happiness is not made for me."

LULONKE

He is exhausted the drama with Mpumelelo and his almost in-laws has kept him busy. His battery died hours ago and he hadn't had the time or opportunity to charge it. He is worried about Milani all alone in the hotel room but this meeting seems to be far from ending.

"How long do we have to be here again?" He whispers to Nhlendla.

"Dude I dont even know why we are here. Zinhle admitted to everything. The wedding is off so why are we here?" Nhlendla fires back at him. Lulonke sighs looking at his watch.

"Its almost morning. I am tired my battery is dead my girlfriend is probably mad right now

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my girlfriend is probably mad right now can this end already?" He mumbles.

"Look I don't know why we are here I am not going through with this wedding no need to postpone it. So please if you all want to sing Kumbaya go right ahead. I am done." Mpumelelo says before storming out of the house.

"I think thats our cue." Nhlendla says. The two men get up and follow their friend only to find his car speeding out of the gate.

"Do we follow him to wherever?" Lulonke asks as the two men stand on the front porch watching the car.

"No. He needs his space. We will check on him tomorrow. Let's go and rest." Nhlendla says. They get in their cars and drive back to the hotel with Nhlendla's security in front and behind them. When they get to the hotel they go their separate ways. Lulonke goes into the hotel room grateful that he took the key with him. He opens the door not turning on the lights for fear of waking Milani up. He finds the closet with the help of the feeble light coming in through the window. He pulls out his carry on bag and gets his charger oblivious to the envelope that just fell onto the floor.

He tiptoes to the bathroom and takes a quick shower before getting into bed. He feels around on the bed surprised to find it empty. He switches on the side lamp and looks around the room. Fear and panic taking over. He opens the closet and realizes her clothes are gone. He finds his phone and tries to switch it on. Lucky for him it lights up just five percent but it will have to do.

He taps his foot on the floor waiting for the phone to fully wake up. As soon as it does he checks for messages and missed calls all he finds is one missed call and zero messages. He calls her number and it takes him straight to voicemail. He tries again and gets the same response. He plops himself down on the bed now more worried than ever. He knew she might not be happy with him being gone so long but he did not think she'd leave.

He dials Nkazimulo's number and waits. Its almost dawn so he doesnt expect him to pick up quickly but he does.

"What?" Nkazimulo answers sounding annoyed.

"Is Milani there?" Lulonke asks. Hoping and praying that maybe she went to the apartment because she was bored being alone.

"Why would your girlfriend be here when you're there?" Nkazimulo answers now fully awake.

"Shes not here so I was hoping she would be there." Lulonke says defeat and pain in his voice.

"What do you mean shes not there?"

"She packed her bags and she left. I dont know where she is." He says holding in his pain and tears.

"I'm coming." Lulonke hangs up the phone and wrecks his brain trying to figure out where she might be. And then he remembers Sne.

"Why didnt I just think of that." He mumbles to himself. He dials Sne's number but it also takes him straight to voicemail. He tries again and again and gets the same response.

He starts pacing up and down the room not sure if he should call the police or wait to hear from him. Common sense says call the police but he knows they will tell him to wait atleast 24 hours. But if something did happen to her then he doesnt ve 24 hours to spare let alone two.

Twenty minutes later Nkazimulo texts him asking which room he's in. He replies and waits. He hears a knock on the door and quickly opens. Nkazimulo nudges in and stands in the middle of the room staring at his brother.

"Tell me what happened." Lulonke takes a seat on the bed staring at his phone and hoping for her to call.

"I don't know what happened. I left her here to attend to Mpumelelo's mess and when I came back she was gone. I didn't switch the lights on when I came back cause I didn't want to disturb her but when I got in bed I realized she was gone." He tells him.

"Maybe she dumped you." Nkazimulo says chuckling earning himself a deadly glare from his brother. "Okay bad joke. I will call someone and see if anyone has seen her." He says pulling out his phone. He dials a number and waits. While the phone rings he notices the brown envelope peeking out from under the closet door. He pulls it out and looks at it just as the person answers.

"I will call you back." He says and hangs up. "I think she left you a note." He hands the envelope to Lulonke who opens it sees his name at the top and puts the letter back. "Are you going to read it?"

"No. I need to find her."

"Maybe the letter will explain why she left." Nkazimulo urges.

"I want her to tell me face to face." Lulonke says trying Sne's number again. Luckily it goes through. He waits until he hears Sne's voice on the other end.

"Hey did I wake you?"

"No I've been up. What's going on?" Sne questions although in her head she has an idea of why he is calling her.

"I cant find Milani do you know where she might be?" She goes silent her mind torn between playing cupid and reuniting the lovers or respecting her friends privacy. "Sne?" She sighs choosing the former.

"Okay I know where she is. Didn't she leave you a letter?"

"She did."

"And you've read it?"

"Yes." He lies. There's no way he is reading the letter. He is too proud a man to be dumped via a letter.

"And you still want to see her?" Sne continues with her Qand A.

"Yes." Lulonke answers trying to keep his patience in check.

"Oh thank God." Sne utters. "I'll send you the address."

He hangs up the phone and waits. And just as promised a message comes in with the address. He quickly gets dressed grabs his phone wallet and the letter and heads for the door.

"Where are you going?" Nkazimulo asks following him.

"I'm going to find my girlfriend."

"Okay I am coming with you." Nkazimulo offers.

"No. I'll be fine. I will tell you when I find her." He says getting in his car and driving off the envelope sitting on the passenger side. Glancing at it from time to time curious to know what it says and yet scared of what it says.

By the time he gets to Tongaat it's already morning. He follows the GPS until it stops in front of a huge double storey house. He parks a few meters away from the house and waits for someone to walk out. Thirty minutes later the gate opens and a car drives out. He notices Mr and Mrs Cebekhulu inside the car. He sees a girl jogging towards the house so he rolls down the window. When the person is close enough he hits the horn. The girl turns around and glares at him. Any other day he'd be slightly amused but not today. He waves for her to come closer and she does.

"Hi I am sorry to disturb you. I am looking for the Cebekhulu home. Is this it?" He asks.

"And you are?"

"I'm sorry my name is Lulonke Mbatha. Can you help me?" The girl's face lights up and the hostility she had a moment ago vanishes from her face.

"Oooh Shandu kaNdaba in the flesh. I was wondering when I'd meet you." She exclaims excitement taking over. "I know why you're here I will go get her." She says practically jumping to the house.

He watches her disappear into the house. He taps his finger on the steering while watching the time. Five minutes. Ten minutes. Fifteen minutes. His patience is running thin. He figures he has no other option but to go and knock on the door. He sees her walking towards him just as he gets himself ready to get out of the car. He grabs the letter and places it under his thigh as he watches her walk around the car. She opens the passenger door and gets in.

"Hi." She says shyly. They sit in silence for what feels like eternity no one ready to speak. Lulonke's anger on the verge of taking over.

"You left." He says after a while. "Why?" She turns to look at him for the first time since she got in the car.

"I left you a letter. It should explain everything." She tells him. He pulls the envelope out from under him and hands it to her.

"I didn't read it. Maybe you can read it to me." He says. She takes the letter and looks at it. His face is not giving anything away so she's not sure if he is lying or telling the truth.

"Why didn't you just read it?" She asks him as he turns in his seat to face her.

"Because if you're going to dump me I'd rather you do it to my face and explain to me what I did wrong." A tear rushes down her face and her heart constricts. He thinks this is all his fault.

"I'm not dumping you." She replies.

"Then why did you leave?"

"The letter is supposed to explain things. All you had to do was read it." She replies as another tear rolls down.

"Well I didn't. So now you can read it to me."

She sighs and lays back on the seat this is not how she expected this to go. Not even her plan D had this scenario.

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I thought Phiwo was lying when she said Lulonke was here. For one she doesn't know him. She knows about him but she doesn't know him. And two he doesn't know I'm here. Walking out of the house I had made up my mind that she was just playing a prank on me. But she wasn't. I had to mentally prepare myself for a moment before even approaching his car or facing him. But I guess it had to be done at some point.

"Read it." By this time I was hoping to just explain myself and not have to start telling my story. But he clearly wants me to read the note.

"Lulonke I wrote the letter because I don't have the energy or the strength to face you when you see what's inside. So please just read it yourself." He turns on his seat glaring on the side of my face. I am too afraid to look at him. I know he hasn't read the letter but now he is angry.

"Milani when I asked you to be my girlfriend I didn't write you a letter I spoke to you and used words like a grown up. So if you want to end this relationship tell me to my face. I'm a grown man I will take it." There is clearly no getting around this so I pull the pages out of the envelope.

"Lulonke

Before I even say anything I want to say Thank you thank you for making me believe in love again. Your presence in my life the past few weeks has been nothing short of amazing. You've shown me that I am deserving of love but I'm

not sure if I'll still feel that way once I tell you about me. My past my flaws mistakes and choices that I've had to make. I'm not going to apologize for any of them because they made me the person I am today. Strong and resilient and that's a woman I am proud to be.

Anyways back to the reason for this letter. You know my life you know where I come from. I've been responsible for my siblings since I was thirteen their wellbeing and their needs became my responsibility. I did anything and everything I had to do to make sure they had food to eat and clothes on their backs.

Coming to Joburg to further my studies was a hard choice to make but I knew if i was going to give them a better life i had to do it. Even when i got to Joburg I still had to work because being there didnt mean they were Okay. I had to send money every week or fortnight depending on how much I made waitressing. I worked two jobs to maintain them as well as myself. My studies weren't up to where I needed them to be. I wasnt failing but i knew i could do better. Two jobs that forced me to be on my feet a lot sometimes meant I would miss classes because I was too tired. And when I made it to class I'd be too tired to focus.

One night when i was waitressing at a club there was a group of men who came in ready to spend money. One of them kept hitting on me the whole night I wasn't interested. But towards the end of the night he offered me 5k to spend the night with him. All I could think about was shoes for Siyabonga and medication for Cebo's asthma. She'd been having too many attacks that week and Hlumile wasn't coping. I figured I wasnt hurting anyone in the process. One night and Cebo would get her medication so I agreed.

I wish I could say that was the only time but it wasnt. He 'recommended' me to some of his friends. One night 5k here 10k there. Things became easier at home. I didnt have to worry about Cebo or Siyabonga. I was even able to buy Hlumile a brand new phone just to say thank you to her for stepping up when I wasnt there. Even my studies came alive especially after I quit working at the

club. I'd go there for one reason and that was to meet someone and make some money. The whole thing took a huge weight off of my shoulders.

A few months back Sne and i went to a club to celebrate the end of exams and me being done with school. I met a guy there we spent the night together at a hotel you know the usual. Except this time I didnt get payment. Only later did I realise that we didnt speak about payment and I couldn't really fault him for that. While I was gathering my things to leave I found his watch under the bed. Since i figured he'd left i took it. I ran into him outside the hotel while we were waiting for our uber. I tried to give him back his watch but he said I can keep it not knowing it was actually the watch. I guess he thought it was something else. I sold the watch and got myself a few thousand rands.

Just like everyone else before him I never gave him a second thought. Until....." I stare at the words in front of me how do I even do this without breaking his heart. I can feel that his stare is no longer on me. I glance at him and see that he has his eyes forward it's hard to tell what he is thinking but from his side profile it looks like his jaws are clenched. I wait for him to say something but he is still silent. I figure I've already started with this so I might as well finish it.

"Until I walked into your apartment and he was there." For the first time I feel his eyes burning the side of my face. I thought I was nervous before but now now I think my heart is going to come out of my mouth. But there's no going back now.

"I know people always say the past doesnt always stay in the past. Sometimes it crashes the present like a massive bomb. I never thought this would be my life. Having you in my life being happy and for the first time looking forward to just living and putting my happiness first. Only for that to disappear in just one moment. I know finding out your girlfriend slept with your brother even if it was before you two met would not sit well with anyone. So I understand that this is the end of the road for us. I know this won't be easy for you to forgive that's why I have taken the decision to make this easy on you

and just leave. I do hope that one day you will find it in your heart to forgive me or see me as MaPhangela the girl you fell in love with without my past tainting all that. But for now

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for now I can see that maybe our paths were never aligned to begin with. But maybe in the next life we will have a different outcome.

I love you Lulonke I never thought that I was deserving of a somewhat fairytale life but for a moment I had that with you. And I will always cherish every moment of it for as long as I live. And I hope one day maybe in the future or the next lifetime we will both find some happiness.

Love

MaPhangela

I fold the letter and stick it back in the envelope. We sit there for a while our breathing the only audible sound in the car. I'm tempted to look at him see his reaction or read his face get a clue on where his emotions are but I'm also scared of all of that. I keep my eyes on the road ahead hoping for the best but expecting the worst.

I feel him turn take my hand in his and kiss it. I close my eyes uncertainty washing over me. This could be nothing more than my imagination running wild.

"Don't get mad." He says more nervous than I am. "Everything you just said I already knew." He adds. "Well everything except the part about my brother." I feel everything literally come to a standstill. When I open my eyes its like even the leaves that were swaying so beautifully among the tree tops have stopped moving.

I turn around to look at him. He is nervous. I've spent all this time wondering how I'm going to open my mouth and tell him all this meanwhile he knew. He

knew and he said nothing. I try to pull my hand away from his but he wont let me.

"What do you mean you knew?"

"I kind of did a background check on you." I pull my hand away and this time he let's me. My head is torn between relief and some other feeling I'm still trying to process. While I've been deep in my feelings going crazy he has known and said nothing.

"Okay what gives you the right to dona background check on me? What gives you the right to pry into my private life like that? And when you found out why didnt you say anything? Or what? You felt pity for me that's why you're here?" I realise I am shouting more than I should be and judging by the anger flying around in his eyes this is not the reaction he was expecting. I dont know what I should be doing right now maybe throwing myself at him and thanking him for putting up with the girl with a horrible past.

"If you already know everything then why are you here? Explain that to me."

"Okay first and foremost. Do not shout at me. I'm right in front of you so there is absolutely no need for you to act like I'm on the other side of a football field. And secondly your past means nothing to me that's why I didnt say anything." He says.

"I have to go." I try opening the door but its locked. "Can you open the door please."

"So this is how things are going to be between us? Instead of talking you're going to run away?" I'm trying so hard to keep my cook even though I can feel my anger rising. I dont want to find myself having to say things I'll regret tomorrow but he is pushing it.

"Can I just go." I say as calmly as I can. I need to get out of here so I can think properly.

"Not until we talk about this like grown adults. You can't be running off each time things get tough. We are in a relationship you dont get to check out at the first sign of trouble. It doesn't work that way." I take a couple of deep breaths trying to calm my raging heart.

"Fine. Let's talk about it. What gives you the right to dig into my life like I'm some criminal you have to defend in court? And then to make matters worse you keep quiet and don't say anything why? Or is it some ammunition you've been keeping in your back pocket to throw at me when I piss you off? Is that it?" I ask staring at him. I see his nostrils flaring and his eyes flash with anger. I don't know why because I am the one who should be angry.

"I asked you to stop shouting at me." He sounds way calmer than I feel and that's kind of a scary thing for me because it makes me want to be calm and rational. I keep my mouth shut and cross my arms on my chest.

"Now as I was saying I don't care about your past. It's yours and yours alone. I love you Milani. With all your flaws and imperfections. I love you. And there is absolutely nothing about you that I want to change." He chuckles and I turn to look at him. This is not the time for him to be giggling like a lovesick school girl. "Except maybe your stubbornness but we will work on that." He adds. He takes my hand again and kisses it.

"Sthandwa sam I know how hard it must have been for you to tell me all this and I am grateful that you've trusted me enough to share that part of your life with you. Even though I already knew it still means a lot to me that you shared it with me. But I want you to know that all that means nothing to me. We all have a past. We all have made mistakes and choices that have made us who we are today. And I love the woman you are today. Your past is just that your past. I don't care about it." He wipes the tear that just ran down my face with his free hand.

Telling him all this has lifted a whole load off of me. I'm still not sure about him doing a background check on me but one day he will have to explain that to me. But I am happy that things didn't turn out the way I expected. But I still need reassurance on one thing and one thing only.

"Can I ask you something? Or rather can you promise me something?" He nods his head kissing my knuckles. I want him to be kissing something else

but it's too early in the morning to be thinking about that plus we are literally sitting on the street.

"If we are going to continue with this relationship I need to know that you are not going to throw my past back in my face each time I say or do anything to make you mad." He let's go of my hand. He is offended. But I'm not about to back down on this. I need to know.

"Milani?" His voice is filled with pain all of a sudden. I need him to understand where I'm coming from with this.

"I know you've known about my past for a while and you've never used it against me and I'm really grateful for that. But that was before I knew that you know. And now that I told you this part of my life I need you to assure me that this conversation about my past ends here and now. And we will never ever talk about it again. Especially if God forbid I piss you off or something. I need to know that if we fight we can do that without my past being thrown back in my face. I need you to promise me that because if that's going to happen I'd rather walk away now. I love you way too much to have to deal with that. Especially from you." He sighs and takes my hand again. I swear this up and down with my hand is enough exercise to last me till next year.

"I Lulonke Mbatha uShandu KaNdaba wakho I promise you I will never ever make you feel like you are blesser than or remind you of a part of your life that you've chosen to leave behind. I promise I will do everything in my power to keep a smile on your face and to support you in everything you do. Ngiyakuthanda MaMbokazi futhi ngiyohlezi ngikuthanda. (I love you and I will always love you.)" Okay maybe words can be just as meaningful as actions.

"That sounded like wedding vows." For the first time since he got here he laughs.

"Trust me our wedding vows will be way better." He says as he wraps his hands around my neck pulling me to him and giving me a kiss. I didn't realise how much I've missed him. I've been so caught up in everything and forgot how to just breathe and be in the moment. Maybe love isn't so overrated after all.

We've been sitting in the car for the past two hours just chatting and he's been updating me about the wedding saga. Through all of that though he hasn't said a word about Nkazimulo and I'm scared to bring it up. I know he said he didn't know about it but I'm not sure I believe that. Maybe I should just trust him when he says my past doesn't matter because Nkazimulo is also a part of my past. One I sometimes wish I could erase.

"So that's how a wedding got cancelled." He says yawning. "But then again I always told Mpumelelo that there's something fishy about that girl." He adds.

"You should go and sleep. You have Gucci bags under your eyes." I say and he laughs.

"Geez thanks. You're coming with me right?" He asks looking at me. A cute little pout on his lips.

"I can't. How am I going to explain to MamCebekhulu showing up in the middle of the night and then leaving again in the morning? And besides you have a flight to catch." He sighs and lays back on the headrest. Just then I see Bab'Cebekhulu driving up the road. Now how am I going to get back inside?

I slide down the seat and this one looks at me like I'm crazy. Till he notices the car drive in and he laughs at me. I need to come up with a proper excuse.

"Don't laugh now I need to come up with a lie. Bab'Cebekhulu is very strict and boys are a no go." I say sliding back up once I'm sure the car is inside.

"You're 23 I'm pretty sure he knows you're old enough to date."

"Try telling him that. I have to go." I open the door ready to jump out.

"So I don't even get a goodbye kiss?" Lu asks pulling me back. I lean in and give him a quick perk on the cheek. "Nope. I want a proper kiss." Needy much. I like it though. I figure the car is already inside anyway so they can't see me. I pull his face down and our lips lock. A few seconds turn into a minute or more and things heat up. I feel his hands roaming over my things and going under my gown stimulating every piece of flesh he comes across.

A light knock on the window sets us apart. I look up and see MamCebekhulu standing on the drivers side her hands on her hip. Lulonke slowly rolls down the window while I pray for the earth to swallow me whole.

"Good morning." She says her lips curled up into a smile.

"Sawubona ma." Lu answers I dont know why he is also smiling because this is all his fault. I would be back in the house by now if he didnt want a 'proper kiss'.

"Mkhwenyana. Unjan baba. (Son-in-law how are you?)" Mkhwenyana? Talk about jumping an entire AK-47.

They start having a full on conversation with MamCebekhulu saying she's always known we'd be good together and now her answers have been answered. I watch them talking like I'm not even here.

"I should go." I get out of the car and stand on the other side waiting for these two to end their conversation.

"You should come by for Christmas lunch." MamCebekhulu says. When did we get here?

"I'd love to but my family and I are going home for the holidays." Oh thank God. Imagine the tension and awkwardness with Scelo Bongani and Bab'Cebekhulu on the same table with Lulonke. I know how hard core they can be and I'm not ready for them to meet just yet.

"Oh well next time ke."

"Yes. Ma I have to get going i have a flight to catch."

"Of course. It was nice to see you again. But next time don't park so close to the gate unless you want ubaba to kill you." She says. I say my goodbyes and give him a perk on the cheek.

We watch him drive off with MamCebekhulu's smile not leaving her face. Sometimes I wish my mother was as present and consistent as MamCebekhulu is I know comparing people is wrong but is it also wrong for me to want to experience a mother's love fully. I know MamCebekhulu loves me and wants what's best for me but she'll never fully fill the void my mother created.

"What was it you said about happiness not being made for you again?" She asks as we walk back into the house.

"I know I said that but maybe I was wrong."

"Of course you were. Milani you are just as deserving of happiness and love as anyone. And trust me you will have it all. All you have to do is believe."

"I guess. You're not going to tell Baba about this right?" She laughs.

"Of course not. You girls are grown now and at some point he has to let you be. But that point is not today."

I quickly rush up the stairs to my room. Yes I have a room. For now though. I take a quick shower and change into sweats and one of Lu's tshirts that I took. I go back downstairs and make myself a bowl of cereal since everyone has already had something to eat. I see the kids playing outside by the pool so I decide to prep for lunch. I'm just not certain what to make. Mama walks in and sits on one of the high chairs sipping on a cocktail.

"Ma what should I make for lunch?"

"We will have a braai. I marinated some meat yesterday so you can start with the salads. As soon as Bongani and Scelo get here they will start the braai." She tells me. I take out everything I will need from the fridge and the pantry. I see her watching me I can tell she has something on her mind.

"What are you thinking about ma? You seem deep in thought." She sighs and takes a sip of her drink.

"I've been wondering have you thought about going to see your mum?" She asks.

"Nope. And I'm not planning to. She's fine where she is and I am fine where I am." I'm not trying to disrupt my life. I haven't even bothered to keep up with the police about her case and honestly ever since I heard that it's highly unlikely that she will even get her day in court so why bother.

"Nana I think you should make time and speak to her. Right now I'm sure she's maybe in a better state of mind to answer your questions. And don't even lie to me and say you don't have them. I do so I can imagine the kind of questions you have."

"I know but I doubt anything she says will make up for what she did. I don't think I'll ever be able to forgive her and no amount of explanation or justification will change that." Our conversation is cut short by Scelo and Bongani walking in with Sne and Hlumile behind them. The mood changes their presence and the sudden change in mood is enough to banish any thoughts of my mother from my mind.

Hlumile immediately goes off to find Phiwo while the brothers head out to the pool. I notice Sne is a bit down. She's been fake laughing since she got here making me wonder what's going on. As soon as we are alone in the kitchen she lays her head on the counter and heaves out a deep sigh.

"Long flight?" I ask even though I know it's not that.

"Something like that. Did you speak to Lu?" Change of subject red flag again. I decide to indulge her for now.

"We spoke. Turns out he knew all along and he actually doesn't care." Her face lights up for the first time since she got here. Like really light up not the fake stuff she's been giving.

"Really? That's great. Should you shouldn't have listened to me before. We would have avoided all this drama. So how did he take the news about Nkazimulo?"

"Well he didn't say much about it. Just that he didn't know I slept with him. I'm not even sure where his mind is about that but we will have to wait and see." She nods her head tapping her fingers on the countertop. I can almost see her mind drifting off again.

"That's good." She says absentmindedly. I let her be.

As soon as I'm done with the salads I drag her up to our room and close the door behind us.

"And now? What's going on?" I should be the one asking that.

"You are what's going on. You've been distant and faking laughs since you got here. What's happening? Did you and Kumkani have a fight?" She sighs and throws herself on the bed.

"I missed my period." She says. I stare at her waiting for her to say she's joking but she doesn't. I sit down next to her.

"Okay when were you supposed to get your period?"

"Two weeks ago." Oh that's not good. But then I remember something that somehow puts my mind at ease.

"Should you do remember that your periods have always been irregular? This could be just one of those times." She throws herself down on the bed with her eyes fixed on the ceiling.

"I know

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but for the past three months they've been consistent and I've had them like clockwork."

"Babe stop stressing yourself. If you think you might be pregnant then we need to get you a pregnancy test before jumping to conclusions. For all we know your periods are back to playing hide and seek." I say. I love her but until I see two lines on a pregnancy test I am not jumping into any conclusions. I've stressed myself enough this week.

"I know but I couldn't even buy one because Scelo was right there being a security guard." She says wiping a lone tear running down her face.

"Sne dont cry we will have to find a way to get to town and get you the test. Until then you have to act normal. If I can figure out that you're acting then so will everyone else. Plus aunt Nomvula is coming and you know that one is a human pregnancy test." She jumps up the bed and starts pacing biting her nails.

"I've forgotten about her. Milani what am I going to do? You know she wont hesitate to say it in front of everyone. And then my father will kill me." She says her eyes watering.

"Hhay Sne you're stressing my niece. Stop it." She stops pacing and rolls her eyes. Atleast she is not crying anymore. "I'm serious. Stop stressing. We will get through this together just like all the other times." She sighs and sits down laying her head on my lap.

"Why do problems seem to find us all the time?" She asks.

"I've been asking myself the same question for a while now."

LULONKE

He is exhausted. Twenty four hours without sleep is not a joke. He walks into his apartment and finds his brother working on his laptop.

"You're here." He says looking at Nkazimulo.

"Yep. So how did it go with your girlfriend. Did she dump you?" He asks chuckling.

"I'm too tired for your bullshit." Lulonke answers dragging his luggage up the stairs. Nkazimulo follows him to his room.

"What happened?"

"Honestly I would much rather not discuss my girlfriend with you." Lu answers pulling his tshirt off. Nkazimulo runs his hand through his hair his jaws clenching and unclenching for a moment.

"I thought we were past all of this? What's going on?" He asks as soon as he is calm again.

"We are." Lu answers although he is also wondering if they are really past it. Today feels like some sort of warped dejavu. It's different but he cant help feeling his trust in his brother slowly fade away again. They have worked hard to get back to where they used to be as kids. But that stint that sent them in different directions five years ago will always be a permanent stain in their relationship. Lu

has made peace with that Nkazimulo not so much. He still thinks they can fully repair their relationship and his ego refuses to let him be wrong.

"Then what's all this about? I'm your brother and I'd like to know what's going on in your life."

Nkazimulo says sounding dejected.

"You know what you need to know Nkazimulo. Now if you dont mind I need a quick nap before my flight. So if you dont mind." Nkazimulo nods his head and quietly walks out his brother watching him. Lu gets on the bed sends a text to Milani telling her he has arrived safely. He lays on the bed for a moment trying to fight the thoughts running through his mind. Being the fourth child in a family of five kids meant he was the proverbial 'middle child'. Bukhosi was the older brother who took his role way too seriously. So much so he even got married young just to prove himself. Nkazimulo was the rebellious son responsible for many of the grey hairs on their fathers head. Even though he cleaned up his act after Bukhosi's death the bad boy in him will never be fully gone. His twin Nkanyezi was and still is the family Princess. The first daughter who had everyone wrapped around her even after getting married all she has to do is scream and everyone will be fussing over her. Nandi is the typical last born who is fearless and does whatever she wants to shake the status quo. She is the feminist in the family who thinks Mbatha and Sons is a patriarchal nightmare she needs to dismantle that's why she is studying law because she wants to be a partner in the family business.

And then there's Lulonke the one who was easy to forget. At eight years old he begged to go to boarding school when he realized he wasnt getting much attention at home. Although he has grown closer to his siblings over the years he has made peace with the fact that they will always be united as siblings but they will never be best friends. He also learnt that the hard way five years ago when he found his then fiancée in bed with his brother. Their relationship took a nosedive and although it's been on a steady rise again he cant help but wonder if this will be a repeat of the past.

He believes Milani when she says she slept with Nkazimulo once. Although he cant fault her on that especially since it was before he met her he knows his brother but he hope's for their sake the past will stay where it is. In the past.

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There's a sense of peace I get when I'm here. It's like the everything with the world is Okay. I've never understood why I get that feeling but I like it. Besides the people here who make it all worth it I love sitting out in the balcony and taking in the fresh air just before I sleep.

She is finally sleeping it took a while with her overthinking as usual. Hopefully tomorrow we can get to Town and buy the pregnancy test so she can know what's going on. My phone vibrates on the table. I see Lu's name flashing on the screen and the little butterflies that are supposed to be sleeping right now come out to party.

"Shandu KaNdaba." I hear him chuckle and I know he is blushing. Yes people say the way to a man's heart is through his stomach I say try his clan names that's the way to his soul.

"MaPhangela. Unjani Sthandwa sam? (How are you my love?)"

"Way better than I was 24 hours ago. How was your flight?"

"Okay. I got here and passed out. And then i was woken up by Sane wanting a place to stay saying something about being stranded since someone scammed her now I'm up." He says but all I heard was Sane. I dont know who that is but I know it's a girl and I hate her already.

"Who is Sane?" I am ready to fight LoSane wakhona.

"Sane is MaNduli's friend. She was at the party on Thursday." He says as if I know everyone who was at that party.

"Describe her. What was she wearing?" He sighs and tells me what she was wearing and it clicks. Its Jezebel. She was serious about inviting herself over and this man thought it would be a good idea to let her in.

I take a couple of calming deep breaths. As much as I want to scream and shout right now I also have to remember that I am far away from Joburg to do anything plus I might wake people up over here.

"So there were no hotels where she could sleep at? Or friends or a bridge maybe a park? Anything?" I say between clenched teeth.

"She said she doesn't have money for a hotel blah blah blah. Anyways she will be gone in the morning so iskhwele asehle kancane nje baby. (Let the jealousy rest.)" I know he is not finding this funny. I know he is not.

"This is not funny Lulonke." I hear him laughing. This man!

"Baby I promise you she will be gone in the morning. My conscience would not let me allow a woman to be stranded alone in the streets of Joburg." The curse of dating a kind sweet man.

"Fine I hear you. But what if she tries something. What if she throws herself at you?" I ask. I cant say I fully trust him he is a man and that species thinks with its other head most of the time.

"I am a grown ass man and I can say no and mean it. Secondly the bedroom door is locked and I pushed the two chairs against the door just in case." He sounds impressed with himself and I'm here laughing.

"I cant believe you would go to such lengths."

"Hey I am trying to protect your assets here." He adds.

"Good. Cause if she gets her hands on my assets I will personally rearrange her face." He laughs. I must be Celeste Ntuli to him.

"I believe you. But dont worry. Your assets are very safe." We settle into a comfortable silence for a moment. It's not awkward or weird even with just the subtle sound of our breathing to show we are still here.

"I miss you." He says after a while breaking the silence.

"I miss you too. I wish you were here instead of being there with Jezebel." He bursts out laughing.

"Since when is she Jezebel?" He asks.

"Since Thursday. She has an ugly Jezebel like attitude."

"Well I cant argue with that. Baby let me sleep. I have an early morning tomorrow." He announces and I can hear him yawning.

"Okay. We will talk tomorrow. I love you."

"I love you too. Now go and sleep. I will call you in the morning."

We hang up and I clear the table getting ready for bed. My phone rings again this time it's an unsaved number. I watch the phone ring for a while trying to figure out who the number belongs to but I come up blank. It stops ringing for a few seconds before it starts again. Same number. This must be important. I press the green button and put the phone on loudspeaker. I'm not about to let some stranger bewitch me through the phone. I keep quiet and wait for the caller to speak.

"Milani?" A Male voice booms through the speaker. It's not Lu or Dave at least.

"Yes!" I hear the person sigh and take a couple of deep breaths.

"How are you?"

"Before I answer that who are you and how can I help you this late in the night? Are you dying?" I ask.

"Huh?"

"Are you dying? Is this an emergency? Why are you calling me so late?" He chuckles.

"No I am not dying this is not an emergency." He says so easily you'd think we are life long best friends and yet I don't even know who he is.

"Okay then tell me who you are and what do you want?"

"Its Nkazimulo." Satan is working overtime clearly. I keep quiet and wait for him to go on. Instead he also keeps quiet. "Milani?"

"What do you want Nkazimulo?"

"I was wondering if you told Lulonke about us?" He asks. I guess Lu said nothing to him.

"One there is no us. Two what I share or dont share with my boyfriend is none of your business. And three please leave me alone."

"Where are you?" Which part of leave me alone did this man not get.

"I am home."

"You're in KwaMhlanga?" How does he even know where home is?

"How do you know where my home is?"

"That's not important." He answers. I guess just like his brother he did a background check on me. Geez these men and being nosy.

"What do you want from me Nkazimulo?"

"Can we meet? I can drive up to see you." I am really curious to hear what he has to say but at the same time I cant put myself in a position where I'll get caught between Nkazimulo and Lulonke.

"No. In actual fact. Lose my number." I drop the call and block the number immediately. Nkazimulo is the last person I need causing havoc in my relationship.

xx**xx**xx**xx**xx**xx**xx**xx**xx**

"Girls here's the list and here's my card. And please

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for the love of God do not spend on things I didnt send you." Ma says handing Sne and i her shopping list. She woke us up early to head to town and do last minute shopping for Christmas.

"I still dont understand why this wasnt done before we got here." Sne says sulking. We might not have the proof yet but I'm certain she is pregnant because this morning she woke up and threw up. It could be stress though but the test will confirm tonight.

"Can we come too?" Phiwo asks coming down the stairs.

"No. You and Hlumile can start by cleaning up the guest rooms and spring cleaning the kitchen." I see Phiwo deflate. I know she hates manual labor but unfortunately for her MamCebekhulu doesnt play.

"That's not fair. They go to town and we clean up?"

"Do you have a license?" She shakes her head. "I didnt think so. Girls get going so you can come back before it's dark. Go." I grab the car keys the list and the card and pull Sne out to the car. Today we are driving MamCebekhulu's Range Rover. How she even woke up and decided to give us the car is a mystery that I wont question. This is a practice run for when I make my own millions so I can buy my own car.

"You know your moods are going to give you away." I say as we drive out of the gate.

"I'm scared Lani my dad is going to kill me. We postponed umemulo to next year and if I'm pregnant I might as well kiss all that goodbye. My dad will be ao disappointed not when he was looking forward to doing this for me." I understand what she means but I also know there's no going back now. Yes her father will be disappointed but worrying about it will not make it go away.

"I know babe but if you are pregnant we will speak to ma first. At least she's not as hardcore as him and if she's the one to tell him it will be easier. Stressing yourself will not change anything."

"I know." She sighs and looks out the window. We drive to Durban with just the music playing in the car. I see she's fallen asleep so I decide not to disturb her. I pull up to Gateway and wake her up. The list isnt that long but its busy so we will have to be in and out quick. Crowds sometimes can make one dizzy.

In four hours we have everything we need and we are ready to go home. We head to clicks and get a couple of pregnancy tests before going to Spur for some food. Its packed. It takes about ten minutes for us to get a table. We make our orders and wait. From the corner of my eye I see Jezebel walking in with the friend she was with at the party. I thought she'd still be in Joburg.

I take my phone and call Lulonke. He will explain everything to me. His phone rings unanswered. He is probably busy I'm sure he will return the call later. Jezebel sees me and walks up to me with her friend in tow.

"Hi. Mhlali right?" She asks giving me the fakest smile I've ever seen. And trust me I've seen plenty of those.

"Its Milani actually."

"Oh yeah. I'm surprised you're here seeing as your man is in Joburg. Shouldn't you be with him?" She asks. I know she's fishing and unfortunately for her there's nothing to catch here.

"He is working plus he doesnt need a babysitter. So how was your trip to Joburg I hear you got scammed and had to squat with Lu." I say and I see the surprise in her eyes. She thought I didnt know.

"How do you know that?"

"Oh my boyfriend told me. You know I'm glad he was there to save you. Joburg is not a place for naive and scheming girls. Only the top dogs play up there." She swallows trying to get her bearings back. I suspected she was there for a reason that didn't involve being scammed but now looking at her I'm quite certain she had a plan and it got foiled. Lu will have to tell me everything.

"Well thanks to Lu I had a place to stay. The place is nice by the way not as luxurious as I expected but its livable." If I stab her tongue will I be wrong?

"Good thing you dont have to live in it. As long as bae and I love it that's all that matters." I say giving back the same fake smile she's been giving me. "So which room did you use?" Her brows furrow and her fake smile disappears.

"Why?"

"I need to know which room to fumigate when I get back. We wouldnt want any bed bugs on the bed. Its new you know." She clicks her tongue and walks away with her friend following behind her like a lap dog.

"Okay what was all that about?" Sne asks seemingly in a lighter mood than she was earlier.

"Just a big that needs to be squashed." I say as the waiter places our food in front of us. "Let's eat so we can go." We dig into our food chatting and laughing. I decide to order a milkshake for the road when I feel someone standing next to me. I look up and I see she looks familiar. I dont know her but her face looks like one I've seen before. Question is where?

"Can we help you?" Sne asks seeing as this woman is not saying anything. She doesn't even give Sne a glance instead she glares at me as if I took her husband.

"I know you." She says still staring at me.

"And I dont know you." She holds out her hand for a handshake. I just look at it wondering who she is for all I know there's poison in those hands. When she realises I'm not taking her hand she retracts it.

"Nkanyezi Mbatha - Sekete. I am Lulonke's sister. And I believe you're his girlfriend?" She asks taking a seat next to Sne and pushing her further into the booth.

"Yes I am." I remember Lulonke telling me about a Nkanyezi. She's Nkazimulo's twin I think. I hope her psycho brother did not send her here.

"You're beautiful your pictures don't do you justice." She says.

"Thank you." I'm not even sure what she wants from me right now but for Lu's sake I will keep the attitude in check.

"So tell me something what is it about the Mbatha men you seem to love so much? I mean first it was Nkazimulo and now you have your hooks on Lulonke. What is it about them do they lay the pipes just right?" She asks her face scrunched up like she is disgusted or something. Her stupid twin must have told her about us.

"Why? Would you like to try them out yourself?" Sne asks since my tongue seems to be stuck to the top of my mouth and I cant speak. She quickly turns to look at Sne.

"And who are you?" Lu did say she was a spoilt brat and now I see it. The way she's sizing up Sne makes me want to pull her over the table with her expensive Peruvian weave.

"Her sister. Did you think you're the only one who has siblings? You're not going to come here and insult my sister and expect me to sit by and say nothing. If you have nothing better to do ir say leave us alone." Sne hisses and I know she's angry. Nkanyezi clicks her tongue and turns to me.

"My brother deserves better. If you really love him you will save his reputation and let him go. He doesnt need to walk around with a prostitute in his arms." She says. I see Sne pull her weave on the side of her head down and she winces. I'm tempted to stop Sne but I also want to see where this is going.

"You listen to me you old fuck. If you ever speak to my sister like that I will forget that you're older than me and I will rearrange your ugly face. Stay the fuck away from her. If Lulonke doesnt want her he will let her know like the grown man that he is. Worry about your own life and leave my sister

alone." Sne angrily whispers into her ear before letting go of her weave. "Now leave." She chuckles and stands up.

"Not only are you a prostitute but you also have straatmate tendencies. Definitely not deserving of my brother. Do us all a favour and disappear from his life. Save us all the misery." She says and walks away.

I watch her as she leaves and I realise Lu told her. Why would he tell her something that's private and between the two of us. I can't believe him. Of all things I've shared with him this is the one thing I was hoping would stay between us.

44

He's not picking up. I've called him way too many times and there's still no reply. My heart refuses to believe he could have told anyone about this. But common sense says he might have.

"You're making me dizzy. Please sit down." Sne says. I sigh and take a seat on the bed.

"He is not picking up." I tell her. I need answers and right now my head is ready to explode.

"He is busy. And besides you don't know if he is the one who told her." She says.

"That's why I need to ask him. I need to know." I get up and start pacing again.

"Go ahead. Offend him by thinking he could break a promise he made to you." She says. I stop and look at her.

What if she's right? What if I'm just overreacting. Maybe it's a good thing he hasn't answered his phone. I sit down again and scroll through my phone. I see Nkazimulo's number and a little flicker of light goes off in my head. Nkazimulo knows where my home is which means he also did his own background check. Maybe he is the one who told his stupid twin about my life. I unblock him and place the call. It rings a couple of times before he picks up.

"Milani you unblocked me." He says laughing. "What changed?"

"How do you know where my home is?" I'm getting angrier with each moment.

"I'm fine Milani how are you?" He says. He thinks this is a joke.

"I didn't ask and quite frankly I don't care. How do you know where my home is?" I hear him sigh as he realizes I'm not playing with him. "Did you do a background check on me?"

"Maybe. Why? Is that a problem." I breathe in and out a couple of times before I say anything.

"Did you tell your sister about your findings." I hear some shuffling on the other end before his voice comes back on the line.

"Milani what's going on?" I feel tears sting the back of my eyes. He did tell her. And now it's likely everyone in their family knows about me. Now I need to prepare myself for a barrage of insults from every corner.

"What do you want from me Nkazimulo? Your watch? Look I'll pay you back for the watch. I cant pay you the full amount at the same time but we can come up with a payment plan and I will pay you back every cent. Just draw up a contract I'll sign it and I'll pay you. Even if it takes me my whole life I dont care but please just leave me alone." I say trying to hold back my tears and failing. My voice is breaking and I hate that I sound weak right now.

"Milani just tell me what's going on. What happened with my sister?" I can feel the concern in his voice but right now it means nothing to me. I just need to know how to put an end to this bullshit so I can live my life without feeling like my past will always pull me back.

"Just tell me what you want from me Nkazimulo. If it's not you threatening me its your sister calling me a prostitute. So tell me what it is you want from me?"

"Where are you? If you saw my sister then it means you're not in KwaMhlanga. Tell me where you are and we can meet and talk about this." He urges.

"Nkazimulo please leave me alone. I'll get your details from your brother and I'll make my first payment for the watch at the end of the month."

"For fucks sake Milani I dont care about the watch. It was insured and the insurance company paid for it. Now can we please let it go." He yells. I dont know who he thinks he is talking to.

"Then leave me alone. And keep your sister away from me." I hang up the phone and block him again.

"See I told you Lu is innocent and you were about to bark at him for something he didn't do." Thank God he didnt answer my calls I'm sure by now I would have no boyfriend.

"I know. What am I going to do about this? If Nkanyezi knows about this then it wont be long before the parents know and the rest of the family. I'll have to face those people and their insults. Just when I thought this was over and now this." We lay down on the bed facing up to the ceiling. Sne laughs. A laugh that emanates from the depths of her soul mixed with tears. I dont know if I should comfort her or let her be. I decide to let her be. After a while her laugh turns into quiet sobs. I pull her into my arms and let her cry.

"Why do we always seem to always be dead smack in the middle of some problem or another?" Sne asks after a while.

"I dont know. We should do the test so we can get this over with and figure out what to do." She sighs and gets up. She heads to the ensuite bathroom. A moment later she walks back in with all four of the pregnancy tests in her hand. She places them on the side table and we wait. I dont think two minutes has ever felt this long. Every passing second seems to be in slow motion. I tap my fingers on my thigh willing the clock to go faster.

Just as I'm about to pick the tests off the side table the door opens and Phiwo walks in. I quickly tuck the tests under my thigh before she notices.

"What are you hiding?" She asks standing in the middle of the room with her arms crossed on her chest.

"None of your business. What do you want?" Sne snaps earning herself a glare from Phiwo.

"Geez rest. Aunt Nomvula is here mum said I should come and call you." She says and turns to walk out. I wait a few seconds before taking the tests out and looking at them. Positive. All four of them have the same result. I hand them to Sne and she sighs.

"What are you going to do?" I ask her. She keeps staring at the tests as if they will change their result under her glare.

"I am going to have an abortion. That's my only option." She says and gets up. She throws the tests inside her bag and walks out. I check my phone one last time before following her out.

I can feel aunt Nomvula's presence before I even make it to the lounge. Her laugh alone is enough to bring a smile to my face. As strict as she is sometimes she's also the cool aunt. The one who will let us sneak out to attend a party and cover for us but she'll also set you straight at the click of a finger. Her husband died two years into their marriage and she decided to never marry again. And now she's the rich aunt who buys us wine every once in a while if she's in a good mood.

"I dont think I'll ever get over how you and Sne look alike." She says the moment I walk into the lounge.

"And I'll never get over how beautiful you look even in your old age." I say and she gasps clutching her imaginary pearl's.

"Oh my God this child. Me old age. Look at me." She says twirling and shaking her ass. "I look better than people half my age." She adds.

"Of course you do." I give her a hug and she kisses me on the lips like most old people do. I don't know who told them that was the appropriate way to do it but you can't tell them any different.

While Phiwo and Hlumile are busy in the kitchen cooking supper we sit in the lounge with the adults catching up. Although I can see Sne is not here her mind is on another planet entirely.

"Let's go help with dinner." I pull her up and drag her to the kitchen.

"You need to keep your mind from floating away Snethemba otherwise everyone will see something is going on."

"I know. I just don't know what to do." That's a far cry from the declaration she made earlier.

"Look whatever you do you know I'll support you. Whatever choice you make I'll be right beside you."

"Choice about what?" Phiwo asks waltzing back into the kitchen.

"Whether to murder you in your sleep or push you off a cliff." Sne replies. I know they are siblings and they fight like cats and dogs but you can't mess with one and not get it from the other. Which is a weird but normal dynamic for them.

"Mxm dinner is almost ready. I made a salad specially for you." She says giving her a wink and taking the bowl of salad out to the dining room.

"Let's go eat. And stay away from the salad." I whisper as we head to the lounge. And for the first time today she actually laughs. We all take our seats and dish up. I must say these two can cook.

"So I got a call from our brother." Aunt Nomvula says and the table goes quiet. Bab'Cebekhulu even places his fork down on the plate and I know for sure something is happening right now. Question is what?

"Nomvula did I not ask you to not mention his name or talk about him in my house?" He asks sending daggers at his sister.

"At some point we have to talk about this. It's been over twenty years Bhuti we have to find a way to get past this and move on." She begs. The only thing we can do is listen and chew as slowly as we can just so we don't make noise.

"Nomvula until Dingizwe comes to me and apologizes for what he and his wife did then I have nothing to say to him."

"Bhuti you know everything that happened came from a place of hurt. I'm sure they didn't mean what they did or said." Nomvula pleads. It's obvious whatever happened was big for it to last over twenty years. I wonder what it is.

"So they took their hurt out on me and my family and I'm supposed to take it?" She let's out a deep breath. For the first time since she arrived I can see the worry lines on her face. Even under all that make up.

"Okay what about our mother? She's worried about you."

"Mum made her choice when she decided to support Dingizwe and his stupid wife. And I'm done talking about this. Keep that man's name out of my house." He throws the napkin on the table and walks away with his wife behind him.

"What was that about?" Phiwo asks the question we are all asking ourselves.

"Its nothing nana."

"That didn't look like nothing. Who is Dingizwe and how come we dont know him?" Sne asks. Nomvula shrugs her shoulders and gets up and leaves.

"Why do I feel like theres something we are not being told?" Phiwo asks.

"Whatever it is it's big." Hlumile replies getting up to clear the table. My phone rings and Lu's name flashes on the screen. Now that I know he didn't tell his sister anything I need to figure out a little white lie to tell him.

"Baby." Six eyes turn to me and I know they want to listen in on my conversation.

"Fifteen missed calls Sthandwa sam

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it's big." Hlumile replies getting up to clear the table. My phone rings and Lu's name flashes on the screen. Now that I know he didn't tell his sister anything I need to figure out a little white lie to tell him.

"Baby." Six eyes turn to me and I know they want to listen in on my conversation.

"Fifteen missed calls Sthandwa sam who is dying?" Damn. Did I really call him that much?

"I'm pretty sure it's just five missed calls haw." He laughs.

"Lucky for me my phone records the number of times one calls and trust me it was fifteen times. So what's the emergency?" Atleast it wasnt twenty.

"Nothing. I missed you."

"Really? Come and show me how much you missed me?" My heart does a somersault. He is here.

"Where are you?"

"Outside."

"Okay I'm coming."

"I'm not covering for you." Humile says and holds out her hand. "Unless you make it worth our while." Phiwo joins her. I'm going to be broke by the time Christmas is over. And I know if i dont bribe them they will run their mouths soon as the adults walk down the stairs.

"How much is this going to cost me?"

"Five hundred bucks each." Phiwo says and her little friend agrees.

"Deal. I will see you when I come back."

"For your sake you better not be lying." Hlumile says. I look at Sne hoping she'll at least defend me but she's laughing.

"I'm not. Later." I run out of the house and find him parked outside. He gets out of the car and I jump into his arms.

"Okay maybe you did miss me." He says laughing and spinning me around. I wrap my arms around his neck taking in his scent. He places me back on the ground cupping my neck his fingers gently pressing on my skin. He lowers his head taking my lips in his gently biting my bottom lip before he completely takes over parting my lips and sending my head spinning into a different universe. I feel his arm wrap around my waist as he pulls me up. I wrap my legs around his waist feeling his hard on getting harder completely oblivious of our surroundings. Thank God it's dark outside and all suburban people are indoors already.

We pull apart gasping for air not that I need it. If this could be the way I leave this earth I'll take it. Death by a kiss.

"I should go away more often if this is the welcome I'm going to get." He says planting soft kisses on my neck and face.

"How was your trip? I thought you'd come back tomorrow." He opens the car for me and I sit with my legs dangling outside. He stands between my legs running his hands up and down my thighs.

"I was but I managed to finish everything early so I decided to come back and see you. So what were the missed calls about cause I know it wasn't because you missed me. So what happened?" I'm not sure if I should tell him the truth or not but in the same breath I dont want us to have any secrets. If I expect transparency from him then I should also be honest.

"Last night I got a call from your brother." His hands stop moving and he stares at me. I look up at him and see his jaws clenching.

"What did he want?"

"He said he wants us to talk. Asked me if I told you anything. I told him to leave me alone but he offered to come to KwaMhlanga and see me."

"How does he know where you live?" He asks getting more and more agitated. What if this was a bad idea?

"I dont know. My guess is he also did a background check on me because I dont remember giving him my number. Anyways today I met your sister Nkanyezi and she made it pretty clear that I am not needed in your life. Apparently having a prostitute in your arm is a bad look for someone of your calibre." He steps back roughly rubbing his hands over his face.

"I cant believe she did that. Either of them. And I know Nkazimulo is the one who told her all that." I feel like I've planted myself in the middle of a family feud that I dont even know about. And I'm not about to be caught in the middle of whatever this is without knowing the full story.

"Lulonke what's going on between you and your brother? I know when you told me about your family you painted a picture of perfection and now I'm realizing that seems to be far from the truth. What's going on?" He sighs and steps in to stand between my legs.

"Okay truth is Nkazimulo and I have a shaky relationship. Five years ago I was engaged to my high school girlfriend. Lobola was paid and all but she was studying in Joburg while I worked in Durban. I didnt have an issue with that because i trusted her. One weekend i decided to go visit her in Joburg. When i got to her apartment i found her and my brother naked in her bed. I didnt need to be a genius to figure out what was going on." He takes a deep breath I can tell he is trying to mask his breaking voice. "I called off the wedding and I didn't speak to either one of them for almost three years. Slindile sent me a text apologizing and admitting to everything while Nkazimulo tried to deny everything but after Slindile's confession he realised he had no option but to admit everything. It took Bukhosi dying for us to salvage our relationship. I dont think I can ever handle something like that happening again. I know...."

"It wont." He looks up at me and I see the tears glistening in his eyes.

"Milani I know....."

"Whatever happened between Nkazimulo and i happened long before we met. And I promise you it will never happen again. I love you and I understand it will take time for you to trust me especially with my past but I'm just asking you to give me the benefit of the doubt." I cup his face in my hands and gently wipe the tear running down his face with my thumb. "I am not her. I have my own mistakes but please don't punish me for her mistakes. I'm not going to hurt you. Not intentionally and

especially not like that. Please trust me." He pulls me to him wrapping his arms around me and resting his head on my shoulder.

"I know you're not her." He whispers in my ear. "And I trust you."

Trust is one fragile thing. Dear God please dont let me break this man's trust.

45

"Do people have to be this inconsiderate though? Christmas is a couple of days away and you're supposed to be away from home. That's not right." MamCebekhulu says. Lulonke suggested we spend Christmas together and being the gone girl that I am I decided to go along with it. Which is why I've had to come up with a proper lie to convince MamCebekhulu that I need to be in Durban for the next couple of days.

"I know ma. But I'm not surprised. Dave did say we should be on standby because clients can call on us literally anytime." She sighs and sits on the highchair. I hand her a cup of coffee and she takes a sip.

"I dont understand why they had to wait this long. You could have done all that work before the holidays." I hate how sad she looks right now but if I change my mind then she'll never trust me again. Now I have to carry this lie through no matter what.

"Dave says the couple bought a beach house in Umhlanga. Since its bigger than their house in Pretoria they have decided to fly the family down to host them here so they need the house ready by tomorrow so we will be working the whole night." I read somewhere that giving too much details when lying gives the lie away so I quickly shut up before I say anything else.

"Fine. But promise me one thing please come home for Christmas even for just an hour." I go around the counter and wrap my arms around her.

"I promise I will come home. And I'll bring gifts." She laughs.

"You better."

"I'll go and pack. I need to be in Durban in a few hours so we can start working."

"Okay nana take care of yourself." I give her a kiss on the cheek and run upstairs. I close the door behind me and take a deep breath.

"Let me guess your lie paid off." Sne says staring at me. I nod my head and she laughs. "You should have been the lawyer." I grab my overnight bag and start packing. Its not like I will need too much

clothing. Just a dress or two for dinner if we decide to go out and a little black dress never hurt nobody. I pack some matching lace sets and bikinis. We will be by the beach after all. Anything else I'll need will have to be bought.

I take a quick shower and change into a black stretch jersey mini dress with white sneakers. I don't need to be accessorizing too much because I am not going somewhere special.

"I can't believe you'll be spending Christmas with a man."

"Speaking of men." I get on the bed. "When are you telling yours about the baby? I know it's your body and your choice but don't you think he deserves to know?" She shakes her head.

"We've been together for less than six months. How am I supposed to just pop up and tell him I'm pregnant? Besides that I still have the parents to contend with. My father was looking forward to throwing umemulo for me and now this. The best thing I can do is get the abortion and carry on like nothing's wrong."

"So basically you're going to lie? To everyone? Sne you can't lie to your ancestors." She laughs.

"Since when do you believe in ancestors?" She asks as soon as she composes herself.

"I don't believe in my ancestors. Those ones have been sleeping since the moment they died. Other people's ancestors yours included work overtime for their children. Plus Kumkani might be happy about being a father."

"Maybe. But we will never know." Arguing with Sne is hopeless because she is as stubborn as they come.

"Fine. Whatever you decide you know I got you. Anyways I have to go and get my back blown out."

"Of course you'd brag to me in my time of need. You're evil." I laugh getting off the bed. "Do you need me to walk you out?"

"Yes. That's the polite thing to do." She throws a pillow at me and gets off the bed throws a robe on and follows me out.

"You're going somewhere?" Aunt Nomvula asks seeing us walk down with my bag. MamCebekhulu tells her my little white lie and she glares at me. It's hard keeping eye contact but I know if I break it she'll know I'm lying. She doesn't relent her eyes are glued on me. I can feel my conviction slowly fading. My heart beats out of control. She cannot know I'm lying.

After a while she looks away and I slowly let out the breath I've been holding. One less person to worry about. Now I need to go before Scelo shows up and then calls Dave to confirm my story. And

knowing Scelo he will definitely call. Atleast if he calls when I'm already gone it will be easier to avoid his calls.

They all walk me out just as Nhlemla pulls up. I was expecting Lulonke but I guess it makes sense for someone else to pick me up instead of him.

"Uber Black ntombo?" Aunt Nomvula says giving me a side eye. Nhlemla gets out of the car and greets charming the heck out of the old ladies.

"Who is he?" Phiwo whispers in my ear. "Please give him my number."

"He is an uber driver and I'll make sure to ask him if he dates children." I whisper back. She gives me a side eye as if I'd let her date anyone. Her and Hlumile have five more years before they can be looking at boys some type of way. Let alone grown ass men.

I say my goodbyes and promise to be back for a while on Christmas day. Nhlemla opens the back door for me and I get in. They all watch as we drive off.

"So what exactly do you NOT do?" I ask as soon as we are farther away. He laughs. If Lulonke was the one driving I'd be jumping to the front seat but I cant be flashing someone else's man right now.

"I lost a bet and that's why I'm here. Mpumelelo was supposed to come pick you up." I dont think his friends actually remember that the man is a chief. A whole entire chief being sent to pick up someone.

"Do your friends know you're a chief?" I ask and he laughs again.

"That's what happens when people know all your deep dark secrets. Plus they've been my best friends long before I became chief so the disrespect is real and historic." He says.

As soon as we are far enough away he stops the car and I get in the front seat. I notice a car slow down behind us when he stops. When he gets back on the road the same car is behind us a distance away but still there.

"There's a car following us." I say trying not to panic. Imagine lying and then being kidnapped. The universe has a way of playing cruel jokes on me and I cant have that not today.

"I know. There's also one in front." He answers unfazed. I stare at him for a moment and then I remember the man is a chief. They all have security.

"Security?" He nods his head and I relax.

"I'm sorry. I should have told you."

"No. It's fine. I was just thinking I made up an entire lie to be with a man only to get kidnapped." He laughs.

"I understand. But I promise you won't get kidnapped."

The drive doesn't feel as long as I expected. Nhlemdla is quite cool for someone who is high profile and a chief at that. We get to Lulonke's place and he is already waiting for us outside. I look at Nhlemdla and he laughs.

"I guess someone is excited to see you." He says. Lu opens the door for me and pulls me into his arms.

"For a moment there I thought you got caught." He whispers.

"Nope. I was thinking you'd come pick me up. That's why I wore a short dress." He holds me at arm's length and looks down at my exposed legs and thighs. He raises his eyes a little sparkle in them and a smirk on his lips.

"What exactly did you want me to do to you in that dress?" I take his hand and place it between my thighs. Thank God Nhlemdla and his security are nowhere in sight. I pull his hand slowly up till his thumb hits my clit. I see the excitement in his eyes. It's just a pity he didn't pick me up.

"Imagine your hand in there the whole way from Tongaat to here." His breathing goes up a notch. My cue. I pull his hand away and he frowns. "I guess I'd picked me up you wouldn't be imagining anything. Let's go inside." I leave him there and head to the house. When I look back I see him trying to adjust his pants. Karma is such a bitch.

He catches up to me as I walk into the lounge and wraps his arms around my waist.

"You'll pay for that." He whispers. I'm definitely looking forward to that. Nhlemdla and Mpumelelo don't stay long citing plans. But I know they are just trying to give us time together. There are takeaways for lunch so I will have to make dinner. I open the fridge looking for the easiest thing I can cook. Chicken is always a best bet. I feel him behind me as I lean down to take the chicken out of the freezer. I guess it's time to pay the piper.

The cold air helps cool down my face but I can't say the same for my behind. My dress is already sitting at my waist my underwear has been shifted to the side and his fingers are slowly running up and down my slit. I try to stand up right but he sends me leaning back into the fridge. He grabs my hip with his one hand while the other rains torture in my clit. I gasp for air the cold air invading my lungs and quickly being heated up by the intensity of the warmth from his touch.

He stops and for a second I'm tempted to beg him to keep going until I feel his fingers rip my underwear apart the fabric grazing my already engorged clit as he pulls it away from my body. I wait ready for him to continue but he is taking his sweet time. I open my eyes and find him squatting behind me watching me intently. His fingers gently running up my inner thigh but not making it where they are supposed to go.

He watches me as he lifts my leg up throwing it on his shoulder the motion turning me around so I'm facing him. His eyes don't leave mine as his tongue runs the length of my slit sending shockwaves all over my body. I hold on to the counter watching him with his face buried inside me.

"Flip." I say as I feel his hand make its way inside me. I gasp when he adds another one and I can feel myself stretching. My phone rings. I look at it and see MamCebekhulu's name lighting up the screen. I'll call her back later.

This one stops everything he is doing and looks at me.

"Answer it." He orders his thumb gently caressing my clit.

"Lulonke?"

"Answer it." He repeats. This man is crazy. I am not answering the call. Not in this lifetime. He pulls his fingers out and I feel empty. "Unless you want the person to get worried you will answer it."

"I'll call them back." He shakes his head slowly moving his hand away.

"No. Answer the call." Shit. Now I need to summon my inner Oscar winning actress. I answer the call just before it goes to voicemail.

"Hi ma." I feel his fingers go in again and my breath stops.

"Hi nana. Did you make it there safely?"

"Yes ma slowly moving his hand away.

"No. Answer the call." Shit. Now I need to summon my inner Oscar winning actress. I answer the call just before it goes to voicemail.

"Hi ma." I feel his fingers go in again and my breath stops.

"Hi nana. Did you make it there safely?"

"Yes ma I did." I feel him grab my clit with his teeth and I hiss. I quickly cover my mouth but it's already late she heard me.

"Are you Okay?" She asks.

"I'm fine ma. I just underestimated this box." She laughs. I hold my breath trying to keep calm inspite of his fingers thrusting in and out of me and his tongue wrecking havoc on my body.

"Dont break your back with those boxes. I still need grandbabies. Anyways I'm glad you got there safe. Dont forget you said you'll come home for Christmas even for just an hour."

"Of course ma. I will definitely come." I say. The moment I hear her say goodbye I cut the call finally being able to fully be in the moment.

He lifts my other leg throwing it over his other shoulder. My breathing is fast and shallow my hand resting on the top of his head pushing him further into me. My joints are going limp. He gets up with me on his shoulders placing me on the kitchen island. He lifts his face up to stare at me my juices dripping on his beard. He leaves a trail of kisses on my body as he slowly pulls up the dress. I lift my hands up and he pulls the dress out leaving me naked with just my sneakers on my feet.

"I dont like being teased." He whispers gently biting my ear. Quite ironic because I remember being teased.

"I wasnt teasing I was showing you what you missed out on." My voice is hoarse and seems to be stuck in my throat. I feel his bulge poking me the yearning to have him buried deep inside me grows. He steps back watching me and running his tongue on his lips.

"You look good." He pulls up his tshirt and throws it on the floor. I grab my boobs fondling them. His eyes follow the movement of my hand as I slowly run them down to my core. He holds my hand before I can even get there.

"That's mine." He says sending goosebumps all over me. "Mine." He whispers before his lips devouring mine while his fingers go on to fan the fire between my legs. A groan escapes my lips as my body reaches its climax and finally let's go. He gently presses on my forehead while I try to catch my breath.

The last time we made love I was fully convinced I'd lose him. Today is different. With each touch or kiss I get to savor the moment and enjoy it. He picks me up and I wrap my legs around his waist leaving a trail of juices on the counter. I'll need to clean that up before I do anything on the counter. He takes a seat on the couch with me straddling him. I feel his hard dick pressing on my wet core. I grind on him desperate to ease the tension building up again inside me. His tongue swirling around my hardened nipples one after the other. I get on my knees and he lifts himself up a bit helping me

pull down his pants his dick springing out like that one spring on an old bed precum dripping all over him.

I kiss his tip and hear him groan. I run my hand up and down his length he leans back on the couch his arms stretched out on the headrest. He closes his eyes hissing and groaning each time my hand makes contact with his flesh. I take the head into my mouth tasting his saltiness. I grab his balls and he almost jumps off the couch. I run my tongue on the underside of his dick and he freezes. I see the veins popping on his neck and temples. He watches as I try and fail to take him all into my mouth. I feel his tip in my throat and I gag. When I pull him out to catch my breath he slides the condom on.

I rest my knees on either side of his thighs and gently lower myself onto him taking him all in. I move around in circles so my body gets used to him before moving up and down side to side as he hits all the right spots. I can feel the pleasure build up inside me with each stroke. I close my eyes getting ready for my body to.....

"LULONKE MBATHA." The scream rips through the room and for a moment I think it's all in my head. I want to keep going but Lulonke's arm has tightened around me and the look in his eyes it's like he has seen a ghost. Before I can turn around and see what's going on he grabs the throw and covers me up. I pull the throw around me and turn around to find a woman glaring at us like we've just committed a cardinal sin. There's a man behind her who has his back turned on us. Dear God please dont tell me these are his parents.

"Mama baba. What are you doing here?" Great. I'm screwed. Literally and figuratively.

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He watches her run up the stairs his mother is fuming and his dad well no one knows what's going on in his head. His face is blank. He has turned around and is looking at his son. Lulonke is floating between anger and shame.

"What are you guys doing here?" He asks pulling his pants up.

"We have the keys remember?" His mum answers.

"Maybe I should change the locks. I didn't give you the keys so you can waltz in here anytime you want. My car is outside so that should have told you I am home and therefore you should have knocked." He replies sitting back on the couch.

"So now I need permission to come into my son's house?" Mam Mbatha asks looking around her face scrunched up in disgust not sure which seat is safe for her to sit on.

"If I'm home yes. We would have avoided all this awkwardness."

"Awkwardness Lulonke? Awkwardness? You call having sex on the couch where everyone sits awkward? What happened to bedrooms? You have three of them upstairs why not use one of them?" She screams. You'd think she just caught her teenage son having sex in her bed.

"It's his house mkami he can do whatever he wants." Mr Mbatha chips in pulling a chair and staring at Lulonke. Lu nods his head and his father gets the message the chair is clean.

"Who is that girl anyway?" Mrs Mbatha pulling up the other chair. "One of your floozies? Who am I kidding of course she is. No self-respecting woman would have sex with a man that's not her husband let alone on a couch in front of everyone." Lu rolls his eyes.

"Who is everyone mama? If you had knocked you wouldn't have seen things you're not supposed to see. Anyways I still don't know why you two are here. Aren't you supposed to be in Nquthu by now?"

"And you're supposed to be there with us but you're here doing ungodly things."

"Ungodly things? The same ungodly things that produced me?"

"I will beat you up. Just because you can have sex now doesn't mean you can disrespect me. Uzongjwayela kabi?" His mother answers wagging her finger at him. He sighs and stands up.

"Would you like something to drink or eat?" Mrs Mbatha clicks her tongue clutching her bag close to her chest.

"No. For all we know you probably had sex on the kitchen counter." She says. Lulonke turns around hiding a smile and heads to the kitchen turning the kettle on for tea. That's his mother's favourite thing in the world. Come rain or sunshine she'll drink tea even if the temperatures can reach 50 degrees she'll be there with her tea.

He makes sure to discreetly pick up Milani's clothes from the floor hiding them in the cabinet. He brings the tea back to the lounge and hands his parents their cups.

"So what time are we leaving?" His mother asks sipping on her tea.

"Leaving?"

"Yes. Leaving. We have to go home everyone will be there so we have to go."

"I'm not going." His mother gives him a look that used to scare the shit out of her kids but now they are older and wiser and they know their mother doesn't shoot daggers from her eyes. Although she tries. When she realises Lulonke is not moved at all her face softens. For her the only thing sitting above family is God. And the festive season is a time for family.

"What do you mean you're not coming?" She asks stealing glances at her husband who has decided to stay out of the conversation.

"It means I will be spending Christmas with my girlfriend. Dont worry about your gifts and whatever I sent everything home with Nandi."

"This isn't about gifts Lulonke its about family. Baba please say something." She pleads. Her husband sighs and takes her hand.

"He is not a child anymore Mkami I cant force him to come home." Mrs Mbatha clicks her tongue and walks out. "Your mum is gone now give me the real reason you dont want to come home." Lu sighs. He pours himself a glass of whiskey.

"I already told you why." He answers swirling the drink around.

"Doesn't your girlfriend have a family to go to? You know how important it is to your mother for everyone to be together."

"I know that"

"Then what's the problem. Come home. Bring your girlfriend if you have to." His father says.

"No thank you. Milani and I are still getting to know each other. I can't bring her into this family until I know everyone will welcome her with open arms."

"And why wouldnt we? If you love her then she's welcome." Lulonke laughs and takes a sip of the bitter drink in his hand.

"You know thats not true. You and mum just saw her naked and you saw the look on mums face that image is not going away anytime soon." Mr Mbatha sighs and stands up.

"I guess. Well if you decide to come please do. I will see you later. And please apologize to Mihlali for invading your privacy." He says walking to the door.

"Its Milani baba not Mihlali. Have a safe trip." He shakes his father's hand watching him as he gets into the car. He waves to his mother but gets no reply. Well looks like there is trouble brewing ahead.

MILANI

I've faced many embarrassing moments in my life but none of them come close to this. I don't know what's happening downstairs all I am certain of is that Mrs Mbatha probably hates me. Or worse she's busy trying to convince Lulonke to dump me. Not that I blame her this is not the 'meeting the parents' I had envisioned either.

My phone rings from somewhere in the room. The last time I saw it was when I arrived. I follow the ringing tone and find my phone in the closet. I guess I didn't take it out of my bag earlier. I check the phone and the call has turned into a missed call. I check the log and see Sebastian's name. I call him back and he answers quickly.

"Hey." He whispers. I wonder what's going on with him.

"Hey why are you whispering?" I whisper back for some reason.

"They want me to slaughter a cow. Me? Imagine the horror. I knew I shouldn't have come home." He complains. I can only imagine right now but I'm quite certain he'd much rather run a marathon than slaughter a cow.

"Why does it sound like you're in some hollow place. Where are you?"

"I'm hiding in the closet. Literally and figuratively." He says chuckling.

"How long are you going to hide in there?"

"As long as it takes honey. How is your visit with bae?" I sigh and lay back down on the bed. I was happy being focused on something else for a moment but now the whole incident is replaying itself in my head.

"It was going great. Until his parents walked in and found us having sex on the couch." He screams. I'm pretty sure he has forgotten that he's actually hiding.

"Oh my God." He is laughing hard.

"I'm glad my misery brings you happiness." He tries to stop himself from laughing but fails I join him and laugh. It's not like crying will automatically erase the image from their minds so I might as well take it in my stride.

"Babe how? Why didnt you lock the door?" He asks. I'm still trying to figure out how they got in because I know Lulonke locked the door after walking out his friends.

"I don't know hey. I dont know if I'll ever be able to face them ever again."

"Okay hold on. This could be salvaged. What position were you in?" What? I know he is crazy but this is nuts even for Sebastian. "Wait I know it sounds crazy but humor me." He adds sensing my hesitation.

"I was on top of him." He keeps quiet. That's not good.

"Wow

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yeah you won't be invited to the family braai anytime soon." He says laughing.

"You're not helping." The door opens and Lu walks in. "Listen I have to go."

"Dont give the old people a porn show. I'm sure they are traumatized enough as it is." He says laughing.

"Go slaughter a cow. Bye." I hang up the phone still keeping eye contact with Lu. I don't know what is going through his head right now. He sits down next to me and takes my hand placing it on his lap.

"We should continue where we left off." He says looking up at me a smile on his face. I pull my hand away and stand up.

"Are you crazy? Where are your parents?"

"They left. You can relax they won't be coming back anytime soon. Even if they do they will learn to knock." He is taking this way too lightly. Whether they knock or not next time they are probably already judging me for this. I know they won't see their son as anything but a saint who was led astray by the jezebel that is me.

"Why were they here?"

"They wanted to know why I'm not going home for Christmas. I told them I want to spend time with my girlfriend." He says it so simply anyone would think they are probably skipping away happy and content. But if Nkanyezi is any indication of this family and their upper stiffness and the importance of their status and reputation they are anything but happy. Add the porn show they just witnessed and my brownie points have gone down the drain.

I slump down on to the floor with the throw still wrapped around me. I dont even know why I'm not dressed yet. Lu slides off the bed and pulls me to him so I'm sitting right between his thighs.

"Listen I know what happened earlier was a tad bit embarrassing but you did nothing wrong. If anything my parents should have known better than to walk into the house without announcing themselves. This is your man's house and if you want to strut around naked then you will." I should take comfort in that but the reality is that these are his parents and no matter how I'd like to ignore everything and pretend like it never happened I cant.

"That's nice and all but these are your parents babe. How am I supposed to face them after this. Your father literally saw me naked. That's not good." He sighs gently caressing my face.

"Okay that may be true but can we please not let them ruin our plans. We cant change the past but we can enjoy the present. So let's forget about them and focus on us. Please." He begs pouting his lips like a little boy.

"What if they come back? And I'm pretty sure they hate me by now."

"They dont know you so they cant hate you. And if they love me then they will love you. So please please let's just forget about them for a moment and just enjoy our holiday." I take a couple of deep breaths and try to banish everything that just happened to the back and deepest part of my brain.

I know I'm not really on the right side of the Mbatha family I knew that the moment I found out Nkazimulo is Lulonke's brother Nkanyezi didn't help matters and now the parents have seen me naked. I'm pretty sure I have dark cloud hovering over me at every turn. But Lulonke is right there's nothing I can do to change what happened so I might as well enjoy the moment.

Choosing to focus on us and forget everything else was honestly the best decision I could make for myself. In the few days I spent with Lulonke I got to learn a lot more about him. Of all the things I learnt realizing that inspite of his confidence his strength and his determination deep inside is a broken little boy. I've learnt how he has had to play second fiddle to his older siblings especially Nkazimulo and Nkanyezi. It doesnt help that even their birthdays are literally three days apart and because of that he has had a joint birthday with them for as long as he could remember. In essence he was the invisible unofficial triplet in this whole dynamic. Which is why I Milani Mbokazi girlfriend of the year have taken a decision to plan a birthday for him and him alone.

Well if my finances will allow. Hlumile passed her matric with flying colors and now she's headed to varsity. And this child decided to go to UCT of all places. Does she know the cost of living in Cape Town is way above any other city in this country. But it doesn't matter. This is what I've always prayed for. I wish Cebo and Siya were here to see that our dreams are slowly coming true.

"Girls hurry up we have to go." MamCebekhulu says banging on the door. It's new year's eve and while other people will be getting kisses under the fireworks filled sky we will be singing hallelujah the whole night. To be fair I did try to make up a lie again but as it turns out Scelo knows I lied. Sometimes I forget he is friends with Dave. So now I have to spend new year's in church or else he will go and sing his lungs out to the parents.

She walks out of the bathroom looking like she's been run over by a truck. You'd think morning sickness would stick to its name but no it shows up any time it feels like it. She throws herself on the bed and sighs.

"How are you feeling?"

"Like I should throw up but there is nothing to throw up. When does this shit end?" She cries.

"Apparently according to articles after the three months mark you should be good. But then again some people go through it the entire pregnancy." I say handing her a glass of water.

"This is going to be the worst nine months of my life. And what's worse I still have to tell the parents. I hate Kumkani."

"Well I'll be there if you need me to be." I'm still not sure what happened while I was gone but when I came back she'd changed her mind about the abortion. Either way I am happy but I still need the full story.

I never thought church would have VIP sections but clearly this one does. We got here late but we are sitting in the second row because our seats were reserved. The drama. If it were up to me I'd be somewhere in the back so I can distract myself with my phone.

My phone pings just as the pastor gives his sermon. I pull it out of my bag after getting stares from those around me. How did I forget to switch it off? I quickly put it on mute before checking the message. It's an unknown number. And all it says is we need to talk. I don't even know who it is.

Before I can put it back in my bag another message comes through. 'Look behind you.' The message reads. I turn around and search the many faces even giving fake smiles here and there. And then I find him. Nkazimulo. Why is he even here?

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I can't concentrate on anything right now. My heart is beating so fast I feel like I'll collapse. Why is he here? What does he want? As much as I'm trying not to look at him I can feel him staring at me. This is not how I wanted to start my new year. Does this even constitute as stalking because right now I feel like it is.

"What's wrong with you? You seem tense." She whispers next to me.

"Fourth row on your left." I whisper. She turns around and finds him.

"What the heck is he doing here?" I shrug my shoulders and try to focus on the sermon. It's hard to face one direction throughout the service. I want to look around and see if people are acting or not when they are captured by the spirit. But thanks to my stalker I have no choice but to focus on the pastor and the choir.

I'm pressed and I need to go and pee. I've been holding it in for almost an hour now and a minute longer my bladder will explode. As soon as the choir starts a song and the MC stands up I also do the same. I use the side door and go straight to the toilet. Thank God there's no queue. I get in and take out my phone. I dial Lulonke's number but he doesn't pick up. I try him again and still nothing. Maybe he is busy. I know Mpumelelo is hosting a braai so maybe there's too much noise. I leave him a message asking him to call me back.

"Milani!" I hear him call out as soon as I walk out of the bathroom. Any other day I'd admire him the black suit looks good on him but today is not that day right now he looks like a demon sent to test me.

"What do you want? Are you stalking me?" He smiles. He has the same smile as Lulonke and yet on him it doesn't have the same impact as Lu's. Now that's a party dropping smile.

"I'm actually here with Nkanyezi and her husband. I didn't know you'd be here." Great so both demons are here.

"So what do you want from me?"

"I want us to talk. Like really talk." He insists. I know some men when they hear the word no they think that's an invitation to try harder and I'm guessing Nkazimulo is one of them.

"I've said this to you before and I'll say it again. We have nothing to talk about. The only thing connecting us is your watch and you've already said I don't have to pay you back for it so what else is there to talk about?" He sighs takes a step forward and I take one back but he's taller than me and he has longer strides. Before I know it he is standing right in front of me. His cologne brings back memories I'd rather forget. He lifts my face up so I'm looking straight in his eyes. I swear if the pastor or any of the elders can walk out now I'll be dragged to the altar and have my 'demons' exorcised out of me tonight.

"Look I know that we didn't part in the best terms but this is not how things were supposed to happen." He starts. Nkazimulo is a confident person there's no doubt about that but right now I can almost feel his voice breaking. For his sake I hope he is not about to tell me he is dying because unfortunately for him I'm not Jesus. He sighs and takes my hand. I try to pull my hand away but he tightens his hold on me. Dear Lord.

"Listen after I left I couldn't stop thinking about you." Okay stop the lorry. I pull my hand away and this time he lets go. I take a step back making sure there's enough open space for me to run.

"What are you trying to say?"

"What I am trying to say is that I love you Milani." Oh heck no. "This is not how I wanted to do this. I had a plan. I would come back find you and make my intentions known. I didn't think I'd come back and find you in a relationship with my brother." Oh so he remembers I'm in a relationship with his brother?

"Okay so what exactly would you like me to do with this information?" I ask. He roughly runs his hands up and down his face.

"I don't know Okay. I just needed to get this out of my chest. You have no idea how many nights I've spent strategizing and planning all this. And to have it all blow up in my face it hurts like hell." I can see tears glistening in his eyes. This this is beyond me and I cannot in good conscience stand there and listen to him ramble on when he knows I'm in a relationship with his brother. What does he expect me to do with this confession? Run into his arms and pretend like Lulonke doesn't exist.

"I'm going back inside." I turn to walk away. He calls out my name a couple of times drawing attention from the people standing outside. I turn and walk back to him.

"Listen to me. I don't know what you expect me to do or react to what you just said. But you need to know one major thing I am not Slindile you are not going to use me for whatever kink you get out of going after your brother's girlfriends."

"That's not what I'm doing." He argues.

"Then what are you doing? Mhm? What? How is this supposed to work? Am I supposed to run into your arms and declare my undying love to you? And then what? We sail off into the sunset together and live happily ever after? Tell me Nkazimulo. What is supposed to happen?" He sighs. I don't think even he thought this through. "I am not going to let you do this. I love Lulonke and I am committed to him. So you can take your feelings and your love and shove it. Happy new year."

I walk back into church. I'm angry. I can't believe Nkazimulo would do something like this. Who am I kidding he has done it before so I shouldn't be surprised. I don't understand though why would he want to hurt his brother.

"I take it you spoke to Nkazimulo." She says as we line up to give our offering. I'm surprised I can hear her even with this loud singing happening here.

"Yeah. He followed me when I went to the toilet." We take our seats again.

"I noticed. He must have really pissed you off. You've been shaking since you came back." I look at my hand and she is right I am shaking. "What did he say to you?"

"He says he loves me." Her jaw falls to the floor.

"He said what? Is he nuts?"

"I don't know I'm beginning to think he has a screw loose." My phone vibrates. I check it and find a message from Lulonke and a couple of missed calls from him.

'Hey sorry I missed your calls my phone was charging. I know you're probably still in church. Call me as soon as you get out. I love you.'

"I need to tell Lulonke what happened."

"You want to tell him that his brother has feelings for you? Are you sure?" She asks. We stand up as the countdown begins. I promised Lulonke I'd be honest with him. And this is not something I can keep from him. Especially with his history with his brother. We have a couple of hours before we can leave and I'm definitely sneaking out as soon as possible. I'll call him when we get home. Whether he is sleeping or not he will have to wake up and listen. Since that other demon is apparently also here

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he will have to wake up and listen. Since that other demon is apparently also here I know she'll be more than happy to tell Lulonke about my little encounter with her demon twin.

We sneak out an hour later and Scelo drives us home. As soon as we are safely in our room I dial Lulonke's number. Even though my heart wants to jump out of my chest I have to suck it up and tell him.

"Happy new year Sthandwa sam." He sounds happy. And from the sounds of the music playing the braai is still going on.

"Happy new year. How is the braai?"

"Boring without you. I wish you were here." You and me both.

"You have no idea how I wish I was there right now." I hear shuffling before the music slowly fades away.

"You dont sound okay what's wrong?" I take a deep breath.

"Nkazimulo was at church tonight."

"Your church?"

"Yeah."

"I knew he was going to church with Nkanyezi. I didnt think she goes to the same church as you. What happened?" I sigh. This is harder than I thought.

"He said something that made me rather uncomfortable." I can hear him breathing but he doesnt say anything. I guess that's my cue to keep going. "He told me he loved me." Silence. Cold eerie silence.

His silence scares me. I can feel him breathing through the phone and right now I feel like a jackass that just stuck a huge knife through his heart. I know I shouldn't be feeling like this this is not how I pictured my first real relationship going. Every relationship has it's ups and downs but we seem to be headed on a downward spiral pretty fast. Honesty communication and loyalty I'm not sure how any of them can stand up against family. Family is important to Lulonke even with the issues between him and Nkazimulo he still values his family. And right now I feel like I am slowly driving a wedge between them. Its noble that he is willing to fight for us and our relationship but where does that put his family? What happens if he decides we should get married in future? How is his family going to welcome me let alone look at me. This is a whole entire mess and it keeps getting bigger and bigger.

"Lulonke?"

"I'm here. Listen let me call you back." He hangs up before I can say anything. He better not be angry at me. I stare at my phone as if it will talk back. I did the right thing. Right? I mean it would have been a whole lot worse for him to find out from Nkazimulo. Yes. I did the right thing. Even if he is angry atleast it will be because of the truth and not a lie.

Sne is already snoring next to me. I was tired when we left church but now I cant seem to find even an ounce of sleep. I think about calling him back but I might just be pushing it a bit. You know what fuck it. I'm calling him.

His phone rings a couple of times but he doesn't pick up. I call again and this time he picks up.

"Babe." Oh thank God. I'm not in the doghouse just yet.

"Are you Okay?"

"I'm fine." I hear the horn of a car in the background. He is driving. Where the hell is he going?

"Where are you?"

"I'm driving home." These simple answers are flaring up my anxiety and I dont like it one bit.

"Are you mad at me?" It sounds crazy to even be asking this but I need to know. I wont be able to sleep without knowing that we are Okay.

"Of course not Sthandwa sam. I'm not mad at you." He replies. I'm not sure I believe him but I'll take his word for it.

"Okay. We will talk in the morning. Right?"

"Of course. I love you."

"I love you too."

"Go to sleep. It's late." He says I can feel the smile on his face even over the phone. I want to hang up but I dont. He doesnt hang up either. Its like he is also waiting for me to hang up. This is probably what umjolo felt like during the landlines era.

I lay down with the phone on my ear. His breathing is like a lullaby sending me to lala land. I can feel myself slowly fading into a beautiful sleep until everything goes completely silent. I look at the phone and it's dead. Great.

Waking up in the morning is a struggle and a half. I only had three hours of sleep and now we have to wake up and prep for lunch after making breakfast. Hlumile walks into the room with her new phone in hand. I swear she's had her head buried in that thing since she got it. But she deserves it.

"You're still sleeping? Breakfast won't make itself." She says pulling the covers.

"Go and start we will be there in a second." I try to pull the covers back but she also pulls them.

"Not gonna happen. That's what you said the last time and we ended up making breakfast alone.

Let's go." She argues.

"You're way too bossy you know that." She says rubbing sleep off of her eyes.

"I know." I leave them arguing in bedroom and go into the bathroom. I wash my face and brush my teeth. I change into a simple maci dress and head down to the kitchen. I find Scelo in the kitchen making a shake. He looks like he just came back from jogging.

"Good morning."

"Yeah pinocchio." He answers and turns the blender on. I'm never going to hear the end of this. I turn the stove on and get everything I'll need set on the counter.

"How long do you think it will take for you to actually get over that?" He shrugs his shoulders and gulps down the disgusting looking green liquid.

"I don't know. I'll let you know once I figure it out." He says walking away. Crazy.

LULONKE

He drives into his family home. It seems everyone is here. Christmas is always spent with family in Nquthu new year's is spent back in Hillcrest. It's a tradition they've practiced for years now. This year is no different. Mrs Mbatha is in the kitchen with her daughters and her daughter in law while the men are outside braaiing and the kids splash around in the pool.

Lulonke walks around the house and heads straight to the pool. There's slow jazz music playing on the speakers accompanied by sweet giggles and water splashing around. Any other day these are sounds that would bring a sense of peace to him. But today is not that day.

He finds his brother and his brother in law Paul lazing around watching the children while their father braais the meat. Nkazimulo is the first one to see him. They lock eyes even with the distance between them he can see the fire burning in his eyes. He blinks once and before he knows Lulonke has descended upon him. He falls back on his chair as Lulonke pounds his face. The shock of it all has everyone numb and stuck in their positions. The kids screaming and shouting somehow brings everyone out of their haze.

Paul quickly pulls a heavy breathing Lulonke off of Nkazimulo who is bleeding from his nose and his torn lip.

"What is going on here?" Mrs Mbatha shouts walking out of the house.

"Ask your son." Nkazimulo answers spitting out blood. Everyone turns to look at Lulonke who is trying to get his breathing under control.

"Lulonke what's going on with you?" Their father asks. Lulonke ignores them and glares at his brother.

"Stay the fuck away from her." He says. Nkazimulo looks up at him anger flashing in his eyes. He gets off the floor and spits again.

"What are you talk about?"

"You know exactly what I'm talking about. You're not going to do this to me. Not again. If you value our relationship in anyway. You will stay away from her." He says. He breaks free from Paul and walks away leaving everyone in shock.

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My bags are packed and I am ready to join the working world again. Somewhat. My only saving grace is that I love my job otherwise I would be dreading going to work again. Since our flight is in the evening I decided to make a big lunch so we can dine together before we head back to our lives. The table is set. I must say my husband will be a well fed man one day. When I'm in the mood I cook like a Makoti trying to impress mamazala.

Sne and Hlumile are busy packing. That's what you get for doing things last minute. The two older lovebirds are taking a stroll on the beach. Umjolo is nice.

As much as I've been enjoying being here I can't wait to go back to being miss independent again. Mostly because that will also give me plenty of time to be with my man. I really he'd be weird about Nkazimulo and his confession but he's been surprisingly indifferent. To me at least. A few days ago Nkazimulo sent me pictures of his bruised up face and swollen torn lips all courtesy of Lulonke. I thought this whole thing was some sibling rivalry gone wrong but now I'm realizing there's clearly bad blood between them. I was impressed and scared at the same time seeing those bruises. I just hope I'm never in the receiving end of those punches and slaps.

I hear the gate intercom buzzing just as I put the final touches to the table. I pick up and the person doesn't say anything for a while. I hang up and walk out to the yard. I just hope I'm not walking into some crazy ambush. I stand as far away as I can and open the gate slightly and wait. A car door closes and the first thing I see are the Omega sandals with Brentwood pants. The person walks in fixing himself up. For an old person he sure has a great afro on his head even with the grey hairs taking over he still looks like a decent old man.

The closer he gets the clearer the resemblance is. He looks like Bab'Cebekhulu just an older version of him. He stops a couple of feet away from me stares at me from head to toe. Scelo is sleeping one scream and he will be out here. I hope this man is not planning anything stupid or crazy.

"Sawubona." He says as soon as his eyes make their way up again.

"Yebo sawubona baba." I reply still not sure if I should be scared or not. But he doesn't seem dangerous. But then again how do killers look?

"I'm looking for a place. My brother lives around here I'm just not sure if this is the right place." He says. Okay weird. How do you not know your brother's home? This is beginning to be a bit suspicious. Bab'Cebekhulu 2.0 is starting to look suspicious all of a sudden.

"Who is your brother. Maybe I can help you." My gut is telling me this is the Dingizwe aunt Nomvula was talking about. From what I gathered he doesn't get along well with his brother. And now he is here. Inviting him inside the house might just be crossing the line and leaving him outside will just be rude.

"Edwin Cebekhulu. Do you know him?" He asks and the puzzle pieces fall into place. Now what? Do I invite him into the house and set a place for him at the table? I'm stuck. I don't know how to proceed from here.

"What's going on?" Thank heavens and whatever Angel's woke Scelo up. He sees the man and his face immediately changes.

"What are you doing here?" He asks him. The man smiles and holds out his hand for a handshake. All he gets is Scelo staring at him his hands in his pockets. Once he realises he won't get what he wants he retracts his hand.

"Scelo you've always been the feisty one." He says. There are many words I'd use to describe Scelo and feisty is not one of them. "And I take it this is Snethemba." He adds looking at me.

"Actually I'm not....."

"You haven't answered my question." Scelo interjects. Okay.

"I'll go finish up with lunch." I leave them there and go back inside the house.

I can see them through the glass door. They aren't beating each other up so maybe that's a good sign. They speak for a while before Scelo leads him into the house. They head to the lounge just as the two lovebirds walk in through the back door. Their laughter immediately comes to a halt when they see the guest. Now I don't know if I should go and call everyone upstairs or wait and listen to whatever is being said in there. I decide to be a child and head upstairs.

These three were supposed to come help me with lunch instead they are here gossiping.

"Who was at the gate?" Phiwo asks as soon as I walk into the room.

"Your uncle."

"What uncle?" She asks.

"I don't know but I'm pretty sure it's the Dingizwe aunt Nomvula was speaking about."

"Oooh I want to see him." Phiwo says running out of the room. We follow her we are gossip mongers by nature.

Downstairs it's quiet. Too quiet. I hope no one is dead. We walk into the lounge and the brothers are sitting on opposite sides of the room. Bab'Cebekhulu is sitting on the one sitter couch his one leg over the other his head resting on his arm and his eyes glued on his brother. Mam' Cebekhulu is sitting next to her husband and I guess Scelo is the referee in this situation because he is sitting between the two brothers. We greet and sit down.

"So who died?" Trust Phiwo to break the tension. Or at least try. Aunt Nomvula walks in panting like she's been running a marathon. I guess the idea of her brothers being in the same room sent her

running. She stops for a second looking from one brother to the other. Neither of them acknowledging her presence. She sits down and looks at her older brother.

"Bhuti I didnt think you'd come." She says. Her brother turns to her clearly angry.

"You said you'd be here alone." Dingizwe says making Edwin laugh.

"Alone in my house?" Dingizwe ignores him and looks to his sister for answers.

"Okay

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I might have exaggerated a bit." She admits.

"Exaggerated? You told me he was ready to apologize." Dingizwe says still ignoring his brother.

Right now this feels like a tennis match because we keep moving our eyes from left to right right to left ready for whatever may come.

"Apologize to you? For an old man you sure can be stupid." Edwin says making his brother turn to glare at him.

"See he is still as disrespectful as I remember."

"Twenty plus years later I'm glad you still have some brain cells left. Now tell me what are you doing in my house?"

"Can both of you please just shut up." Aunt Nomvula begs close to tears. She turns to Dingizwe. "I called you here because I figured there was a better chance of getting you here than Edwin going home. The two of you need to make peace or atleast pretend for mums sake." Edwin laughs. Phiwo already has her phone out recording everything.

"The same mother who sided with him? Please."

"Mntungwa give your sister a chance. I'm sure she has a very good reason for doing all this."

Mam'Cebekhulu says. Nomvula sighs closing her eyes probably summoning whatever Angel's or gods that bring peace to descend right now.

"Okay. Truth is mum is dying. The doctor's say she has a lump on her breast and its spreading. They say she has a year at most." Silence. Awkward shocking silence. Now no one seems to have anything to say.

"Mum would have told me if there was anything wrong with her." Dingizwe says. His voice has gone from menacing and angry to quiet and sad.

"She didnt want to worry you." Nomvula tells him.

"I still dont understand why I am involved in all this." Edwin says. He seems indifferent. But his voice has a slightly sad undertone. I guess no matter how hard one tries you cant fully hate your mother.

"Bhuti I know what happened before was hard on you but this is your mother we are talking about. Our mother. And she realises that things should not have happened the way they did that's why she wants the you to come home so we can fix this." She begs. Her eyes have turned red and she keeps blinking away her tears. This explains a lot. Ever since she got here she hasnt been herself. So much so she hasnt even realised that Sne is pregnant. I guess we should have known that something was wrong.

"We should go dish up." I whisper to Sne. We get up and quietly head to the dining table. We dish up for everyone and take the food to the lounge. We dish up our own plates and head out to the pool area. Hlumile and Phiwo follow us out with their own plates. We eat in silence for a while.

"You know I've never met my paternal grandmother." Phiwo says breaking the silence. "I always thought she was dead because no one in this house ever mentions her."

"And now she's really dying and we might not even get to meet her." Sne adds. "They need to tell us what's happening honestly."

The mood has totally changed. This morning we were happy to go back to our lives and now this. This is not the new year we signed up for.

By the time we get to Joburg it's already dark and we are tired and drained. Scelo decided to stay back and help his parents navigate the way forward. Tomorrow I have to take Hlumile back to KwaMhlanga so she can get her statement so she can register online. Registration opens in a couple of days. This will also give me a chance to go see my mother. The whole flight here I was contemplating my relationship with her. A few months ago I was ready to mentally bury her and forget that she even exists but I figured right now she probably has some semblance of sanity since she's back on her meds so maybe she can explain to me why she did what she did.

Lulonke picks us up from the airport since he got here first. We drop off the girls at the flat and then he drives us to his place. The first thing he does is run me a bath with bubbles and all the bells and whistles. Shem he is definitely the romantic type. I lay in the fragrant water taking in the relaxing lavender scent mixed with the vanilla scent from the candles. It feels like heaven in here.

He walks in with a glass of wine in one hand and a glass of whiskey on the other. I take the glass and he sits down on the toilet. I take a sip and sit up. As much as he is here he also seems so far away mentally.

"How are you?" I ask. He looks at me a frown on his face.

"I am fine. You've already asked me that." He says his lips curling into a smile.

"I mean for real how are you? We haven't really spoken about Nkazimulo and what he did. Plus he sent me pictures of the bruises you inflicted on him." His mood immediately changes. Angry or not we have to talk about this.

"I thought you blocked him?"

"I did. But he seems to discover new numbers every day." He sighs and takes a sip of his drink.

"Maybe you should change your number." Well that's not a bad idea.

"Okay." His widen.

"That easy?" He questions.

"Am I supposed to fight? I dont like what Nkazimulo did either and if changing my number will put a stop to all that he is doing then so be it." He nods his head and sips his drink.

"I'm not trying to control you or anything like that."

"I know."

"Nkazimulo is the kind of person who hates to lose. Even if he is in competition with himself he still wants to win. And right now I'm afraid he might not stop until he gets what he wants. And I dont want to lose you Milani." He says his voice cracking. I'm not sure anymore how I can show him that I am committed to him.

I get up and wrap a towel around me then get out of the tub and kneel in front of him. I lift his head up so he is looking at me. There is nothing I hate more than an insecure man and this one is not about to walk down that path. Not on my watch.

"Listen to me. And listen very very well because I wont repeat myself." He smiles. "I'm not going anywhere and I need that to stick inside this big head of yours. No one not Nkazimulo or anyone else will take me from you. Unless of course you do some fucked up shit like cheat on me or abuse

me. Either than that you have no reason to worry about losing me. You have me. Okay?" He nods his head. "Good. Now stop being insecure and come and show me how much you missed me."

I didnt need to tell him twice. He lifts me off the floor and carries me all the way to the bedroom. I hope I have enough energy left over for tomorrow.

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It feels weird being back here. Especially since I wont even be popping in at home. I don't know how everything is going there and quite frankly I dont want to know.

"I cant believe this is officially the last time I will be here." Hlumile says as we walk to the school. Its not as busy as it would have been had we come immediately after the results came out. I see Hlengiwe walking out of the school gate as we approach. From the looks of it something might have gone left. I'm tempted to laugh at the somber look on her face but whatever good spirit that resides inside me reprimands me.

"Let me guess you have to rewrite." I say as soon as we get close. Yes the petty spirit won. She quickly shoves her statement inside her bag. Yep it's bad.

"What are you doing here? I thought you came last week." She says staring at Hlumile. I guess she's trying to ignore me. Unfortunately for her I am not that easy to ignore. Not today satan. I wrap my arm around Hlumile's shoulders.

"We could have come but you know Hlum hlum got some distinctions so we wanted to give you and the others a chance to shine before we make our grand entrance." I reply. Hlumile elbows me. I laugh and leave them there. I'm sure she'll be happy to tell her mother that she saw us.

Hlumile catches up to me just before I go into the headmaster's office. We knock a couple of times before we hear him invite us in. He looks up and a smile fills his face as soon as his eyes land on my sister. He gets up and walks around his desk.

"The Mbokazi sisters it's so nice to see you. I was wondering when you'd come. Congratulations." He shakes Hlumile's hand and I can see the pride beaming in his eyes. This school is not the best performing school in the district but it has produced some incredible people.

"Thank you sir."

"I knew you'd be the best performing student here but even I was surprised to see your results. You really outdid yourself sisi." Yep that's my sister. He pulls an envelope from his desk and hands it to

her. She opens it and I peep over her shoulder. Four distinctions including maths. Clearly the brains went over my head because my results weren't as clean as hers. But who cares I can brag about her distinctions.

"So what's the plan now? Where to from here?" Principal asks leaning on his desk and crossing his arms on his chest.

"I'm actually going to UCT. I need to register as soon as possible so I can apply for bursaries."

Hlumile replies.

"Okay that's good. And what will you be studying?"

"Medicine."

"Sticking to the plan I see. That's good. Well I'm proud of you and as a school we are proud of you. You did pretty well Dr Mbokazi." He says shaking her hand again. I like the sound of that Dr Mbokazi. It just rolls off the tongue.

"Thank you sir. We should get going." My sister says. Before we can get out the door some of the teachers walk in singing and carrying a white sash written Congratulations in bold gold letters.

The plan was to get the statement and go but this has turned into a whole celebration. It turns out Hlumile is the first student to get more than one distinction in the school's history. The most anyone has gotten is one. Some of the teachers even got gifts for her. And the school bought her a laptop. Impressive. One less thing for me to worry about.

As soon as the mini celebration is done we leave. We still have to go back to Joburg and I don't want to be using public transport when it's dark.

"Can we go see mum?" My sister says when we walk out of the school gates.

"Really?" She asks clearly shocked.

"Yes. I also want to see her. I have questions I need answers to." A taxi stops and we get on.

"Maybe we shouldn't go then." I turn to look at her. "I know you and your idea of 'questions' that need answers might be the very thing that sends her back to her dark hole." I sigh and face forward.

"I won't do anything that will jeopardize her recovery. I promise." I'm not sure I can keep that promise but I know today is important for Hlumile. Unlike me she still has a tad bit of hope that mum can go back to being the woman we knew as kids.

We get to the hospital and we find her sitting out in the garden basking in the sun. She seems different better even. She's gained a bit of weight and her hair has been cut to a cute little brush cut.

I stand a distance away and watch my sister run to her. She hugs her and sits next to her on the bench. Hlumile is way too forgiving than me that much is clear.

"She's getting better." Someone says next to me. I look up and see a doctor. I don't even know her but the smile on her face tells me she's probably the one treating my mother. "I'm Dr Nkomo I'm your mother's psychiatrist." I shake the hand she's holding out and give her a faint smile. I don't even know how she knows that's my mother because I did not tell her. "I saw your name on the visitors log. And it's the first time she's had visitors since she was admitted here." She adds answering my unasked question.

"So how is she doing?" I look back at my mum and watch as my sister shows her the statement of results. Hlumile is excited and I can see the smile on mum's face. It's not as wide as Hlumile is but it's there.

"She's been taking her medication so she's slowly getting there. It's the therapy that's taking a bit of time. She hasn't been opening up as she should. But we have time so we will get her there." Dr Nkomo says. She seems hopeful I'm not.

"So she hasn't told you why she did what she did?" She sighs and walks around to stand in front of me.

"I know you're probably itching to get answers but it will take a while. When everything happened your mum wasn't taking her medication so we don't know yet how deep her issues are and since she's recently started taking her medication again we need to not just feed her the pills and all that without trying to fix what's really broken inside her." Nothing that she just said makes sense to me right now. All I want are answers and it's clear I will not be getting them anytime soon. I might as well go back to my life.

"Thank you for your time. We need to get going."

"Before you go I'd like to set up a family therapy session with the three of you. I'm sure it would help with her recovery." She says. She's reverted back to her serious professional stance. I don't know how that's going to help her because I am definitely not doing that. No amount of family therapy is going to bring my siblings back so why bother.

"I'll think about it." I walk over to the garden and stand behind the bench. For some reason my heart is on overdrive. I don't know what I should say to my mother or if I should say anything. Seeing her just brought back all the pain I went through. All I've ever done is take care of my siblings. Yes it was hard at first but eventually it became like breathing to me. I had a dream of us being more than what

society might expect us to be and I would have done anything and everything to achieve that dream. But she cut it short. So short I feel like wrapping my arms around her neck and watch her fight as the life is sucked out of her the same way my siblings probably fought. But I'm not her. I don't take lives. I take a deep breath. "We should get going." They both look up at me and mum's smile fades away.

"Let me use the bathroom real quick." Hlumile says walking away. I know that's just her way of trying to give us some privacy. Which is unnecessary really. Mum holds out her hand and pulls me towards her. I sit down next to her keeping my eyes on her face. She runs her hand on my face. I close my eyes the feeling taking me back to a time when I was just a child with an attentive mother.

"You look just like her." She whispers. My eyes fly open and I look at her. Her eyes are slightly squinted and a faint smile rests on her lips.

"Who?" I ask as the curiosity gets the best of me.

"Your mother." She answers. "You have her eyes and her lips." She adds almost chuckling. I've always known I look like her the only thing bothering me now is that I don't have her eyes. Hers are a dark chocolate brown shade and mine are a lighter brown shade. Even the shape of them is different.

"Okay I'm ready." Hlumile says and mum quickly lets go of my hand and face. What does she mean I look like her. And the way she said it makes it seem like she's talking about a third person not herself. If I'd never seen my birth certificate I'd probably be thinking maybe she's not my biological mother.

Hlumile gives her a hug and we leave. Seeing her again was a bit weird but since I didn't get the answers I need maybe I'll come back again. For now I need to focus on making sure my sister settles in at school and she's comfortable and focused. That's all she needs to do focus on school and I'll take care of the rest.

By the time we get to Joburg it's already late afternoon. We find an internet cafe and quickly make copies of her statement and all the documents required for her to register. We find a police station and certify the documents before heading back to the flat. I am dead tired and all I want to do now is take a shower and get in bed. Thanks to technology we won't have to wait for hours in line for her to register.

I drag myself from the lift to the front door. I don't think this one can even feel the fatigue. Excitement will do that to you. She opens the door and the moment we walk in there's a huge chorus of 'surpriseeeee'. I look around and the flat is decorated with balloons and there's a huge table right in the middle of our living room set up like some fancy dinner vibes. There's a huge banner on the wall written Congratulations.

"What is going on here?" I ask. Sebastian and Sizakele literally push me aside and wrap their arms around Hlumile's shoulder.

"I'll tell you what is going on. We are celebrating miss cute nerd over here." Sebastian says.

"So the two of you need to go and change this is a fancy dinner so please these rags you're wearing will not work. Now get to it." Sizakele adds pushing us to the bedroom. There are two dresses decked out on the bed.

"Yours is the black one. And yours

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Miss smarty is the white one." Sizakele tells us. I wonder when this whole thing was planned.

We quickly change into the dresses and put some make up on. By the time we walk out everyone is here. Which is weird because I thought it was just the five of us but Scelo is here Lulonke and Kumkani are here too. And there's a professional photographer on hand and a chef moving around the small kitchen.

"When did you plan all this?" I whisper to Sne as a waiter hands us drinks.

"Since the results came out. Come let's all sit down." We gather around the table with Hlumile at the head.

"You look beautiful." Lulonke whispers next to me his hand slowly rubbing up on my exposed thigh.

"Thank you. You didn't tell me you'd be here. Since when do we keep secrets from each other?" I feel his smile as he gently bites my ear.

"Okay you two can we focus on the programme please." Sebastian says in front of everyone. We sit up. "Thank you. Now back to regular programming. Like in every event we shall open with prayer. So who would like to do the honours?" He asks looking around the table. Everyone suddenly seems to be focused on their food. "You cannot be serious. So none of you know how to pray?" He asks and

we laugh. "Fine. I'll do it." We close our eyes and he starts reciting the Lords prayer. We seriously need to learn how to pray.

"Amen." We all say in unison.

"Great. Now let's get started. Since this was Sne's idea please say a couple of words so the party can start." He says and takes a seat. Sne stands up and clears her throat.

"Okay I dont have much to say. I have known you Hlumile for a while now thanks to my friendship with Lani. In the time I've known you you've been a focused strong person. Stronger than most people your own age and definitely a better human being than I was at your age."

"The truth in those words." Scelo chimes in making us laugh.

"You'll get your chance to do a speech." Sne says throwing a napkin at him. "Anyways as I was saying before I was rudely interrupted. Your results baby girl are not a surprise to us what is a surprise is how even through the most trying of times you came out on the other side still as focused and determined as ever. And if ever there were qualities needed for one to get through medical school I'm pretty sure those two will be the ones you need. Anyways before we get all teary eyed Congratulations nana. We are all proud of you."

"Here here." We all lift our glasses.

This celebration feels like a culmination of our dreams. Sure some of them died with Siya and Cebo but we are here we still have a long future ahead of us. People say blood is thicker than water but Hlumile and I have found ourselves our own little tribe with people who love us and want what's best for us. Where family failed us God showed up and gave us this family. Seeing my sister so loved and embraced so effortlessly makes me feel like maybe there is a God afterall.

Inspite of everything happening right now my mothers words are still ringing in my ear. What did she mean I look like her? I know its probably not something to be worried about it makes me wonder how deep is that dark hole of hers? What if the whole time I've been thinking all this is because of my father but maybe its deeper than that.

"Penny for your thoughts." Lu says wrapping his arms around my waist. "You've been out here for almost ten minutes. What's wrong?" I turn around and look up at him.

"Mum said something earlier. Maybe I'm overthinking it but it won't stop bothering me."

"What did she say?"

"She said I look like her." He chuckles.

"Babe you do look like her"

"Then why does it bother me? I mean I've always known I look like her but the way she said it it was like she was comparing me to someone else. Not her." He kisses my forehead.

"Baby you're overthinking this. You know your mother. No one knows what goes on in her head. For all you know she might be seeing herself as someone else entirely. Like an out of body experience type of thing. Stop thinking so much about this otherwise you'll go crazy." He says. I take a couple of deep breaths and shove the whole thing to the back of my head. "Now let's go back inside and celebrate your sister." I allow him to pull me back inside. Maybe he is right this whole thing is nothing but the musings of a mentally unstable person. If I think too much about it I might just find myself in a padded room right next to her.

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LULONKE

I've never been one for attention that's why I prefer corporate law to criminal law. Nkazimulo on the other hand is a pro at navigating the media and its sharks. Unfortunately for me I'll have to deal with them a lot when it comes to my upcoming case. It's high profile and there's a lot of attention attached to it. Nkazimulo did most of the groundwork but since he decided to further his studies I'm left to take care of everything else.

I have a meeting with our client today Tshego Malope daughter to the deputy president married to Mazwi Malope a well known construction mogul. Her case alone is top priority for the firm. I've had to delegate most of my corporate work to focus on this one. I drive up the large concrete driveway of her mansion. This is also the crime scene. A year and a half ago she came home to find her husband dead on their bed stabbed 13 times. At least that's what she says. She maintains her innocence but it's kind of hard to believe that someone dropped from heaven killed the man and ascended back to heaven like Jesus. As far as the cops are concerned this is an open and shut case. My job is the break down the prosecution's case brick by brick.

When I park my car I notice there's two other cars on the driveway. I know the other one belongs to one of the other associates I'm working with. The other one looks familiar but my head refuses to believe Nkazimulo could be here. He is supposed to be on the other side of the world by now. I hope this is just my mind playing games on me.

I take a deep breath and get out of the car. I get everything I'll need and head towards the door. My curiosity gets the best of me so I turn back and look at the number plate. It's his alright. My mood just took a nosedive from 90 to 10 in the blink of an eye. I can bet my last cent his presence has everything to do with Milani. My brother and I may not be as close as most siblings are but I know him he hates to lose. And right now he is an injured bear who will do anything to inflate his already fragile ego. Milani rejecting him must have been a huge blow to him. That alone raises my mood back fifty points.

I walk up the stairs again and ring the doorbell. The housekeeper opens the door and welcomes me in. His laughter is the first thing I hear. The housekeeper leads me to where they are the huge lounge with double volume ceilings and the barest of furniture. The only thing here is a couch and a coffee table. She gets up to give me a hug. I understand why most people are torn on whether she's guilty or not the woman exudes elegance and style most people think she's way too smart to stab her husband in their bed when there was just the two of them in the house. I think she's smart too the problem now is proving her innocence when all evidence prove that she's guilty.

"My dream team is finally complete. You didnt tell me big brother would be here too." She says taking a seat and elegantly crossing her legs on the ankles. I've met her a few times and I'm yet to see even a hair out of place.

"That's because I didnt know he'd be here." I say looking at my brother. The bruises on his face have faded with just a tiny scar on his lip.

"Oh. Well it doesnt matter I'm just glad you're both here. Two heads are better than one. Would you like some tea or coffee?" She asks her tiny bell already in her hand summoning the housekeeper.

"Coffee please." She rings the bell a couple of times and the housekeeper walks in and takes instructions then heads out again. "So what's with the new look. Redecorating?" I ask looking around. I'm sure Milani can have a field day here.

"Something like that. I just haven't figured out what look I want to go with yet and all the designers I've met with all think this is Kensington Palace and there's a five million dollar budget so they want

to import everything Persian rugs Italian leather couches Spanish tiles. It's a whole entire mess." She says sounding frustrated.

"There's one designer you haven't met." She cocks her one eyelash up waiting for me to go on. "The one who did my house. Trust me she's good. I'll give you her number before I go."

"Lu I don't want anyone who will see this huge house and see dollar signs. I want to erase all traces of Mazwi's tacky tenderpreneur style."

"Trust me my designer is very good. And she listens to her clients. Believe me you'll be happy." I see a smile form on her lips.

"Okay I'll take your word for it and I'll give her a call." I need to call Milani and warn her or maybe not. But I'm sure she'll be happy.

The housekeeper returns with my coffee and the two associates I've been working with behind her. She places the tray on the coffee table with a single mug and steaming black coffee just the way I like it.

"Well now that we are all here let's get started." I say and everyone takes out their note pads and files are scattered on the coffee table and couches.

"Max found something." One of the associates Glenda says going through a file. She pulls out a piece of paper and hands it to me but my brother takes it. He looks at it before handing it to me.

"A phone number? Whose is it?" He asks her.

"A possible eye witness. Not to the actual murder but the person noticed someone sneaking out of the house a few minutes after the attack. They used the back door jumped over the fence and since there are no houses behind the house the person disappeared into the thick bushes at the back and next thing there was a car driving away from the back road." She says.

"So it's possible someone snuck in stabbed Mazwi snuck out without drawing any attention to themselves and then disappeared?" Nkazimulo says running the whole thing through his head.

"That's clearly what happened." I say. "And I think it's someone who knew the both of you very well and they've probably been in this house a few times. They knew where to lie in wait they knew your schedule they knew Mazwi always came home before you

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they knew Mazwi always came home before you they knew to disable the alarm since it's clear it wasn't tampered with in any way."

"So the person set me up so well it's hard to believe a different theory?" Tshego asks. As much as she tries to project this picture perfect act any same person can see that this case is taking its toll on her. And with her trial coming up things will get hectic before they get better.

"Pretty much. That's why we need to find this eyewitness before even the cops get to them. We need to get their statement and possibly get them in protective custody before they are silenced." I say and everyone nods their heads.

"I'll call Max he is keeping an eye on them." Glenda says already texting.

"Tell him to get the person to a safe house today. We cant afford to lose them." Nkazimulo tells her.

"Wait why didnt this person appear on any of the security footage?" Tshego asks.

"Blind spots. They knew where they were and they made sure to stick to them." I say. She nods her head and sips her tea.

Throughout the day we strategize and come up with a solid defense plan. For a moment my brother and I bounce off ideas to each other like we did when we used to help dad. It brings back those little moments when we were brothers before everything went to shit. And for a moment I forget that he is busy chasing after my girl. Talk about professionalism being at its highest level.

By the time we leave we are already tired and I'm ready to hit the pillow and rest. But I have to go past the office first and get some files I need to go through before tomorrow. Work never ends around here. When I pull up to the office there are a few offices with lights still on. I notice Nkazimulo pulling up next to me. I want to ignore him but I cant. He is still my brother. He gets out of the car and leans on it I know he wants to talk about something. For his sake it better not be about Milani.

I get out of the car and walk to the building. I bet he thought I would stand there and talk to him. I hear his footsteps behind me. We haven't spoken about me attacking him and I know he is itching tonsay something.

"So you're going to ignore me?" He asks as I wait for the lift. I should have taken the stairs.

"How am I ignoring you?" He chuckles.

"Really? After the stunt you pulled at home you're going to pretend like nothing happened?" The lift opens and I get in with him behind me.

"Something did happen. I realised you haven't changed one bit. Even after everything you put me through with Slindile you still want to do the same thing with Milani. What will it take for you to get yourself a girlfriend that is not attached to me?" He let's out a deep sigh.

"You do know I knew Milani long before you did?" He asks. I hate that he thinks he can hold that over me over us like it's some Ace up his sleeve.

"I know."

"And I also told you that I love her." Okay stop the lorry.

"What the heck are you talking about?" The lift opens on my floor and instead of getting out I stand there waiting for my brother to explain. He is not about to make me the villain in this story.

"I told you about the girl who stole my watch I told you that I was attracted to her I told you that I had plans to pursue her when I get back. I told you that." I remember him telling me about a girl he was in love with. I remember how determined he was to get back and find her.

"You forgot to tell me one thing. Her name. I didnt know who the girl was except the picture you painted and nowhere in it was Milani's name surname or anything that could possibly make me think twice about her. What was I supposed to do? Ignore every woman I meet because God forbid one of them could be the 'great love of your life.' If you were in my shoes what would you have done. Ignore your feelings because hey maybe this could be your brother's potential girlfriend?" I press the open button and the lift doors fly open. I walk to my office a pang of guilt settling in the pit of my stomach.

"Well now you know." He says walking into the office. "Now that you know what are you going to do about it?" I turn to him. I hope he doesn't expect me to shove all the feelings I've invested in this relationship because he says so.

"What would you like me to do? Leave Milani for you?" He doesn't answer me but I can see the glint of hope in his eyes. "Nkazimulo I'm sorry that you and I find ourselves in love with the same girl. But you need to understand one thing Milani is not a toy that can be tossed between you and I. She is a human being with feelings and a mind of her own."

"None of this would have happened if you had just kept your paws off of her. Or what? Is this payback for Slindile? Are you trying to prove a point?" I swear my brother is delusional.

"Nkazimulo first of all Milani was never yours to begin with. And two the world does not revolve around you. I met Milani I fell in love with her I made my intentions known and she agreed to give me a chance. Had I known then that she was the girl you were busy pining over I would not have gone after her. Unlike you I respect boundaries. If Milani wants to be with you she will be. And if she makes that choice I will not stand in her way." I grab the files i need and walk out.

I get to my car and take a deep breath. My mind keeps playing the conversations I had with him after he left. And I don't remember him ever mentioning Milani's name. Time and time again I'd ask him who this girl was that was driving him nuts and he'd always say I'd meet her as soon as he made his move. I get why he'd think I did this on purpose but how was I supposed to know Milani is the one he was talking about?

I pull up to my house and the lights are on. Milani is here. I didn't think she'd come back since she spent the night here last night. I walk in and the smell of something amazing hits my nostrils. I find her in the kitchen wearing my shirt and nothing else on. I hope. I could get used to this. I wrap my arms around her waist and I feel her smiling and immediately whatever guilt I thought I had earlier vanishes. I love my brother but I'm too far gone in love with Milani to let her go.

"I like this." I say nibbling on her neck. "Coming home to you like this I love it." She closes the pot and turns around to wrap her arms around my neck pulling me down to kiss me.

"I love it too but don't get used to it. I'm not your wife yet." She says and I smile. That yet alone makes me think she sees a future with me. God will have to forgive me but my brother will have to look somewhere else for a partner. This one is mine. All mine.

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I knock on Dave's door and wait for the invite to come in. It's been a week since we came back to work and I must say I am exhausted. Not from work I just think I carried all the festive rush with me into the new year and now I'm tired. I need a date at the spa to bring me back to myself.

I knock again and there's no reply. I turn the knob and the door opens. I peep my head in and it's empty. I call out his name a couple of times and nothing. I wonder where he is. I know he is in the building somewhere. Question is where. I close the door and head back down to my desk. I use the stairs instead of the lift since I figure I might run into Dave. I know he likes to use the stairs.

The smell of nicotine is the first I smell as soon as I get on our floor. I follow the smell and find him a couple of floors down. I've never been a cigarette person but the strong smell makes me wonder how many cigarettes he has had. I find him sitting at the top of the stairs a box of Peter Stuyvesant sitting right next to him with a blue bic lighter. I don't think he even hears me come down because his eyes seem to be focused on something on the wall the only movement is just his hand and lips as they work together to fill his lungs with the nicotine.

I sit down next to him and only then does he turn and give me a glance before turning back to whatever he was looking at.

"At least if the building burns down we will know who the culprit is." I say and he chuckles putting out the cigarette and adding the stub to a few others on the step his feet are on.

"You look like you have the world's problems on your shoulders. What's going on?"

"Maybe not all the world's problems just one that I'll have to deal with for the rest of my life." He replies his eyes still glued to that magic spot on the wall in front of us.

"I'm a good listener." I volunteer. Although to be honest I'm just curious more than anything and I also like gossip. He sighs roughly rubbing his hands over his face. Whatever this is must be huge.

"Some I had a fling with months back says she's pregnant and it's my baby." He says. I'm tempted to say congratulations but it's clear this is anything but something to congratulate.

"Wow that's hectic. But they say a baby is a blessing nje maybe this will be something good." He laughs and looks at me. His laugh doesn't make it up to his eyes.

"Maybe. But I'm not ready to be anyone's father. And when my father finds out he will expect me to marry her." Huh? People still do that? In this day and age.

"Come on Dave it's the 21st century I'm sure you can coparent without having to get married." I argue. Surely his father is not that backwards.

"Trust me he is that backwards." Shoot I said that out loud. "And not only is he backwards he is also deeply religious. As far as he is concerned all children need to be born within the institution of marriage." Well now I'm glad my own father is a deadbeat. I can imagine having to marry someone just because they knocked me up. What a tragedy.

"Forget about me though why are you not working?" He changes the subject and I let him even though I have a few things I need to ask.

"I was actually looking for you. I just got off the phone with Tshego Malope. She's looking for a designer and someone recommended me." He stares at me for the first time since I sat down here he has a genuine smile on his face.

"You do remember you're still a first year apprentice right?" I flip my hair and sit back. It's not my fault people like my work.

"I know but you know what they say about God and his favour it breaks protocol." He laughs.

"I guess. Anyways do what needs to be done I'll have the contract drawn up." I guess that's a go.

"Dont forget....."

"Yeah yeah I know I'll get Sebastian and Sizakele to help me out."

I head back to my desk with a little bounce on my step. Not that I doubted Dave's ability to see the good in this but i know it might rub people up the wrong way that I'm getting my second contract barely a year into my job. Mapaseka walks past me just as I sit down and I get a waft of a ginger garlic concoction. She looks different this time around she's gained some weight and this whole week she hasnt worn a single tight fitting item. I watch her all the way to her seat and notice that when she sits down the shirt she's wearing tightens around her stomach and I gasp. She is pregnant. Oh My God.

I send a text to Sebastian and Sizakele telling them to meet me in the bathroom. As soon as I get up I hear them behind me. I get in the toilet and check each cubicle to make sure we are the only ones here. They get in and Sebastian stands by the door pushing it shut.

"What's the emergency?" Siza asks.

"Have you noticed anything different about Maps?" They look at each other and shake their heads.

"She's been wearing baggy clothes lately."

"Yeah it's hot. I cant blame her." Sebastian answers. I swear these two are slow as a tortoise running a marathon.

"No. Yes it's hot but she is also pregnant."

"No way." Sebastian says.

"Oh my god you're right." Siza says as realization dawn's on her. "Now that you mention it I noticed before we closed she stopped drinking coffee. At first I thought maybe she was getting her summer body ready but now I'm not so sure."

"So you're telling me you haven't noticed how plump she's been lately?" I ask Sebastian.

"I dont know I haven't been paying attention. My mind is still stuck in December." He says.

I'm tempted to tell them about what Dave told me but I can't break his confidence like that. He told me all that he did because he trusts me to keep my mouth shut. Although he didn't utter those words it's pretty obvious. No boss wants their personal life making the rounds around the office.

My day went from focused and ready to take on the world to watching Maps each time she stood up or did anything just so I can get a glimpse of her baby bump. It didn't help that my mind went on replay mode and I remembered a conversation I overheard when I was at a spa a few months back. The voice I recognized but couldn't place it was Maps. I've never been good at maths but I've been doing some mental subtractions and additions and it all points to one thing Maps is having Dave's baby. And one thing I'm certain of is that it wasn't a mistake. At least on her part. She planned this with her friend and now poor Dave is going to have to deal with Maps for the rest of his life. And if his father gets involved he might just be married before the year ends. This is a whole mess. Even if I tell Dave about what I overheard it won't magically make the baby disappear. It's here whether he likes it or not.

Getting home I feel like I have a huge burden on my shoulder. I grab a bottle of wine and pour myself a glass. I should be happy I have my second contract instead I am more worried about Dave and him possibly marrying a woman he clearly doesn't love. I pour a second glass and throw it back like it's water. I should probably slow down before I wake up with a hangover tomorrow. Especially since I have a meeting with Tshego.

Lulonke is not back yet. How long do I have to visit him before this turns into a vat n sit vibe because I've been here for almost a week? I'm too lazy to cook but since I'm here I have no choice but to whip up something. That's what a good wife would do. Right?

I decide to freshen up before I start cooking. I pour another glass of wine and head upstairs. Instead of a shower I take a bath. A long soothing bath. By the time I get out my body is tired and all I want to do is lay down and rest a bit. I get on the bed and lay down. I set the alarm to wake me up in thirty minutes. All I need is a power nap and I'll be good to go.

I'm woken up by feather light kisses all over my face. I pry my eyes open and find Lu looking down at me with a cute smile on his face. I know I'm used to God playing puppet master with my life but this time this time he did good.

"Does that smile mean you were dreaming about me?" He asks planting another kiss on my nose.

"Trust me if you existed in my dreams I would never wake up." He is blushing. What a sight. "Look at you blushing."

"I'm a Zulu man we dont blush." He says standing up.

"What time is it? I'm supposed to cook." I grab my phone and look at the time. Its almost eight o'clock. I've been sleeping for a full hour and a few minutes.

"Dont worry about that. I brought takeaways." He says pulling off his tie. Music to my ears. He unbuttons his shirt and I get an urge to run my hands on his skin and maybe do something more. Who am I kidding we are alone the house is big I can do whatever my heart desires.

"Stop being a pervert." He says pulling off his vest. Oh well. I get on my knees and pull him to me by his pants.

"Or we could both be perverts and pervertise each other." I unbuckle his pants and he laughs.

"I'm pretty sure that word doesn't exist." He groans as I stick my hand inside his pants and grab his dick. "Plus we have guests." He adds. I stop fondling him.

"Its not like they can hear us." I argue and go back to what I was doing. No uninvited guests formed against me shall prosper. "And we will be quick."

"Its never quick with you. I need to take a shower sk I can go back and work."

"Okay come I'll give you a bath." I unbuckle his belt and let the pants pool around his feet.

"Sthandwa sam I need to work." He says his words a complete polar opposite of what his dick wants. I pull down his briefs and he springs out like an excited rabbit jumping through a veld.

"Shandu wants to play. So what do we do?" I ask as seductively as I can and running my hand slowly up and down his engorged manhood.

He looks at his watch then looks back at me.

"You have ten minutes. Do what you need to do." He jumps on the bed laying face up with his hands behind his head. Ten minutes isn't too long for me to do what I want so I'll just do what I need to do. I grab a condom from the side drawer and slide it down his dick and I follow suit and he groans. I throw the towel on the floor and his eyes immediately go down to my boobs.

"You still want to work?" I gently move around in circles around him.

"I think I like this better." He mumbles. His eyes already heavy lidded and his voice hoarse. I dip down and take his lips in mine. His hands instinctively holding on to the back of my neck. This is turning into a whole love making session right before my eyes but I like it. He wraps his one arm

around me and flips me over so he is on top. He pulls my hands up and holds them in place above my head before he pumps into me so hard I feel organs shifting. I think.

I know I said we'd be quick but this is torture. He keeps hitting that one spot that sends little bolts of lightning all over my body.

"Lu!" I whine as the intensity builds up inside me. Each stroke sending me further over the edge. I reach my orgasm just as someone knocks on the door.

"I'm coming." Lu shouts and he literally comes right at that moment. He collapses on top of me as we both try to catch our breath.

"Lulonke? What are you doing?" I know that voice.

"I said I'm coming." Lu shouts back. His voice muffled because he is laying down on top of me his face buried on my chest.

"Who is that?" He raises his head up and looks at me.

"Nkazimulo. We are supposed to be working on a case together." He says. Not that it means anything but a heads up would have been nice. But then I remember he did say we have guests. I don't know if I should go down and welcome his guests or hide up in here although the latter sounds like a better option. Lu gets off the bed and goes to the bathroom. I lay there a little more anxious than normal. I say a silent prayer hoping that Nkazimulo does not spend the night here. The man has a way of rubbing me up the wrong way and I am not in the mood to deal with him.

Lu returns dripping wet with a wet towel in his hand.

"I'm pretty sure there is a section in the Guinness book of records for the fastest shower." I say as I watch him clean me up.

"Its your fault. If it wasnt for you I would have had a proper shower." He quickly dries himself and puts on a pair of track pants and a simple tshirt. "Do you want to come downstairs?"

"No thank you. I think I'll stay here and watch a movie." I'm not in the mood for Nkazimulo and if I have to sleep hungry then so be it.

"Okay. I will bring you some food." Such a perfect gentleman. He gives me a kiss and walks out. I just hope by the time morning comes Nkazimulo will be gone.

"So what do you think?" Tshego asks. She's given me a tour of the house and its huge. Her main bedroom is double what my bedroom is. People live in mini heavens on this earth. But then again old money is nice. And this is Hyde Park so it makes sense.

"This is a huge house." I say when we sit down in the lounge. "What's your style though? I noticed there are some traces of gold and opulence especially in the dining room and the upstairs rooms."

"And that's why I am renovating. My husband had a rather tacky over the top style. And since this was his house I was only allowed to only change a few things. Now that he is gone I need the house to be livable. I like luxury but not if its tacky. And no glamorous anything. Just soft beautiful livable luxury." She says and I note everything down. She tells me her favourite colours and the kind of pieces and art she likes. "I also have some antique pieces that have been passed down from my great grandmother. I hope you can find a way to incorporate them into the design. I'll send them to you." She adds.

I'm tempted to ask her if she really had something to do with her husbands death from the way she speaks about him it sounds like she's over him. Heck she's trying to erase every single part of him from their house. But then again that's none of my business. My job is to make this place beautiful.

"Got it. Budget wise how much are we looking at?"

"Actually I was hoping you'd tell me that. As much as I dont want cheap stuff I also dont want things that are exorbitantly expensive that they dont make sense. I want quality that will last but whose price is worth it. The one thing I'll say I need the bedroom to be a peaceful retreat for me so we can splurge a little there." I note everything down and once I'm sure I have all that I'll need i close my notebook and chuck it in my bag.

"Well I have everything I need. I will put my plans together and get the quotations done and we will take it from there." I say standing up.

"Perfect. I will wait for your call then." We walk out with her behind me. I thought she'd ask her house keeper to walk me out but she chooses to do it herself. As soon as we are out the door I request an uber. I should have taken Lu's offer to pick me up but it's too late now.

"So you wont ask me?" She asks. Her face is hard to read but I figure maybe it's because she's had to learn to be selective on what she shows to the world. And right now her face is as bland as bland can be.

"Ask you what?" I might have an idea of what she means but I'd rather feign ignorance right now. I need the commission from this design.

"Everyone I've met has asked me the same thing. Did I kill my husband? It's always the first or the last question. You haven't asked me." She says and for the first time I see a smile that seems genuine.

"It's none of my business." I say and actually mean it. As far as judgement goes I'm the last person to dish it out.

"Milani come on."

"Mrs Malope..."

"Tshego please." She interrupts.

"Tshego I mean it. It's none of my business. And to be honest with you I don't know you well enough to make an assumption about that. But from what I've read about you you're way too smart to kill someone and leave so much evidence behind. That's just my opinion. But the important thing whether you did it or not that's for the law to decide not me." We turn to the gate when we hear the hoot of the uber. "I should go. I will call you and we can set up a date to go over the plans. Bye."

Walking down to the gate I can feel her watching me. If there was no security guard at the gate I'd think she's waiting to open the gate for me. I get in the uber and head straight to the apartment. I need to help Hlumile get her things in order before she goes to school. Doing this meeting on a Saturday was a good idea. It gives me plenty of time to figure out a plan of action and I already have some great ideas.

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No one is home. Maybe I should have called first. I should have checked if Hlumile is in the coffee shop downstairs before coming up. On the bright side though this gives me a chance to get some work done. I pull out my laptop get a glass of wine and sit my ass on the carpet with my laptop on the coffee table and get to work.

Two hours later I am halfway through with the downstairs portion of Tshego's house. It's not exactly how I'd like it to be but this is a first draft so I'm good. I just need to make sure my final presentation is A grade. Tshego has contacts in high places and this could open some wide ass doors for me.

Four hours and two empty bottles of wine later and I am buzzed and seeing stars. These two are still not back yet. My phone vibrates on the table and I see Lu's number on the screen.

"Shandu KaNdaba." I say and he chuckles. I don't know what his clan names do to him but he blushes each time I say them. Men are easy sometimes.

"MaPhangela. Where are you? Still not done with Tshego?"

"I finished hours ago. I'm at my place." Twenty bucks says he is about to pout and sulk.

"But you should be here. Come home." He begs. "I want to wake up next to you tomorrow. Plus its Sunday we will sleep in." He adds. As tempting as that is I need to get some work done this weekend and I know that's not going to happen if I'm there.

"Lulonke Mbatha you do remember we don't live together right? I can't spend all my time with you."

"Says who?"

"Says my father's empty kraal." He laughs.

"That can easily be remedied. Say the word and I'll have my uncles singing your clan names outside your yard." You'd think he is joking but he is using his serious voice so I know he is not.

"Don't jump the gun just yet. How far are you with the case?" I change the subject because as much as I love Lulonke the prospect of marriage is a lane I'd rather not be on right now. Not because I don't want to marry him or anyone else in the future but marriage in African families is not just between two people. Now put my dysfunctional family and his family that already has reservations about me and already you have an explosion waiting to happen. So that's a no go area right now even though Lulonke has been making hints here and there.

"We are coming along just right. At this point I don't think we will even make it to court. We have found some evidence that might get Tshego off Scot free." He says yawning. I know this case has been a hard one to crack but I knew Lu can do it.

"Maybe you should take up Criminal defense and leave corporate." I suggest and he laughs. He claims he is not a fan of criminal defense but this case says otherwise. "I'm sure the adrenaline rush these past few weeks has been amazing for you."

"Trust me I get enough adrenaline from corporate. Plus I have you so I'm good."

"Aren't you just a charmer?"

"Charming enough to make you come back?" He asks.

"Not today baby. Tell you what I'll come see you tomorrow afternoon. Cook lunch." I hear him sigh.

"You know you make it sound like I live in a whole different province and it will take days or maybe weeks till you see me." He laughs.

"Its because i love you and I want to see your face everyday. Is that such a bad thing?" I get a strange fluttery feeling at the pit of my stomach. But then again I have been getting those a lot lately.

"No it's not bad. I'll see you tomorrow I promise." We say our goodbyes and I hang up the phone. I get myself a glass of water. I need to sober up and cook because at this time I dont think a nap will do. I find the simplest thing I can cook and get to work. By the time I am done there's a hot fresh pap and chicken feet ready and waiting. Now to wait for these two girls. I decide to take a shower while I wait. And since I'm done cooking a glass of wine wont hurt.

I'm not sure how much I had to drink last night but the headache I'm waking up with right now tells me maybe i had way too much. And to make matters worse I was drinking on an empty stomach. I don't even know when or if Sne and Hlumile came home last night. I need to get something in my stomach before taking some paracetamol. I struggle to get out of the bed but I make it. When i walk into the lounge Sne and Hlumile are already on the couch

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there's a repeat of yesterday's movie already on and they have snacks on the table. Those will have to do. I grab the bottle of pills and a bottle of water and join them on the couch.

I grab a handful of the snacks and munch on them before taking four of the pills. I lay back on the couch and close my eyes every second that passes the headache doesnt seem to want to go away. I can feel these two watching me.

"Just say what you want to say and stop staring." I mumble.

"You had a party last night. What time did Lu leave?" Sne's voice is way too loud and it just seems to worsen my headache.

"He wasn't here. I was alone and waiting for you guys you didnt show up so I slept." I reply. I feel the awkward silence even with my eyes closed.

"So you drank four bottles of wine alone?" Hlumile asks. Well that explains the headache.

"I guess. Where were you anyway?"

"I spent the day with Kumkani since Hlum hlum left me all alone to go work. And then we met up later and had dinner and then watched a movie. Why didn't you tell us you were here we would have come home early?" She asks.

"I don't know. What time is it?"

"Three thirty." She answers and I spring up from the couch but my head sends me back down. I'm supposed to have lunch with Lulonke.

"What? Do you need to be somewhere?" My sister asks handing me the bowl of snacks.

"I'm supposed to be having lunch with Lulonke."

"He is on his way here already. He tried calling you and your phone was off. So he said he is on his way." Well that's one less thing to worry about. I should take a shower in the meantime. As soon as my head settles down.

"So how is it going with the bursary applications?"

"Good. I haven't got any replies yet but I'm sure I will." My sister replies. I'm not worried about her I know she'll get a good bursary. And even if she doesn't I have my savings to carry us through the coming months. And that's why I need this contract with Tshego. It will go a long way in making sure we are comfortable.

My headache settles down a bit so I make my way to the bathroom. I brush my teeth and wash my face before heading back to the lounge. Lulonke arrives bearing gifts. He actually did cook. He has a couple of containers with food. She takes the containers and goes to the kitchen to dish up. Lu sits down next to me and I can feel the cold air coming from him. I know he is not happy about me not showing up like I promised and worse I don't even know where my phone is.

He is staring at me and it's making me uncomfortable or is it the guilt?

"What happened yesterday?" He asks. He turns on the couch his whole body facing me. No smile not even a hint of it.

"Nothing. I took a shower and I slept."

"Did the alcohol help you sleep?" She and her loud mouth. She told him.

"It did actually." I am not about to let them make me feel bad for drinking wine. Yes four bottles might be excessive but it's not like I drink four bottles every single day. It was just this one time.

"You realise you've been drinking a lot lately." He is telling me and not asking even though his statement might seem like a question. "I know you love wine and all but this is getting out of hand." I

take deep breaths I need to calm myself down or else I'll end up saying things I'll regret. So for the sake of peace I close my eyes and will my heart to rest.

"Can we please just have lunch and enjoy the rest of the day. I'm sure you're not here to police how much I drink. Please." Hlumile places a tray with two plates on it on the coffee table. Now I feel bad for oversleeping. Lu went out and actually made a whole seven colour Sunday lunch with rice beef stew creamed spinach potato salad beetroot and something that should atleast be a three bean salad instead it's just koo beans with mayonnaise.

I take one plate and hand it to him. There's way too much tension between us right now and I know he wont say what it is that he really wants to say because Sne and Hlumile are here. On the one hand it's a good thing but on the other hand it will just make the elephant in the room grow bigger and bigger.

I take my plate and pull him to the bedroom. I dont like tension so if he has something to say he might as well say it now so we can get it over and done with. I close the door as he takes a seat on the bed placing his food on the side table.

"Look I am sorry I overslept. I know we had plans and I ruined them. Please dont be mad at me. If you're going to shout at me do it so we can get past this." I dont know if I can say this is our first fight because we have had a few slight bumps along the way.

"I'm not going to shout at you I am worried about you." Oh God I will not hear the end of this.

I take a piece of meat and throw it in my mouth. It's good it just needed an extra hour on the stove and I tell him as much. My little joke is not received the way I thought it would be.

"Changing the subject is one of your strengths." He says picking up his ringing phone from the side table. "I have to go. We have some work to finish up before we meet the prosecutor tomorrow." He stands up and pushes the phone into his pocket.

He leans down and kisses me on the cheek. I'm close to tears watching him walk out. I am mature enough to admit that I ruined this day. Should have could have would have aren't going to work right now. I made a mess and I need to fix it. Somehow.

Mondays have never been my favorite day of the week today makes it worse because I went from oversleeping on Saturday to barely sleeping yesterday. I can feel the heavy bags under my eyes even though I tried to cover them with make up. Lu hasn't been answering my calls but we've been texting. I'm pretty sure he is over me missing lunch but now he is probably angry because I refuse to admit that I have a 'drinking problem' as he calls it. A person goes overboard once and everyone suddenly has a label for it. Mxm.

I walk into the office feeling like a zombie. That's what lack of sleep will do to you. I am one of the first people here. I decide to make myself a cup of coffee before anything else. I find Dave at the coffee station stirring a cup and from the looks of it his mind is definitely not here. I pour myself a cup of coffee and he is still busy stirring. And it's starting to irritate me. I should have spoken to him when I got in but I have this problem of wanting to hear what people might say when they are in their daze. Who knows maybe he will tell me the codes to his offshore accounts.

I touch his hand and he immediately stops stirring and looks at me like I have horns on my forehead.

"Hey. Are you Okay?" He stares at me for a moment his brows furrowed and his eyes squinted as if he is trying to figure out something in his head. He closes his eyes and shakes his head as reality sets in.

"Hey when did you get here?" Yeah he was really gone.

"I just got here. Let me guess the baby issue is giving you sleepless nights." He sighs and leans on the counter pinching the bridge of his nose before sipping on the cold coffee. As soon as he tastes it he spits it back in the cup. "Let me make you another cup." I grab the cup from his hands and pour another cup and hand it to him. He looks at it and looks back at me.

"There's no milk."

"Just drink the coffee. You need the caffeine." He takes a sip and almost spits it out.

"Lani there's no sugar either." He says.

"I know." He shakes his head and takes a few sips. I watch him gulp down the hot bitter liquid and wonder if I should tell him about my suspicions. For all I know it could ease his mind and help him avoid this whole marriage thing. But what if I am wrong and this baby wasn't planned and I'm just sticking my nose where it doesn't belong? If this is his child and knowing Mapaseka she might just

do everything in her power to keep him from the child just to spite him. That's how bitter baby mamas are created.

"Is Mapaseka the girl you had a fling with?" I ask. I need to know and since he's decided to open up to me he might as well go all the way. Fear crosses his face for a moment before sadness clouds his features. Man this thing is really hard on him. He nods his head and I get my answer. Puzzle piece one down on the board. Now to piece everything together.

"So I....." Mapaseka walks in before I can even start my question. And as always her FBI antenna is on high alert. She stands by the door her eyes darting from me to her potential baby daddy. Today her bump is not as visible under her maxi dress. She's clearly working overtime to keep her little secret hidden.

"What's going on here?" She asks crossing her arms on her chest her boobs popping up to form a very cute cleavage. Pregnancy is working wonders for her.

"Lani we will talk later. Let's meet at our spot." Dave says and walks out. I see the shock in Maps face. Well I would be shocked too if my baby daddy blatantly ignored me.

"What spot is he talking about?" Maps questions. I'm tempted to tell her but the petty bitch in me just wants to rub her up the wrong way.

"Like he said Its OUR spot. I'm sure you two also have your own spot so..." I shrug my shoulders and walk off head held high and a laugh gently tucked in my throat.

I feel her watching me throughout the morning. I can almost see smoke coming out of her ears when Nomsa comes to my desk with a large bouquet of red Rose's. The card says they are from Lulonke but missy doesn't need to know that. I feel the daggers she shoots at me each time she looks up from her cubicle. I doubt she's even done any work all morning.

At lunch time I grab my lunchbox and head off while her head is down. Knowing her she's most likely going to try and follow me just to see where I'm going. Once im sure she's not on my heels I take the steps down a floor. I find Dave already here with his cigarette. This new tendency of his is getting out of hand and I blame Mapaseka and her scheming ways.

I sit down and open my lunchbox I take a couple of spoonfuls and then hand the container to him. He puts out the cigarette and starts eating.

"This is nice. Did you cook?" He asks. He is going to finish my lunch and I thought he'd take a couple of spoonfuls like me and then hand it back you know share and all.

"No. My boyfriend did. Its leftovers from yesterday." He nods his head and keeps stuffing his face. Even if Lulonke had sprinkled something in there it would all be gone and Mapaseka would lose 'her man's to another man. Wouldnt that be fun. I guess I'll have to drink my water and hope I dont faint.

"So tell me about this little fling of yours. When did it start?" I ask as soon as he finishes eating.

"A few months after she started here. I thought me and her were on the same page you know it was supposed to be just something casual. When she started catching feelings I called the whole thing off. I wasn't ready for a long term relationship but she was. I had to end things and for a while everything went back to normal. We were employer and employee. Until mid last year we found ourselves gravitating towards each other again. And this time she seemed to be Okay with things being just casual. Then just before we went on break she told me she was pregnant and she's keeping the baby." He tells me. I'm not sure if I should comfort him or just listen. I know they say women can never just do a hit and run. One way or another they will catch feelings and now I believe that. Clearly Mapaseka was never content with just being the girl Dave only calls when he is horny but to bring a child into that mess now that's just plain cruel. The girl has serious issues.

Common sense and logic says I should tell him about Mapaseka's plan now but maybe I should talk her into telling him the truth. That's the least she owes him.

"You need to stop stressing about this thing trust me it will work itself out." I reassure him. I doubt Mapaseka will come willingly to the party but if I have to drag the truth out of her then so be it.

"I dont know hey a baby is a lifetime commitment one I'm not ready for. I've thought of disappearing into thin air but my parents didnt raise a deadbeat so I'll have to suck it up be a man and take care of my responsibilities." Noble.

"What if the child is not yours? Maybe before you make any major decisions be sure that this is your child." He turns to look at me. Did he not think about this before? Men!

By the time lunch is over Dave is laughing and making jokes. I guess all he needed was to vent and let everything out. I walk back to my cubicle and I can see miss Maps watching me her daggers are back. Sizakele and Sebastian quickly join me.

"Where have you been? Maps has been looking for you." Sebastian whispers. Please if she had anything serious to talk about she'd be here now.

"Well I'm back now if she's serious she'll come talk to me."

I wait and wait and wait and Miss Maps is still stuck in her chair giving me deadly looks. I'm pretty sure she's killed me a thousand times in her head resurrected me and killed me again. She gets up from her chair and walks out probably going to think of more ways to kill me.

I get an email alert and quickly open it. It might be Tshego. I sent her the drafts earlier and I'm hoping she'll give me the go ahead. Once we do the presentation and she loves everything it will be all systems go. And I can't wait. I open my emails and hers is at the top of my inbox. I take a deep breath and open the email.

"You're Hired!" It says.

My day just got ten times brighter. Or not.

A big brown envelope is thrown on my desk. I look up and see Maps staring down at me her arms crossed on her chest. She's mad. Really really mad. I grab the envelope and open it her arms crossed on her chest. She's mad. Really really mad. I grab the envelope and open it it's not sealed. Red flag number one. I take out the document and it's the contract with Tshego. Dave was quick about it. I shove the document back in the envelope and look up at Maps.

"Thank you." She chuckles.

"Thank you? Who the fuck do you think you are Milani?" She shouts and everyone stops what they are doing to stare at us.

"What are you on about?"

"What am I on about?" Is she really going to repeat everything I say? "You just stole my client." She screams. God have mercy. I figure sitting down is putting me at a disadvantage so I stand up. If hands are going to be thrown I need to be ready.

"Okay Mapaseka I know you and I have had our differences but what client are you talking about?" My voice is not as high pitched as hers is. She's determined to let everyone know all from the top floor down to the parking lot that she has a problem with me.

"Tshego Malope is my client and you just stole her." She says poking me with her manicured nail on my shoulder. It gets painful the more she does it. I grab her finger and twist it a bit and she groans.

"One do not poke me I am not a child. If you have a problem with me then discuss with me like an adult. Two I don't know what you mean because Tshego is my client and she just hired me." She pulls her finger away and starts clapping. A slow mocking applause.

"Your pussy must be really hot for rules and regulations to be bent so easily for you. First you waltz in here with no interview and a mediocre portfolio then you get a client barely three months into working here when we all know first years aren't allowed to have clients. And then you meet with Dave in your 'secret spot' and next thing you've taken my biggest client. Hhay no I'll give it to you girl bereka mosadi."

If I punch her now will it be considered double assault since she's pregnant? Will I have to pay bail twice?

"Listen to me Mapaseka unlike you I dont lay on my back and hope that that will take me to the top. Unlike you I dont trick men into....." I feel a sting across my cheek and stars floating around my face this shit hurts. Well she started it. I ball my right hand into a fist and land it on her face. She stumbles back almost falling over and all I hear are gasps all around before screams and cheers erupt and then reality sets in. I just fucked up. Damn it.

"You bitch." She screams coming right back. Before she can get to me someone pulls her back. I look up and see Dave he is fuming. The cheers have died down and there's dead silence.

"Both of you in my office. Now." Dave hisses and quickly walks away. I grab my phone and follow him. Maps is crying as we get in the lift. And she's bleeding. We get to the office Dave leans on his desk looking at us. He grabs a tissue from his desk and hands it to Maps. She takes it and wipes her nose. That's a lot of blood I hope the baby is not bleeding too.

"Now can one of you tell me what just happened?" I take a deep breath as Maps rambles on and on making zero sense. The one thing she's consistent on is blaming me for everything.

"Milani what happened?" Dave asks.

"I just told you what happened." Maps chirps in.

"Now I want to hear her side of the story." Dave replies his eyes stuck on me. I tell him the whole story from the moment she threw the envelope at me till I punched her in the face. He sighs and turns to her.

"Mapaseka how long are you going to be jealous of Milani?" Her jaw drops to the floor.

"Jealous of a wannabe? Please. And did you not hear me say she stole my client?"

"I did not steal your client Mapaseka. I didnt even know you knew Tshego. She called me and told me someone recommended me to her and she hired me. Had I known she was your client I would not have spoken to her." I defend myself.

"Please. You've been breaking the rules from the moment you got here and you've been right there helping her." She says staring at Dave her voice breaking I almost feel bad for her. But I have mouths to feed too so I'm not going to pass up an opportunity to work.

"Mapaseka what's the most important thing about our job?" He asks staring at his shoes. Maps pouts crossing her arms on her chest. When a minute passes without an answer he looks up at her but she is steadfast in her defiance. The perks of sleeping with the boss.

"The client is the most important thing here." He answers his own question. "What the client wants the client gets. Who the client wants the client gets. It's been three weeks since you went to view Tshego's house and you havent got a reply. She hasnt replied to any of your designs. Milani saw her a few days ago and she's given the go ahead for her to start work. You know what that means? It means she likes Milani's designs. And since she is the client she has the final decision. I'm sorry that you lost a client but we cannot let a client walk out the door when there are other designers who can do the work she wants." He stops and takes a breath. "Now the fighting. The two of you will not treat that office like your own personal boxing ring." He stands up straight and walks around to sit down on his chair.

"Now we can either take this to HR or we can all find a solution." The sly smile on his faces tells me he already has a solution and neither of us will like it. "My solution Mapaseka will assist you on this project." I knew I wouldnt like his 'solution'.

"Hell no. I'm not anyone's skivvy." Maps says.

"For once I actually agree with her. Not that I wouldnt like to boss her around....."

"As if you could."

"I can take any other punishment except for that. Mapaseka is already mad that I 'stole' her client what makes you so sure she won't do anything to sabotage me?" She laughs.

"Sweetie I dont need to sabotage you. You will do that all by yourself." She says.

"Good then you'll wake together." Dave says. I dont care how final he thinks this is I'd rather eat glass than work with Maps.

"Not in this lifetime. If there is no other solution I will call Tshego and tell her that I'm passing the project over to Mapaseka."

"Oh look at that you have sense afterall." Maps says almost impressed.

"No. The project is yours. Since you're both opposed to my solution you will both be receiving written warnings for fighting in the office. Now if you'll excuse me. And make sure you don't kill each other on your way down."

We walk out of the office instead of taking the lift I take the stairs. If I get in the lift with Maps I might just end up killing her. It's almost time to go home. All I want to do is get home pour myself a glass of wine and soak in the tub.

54♥

I am watching the clock. Each second that passes feels like a whole hour. I get a text from Lu saying he is outside. I don't even say goodbye to my friends I just grab my things and walk out. If I stay a moment longer I might just finish what I started earlier since Maps is determined to get under my skin. Every opportunity she gets she rubs me the wrong way.

I open the backseat and throw in my bags then get on the front seat with my flowers in my hand. Lu doesn't start the car instead he stares at me. I am angry and I can feel it in the pit of my soul. I know I should greet but I am afraid if I open my mouth I'll end up saying something very wrong. I'm still angry at him for calling me an alcoholic in not so many words. The unfortunate part is that he is also determined to keep his mouth shut. I take a deep breath and turn to look at him.

"Are we not going?"

"Sawubona MaPhangela. Unjan Kodwa? Uphilile? (Hello. How are you? Are you well?)" Trust him to annoy me even more. I heave out a long sigh. This day has the potential to go down as one of the worst days of my entire career.

"Can we please just go. I am tired and I need to take a bath and rest."

"Sawubona MaPhangela. Unjan Kodwa? Uphilile?" Kill me now. I forget how stubborn he can be.

"Yebo Shandu ngiphilile unjan wena. (Hello. I'm fine thank you how are you?)" He smiles. Idiot.

"Good. Now tell me what happened to your face." I touch my face and I feel a bit of pain. Maps and her slap I'm sure she got the extra energy from that baby you know what they say about pandemic babies.

"Nothing. I just had a little disagreement with a co-worker." I'm hoping he will let it go but no he turns on his seat and fully faces me. I dont even know how he saw my face because Maps hit me on the left side.

"So little disagreements in your place leads to your face being red and having hand mark's on your cheek? I thought you were an interior designer and not a wrestler." He says.

"Well you should see the other guy." He doesnt see the joke. I tell him what happened and by the time I'm done he is fuming.

"Did you report the attack to HR?" I shake my head. "So you're going to get a written warning because some jealous mean girl decided to attack you in front of the whole office? Is that how things are done here? Someone is attacked and they are penalised for defending themselves?" Now he is on full lawyer mode and I dont like it. I dont want to make a big deal out of this whole thing. It might just turn into a bigger mess than it is right now.

"Well I punched her too. And besides Dave sorted it out so we are good." He is not buying it. He looks at his watch before opening the door and getting out. In my head I'm thinking he will go in and make an unnecessary ruckus so I quickly get out.

He walks around the car and pulls me back into the building. I'm literally running behind him. He ignores Nomsa as we head to the lift.

"HR is on what floor?" He asks when we get in the lift. I'm not sure what his plan is but I know it would be better to not anger him some more. I tell him and he presses the button. Lucky for him our HR manager Enhle is still in her office.

"Good afternoon. Can I help you?" She asks staring at me and then him.

"We would like to lay a formal complaint. My client was attacked earlier today by one of her colleagues." Lu starts. Enhle looks at me she's not as shocked. News travels fast around here.

"Okay. You can have a seat." We take our seats and she pulls out a notebook. I'm not even sure if this is how things should be done but I'm here for the ride. "Okay please tell me what happened?"

I narrate everything to her including Dave's written warnings. I thought that would be the end of it but clearly Advocate Mbatha has his own ideas.

"So what I don't understand is why my client is getting a written warning when she was just defending herself."

"Sir I understand your concerns I will look into the matter and then get back to you." Enhle says.
Poor woman just wants to get home.

"Good. Please keep me updated and make sure you dont talk to my client without me present." She nods her head and we get up. I mime an 'I'm sorry' as we walk out the door. She understands and all she does is smile.

The drive home is quiet. Too quiet. Lu keeps clenching his jaws and taking his anger out on the steering wheel. It's cute that he is angry on my behalf but he is taking things overboard. We drive up to his house and there's a car in the driveway. The lights are on inside.

"Who is here?" I ask and he shrugs.

"Probably Nkazimulo." He replies getting out of the car. Now there's another demon that's going to ruin my day.

We find him in the kitchen cooking dinner with a glass of wine on the counter. My kind of party.

"What are you doing here?" Lu asks. No greeting no nothing but he gave me grief for not greeting earlier.

"I thought I'd come and spend time with my brother. I didnt know you'd be bringing Milani."

Nkazimulo is staring at me. I grab a glass and pour myself some wine. I can feel Lu's eyes boring into me. I ignore him and do what I need to do. I can also feel Nkazimulo also staring at me and his stare is just uncomfortable. Before I can take a single sip Lulonke takes the glass and gulps down the red liquid. Its moments like these where I wish i had the ability to shoot lasers with my eyes.

"Didn't you say you want to take a bath and rest?" He is glaring at me like I'm a child. He is lucky I love him. I grab my bags and head up the stairs. "I'll bring you something to drink." He shouts after me. I'm not impressed because I know it wont be wine or a cider at the least. I fill the tub and add some bath salts. I get my phone and connect the speaker then blast some RnB music. While the tub fills with water I look at myself in the mirror. I am not as light in complexion but Map's slap mark is visible. I cant believe her ass slapped me. Now that the gloves are off I am definitely telling Dave everything.

As if he can feel that I'm thinking about him Dave sends me a text.

" what the heck Milani?" Great Enhle told him. I decide to call him and he answers quickly.

"Hey what the heck happened from when we spoke to you laying a formal complaint?" He sounds angry. Not surprising.

"Look can we talk about this tomorrow. I will come to your office first thing in the morning." He takes a deep breath.

"Okay I'll see you tomorrow." He hangs up. Great I hope this little complaint didn't get me out of the pan and straight into the fire.

I lay on the tub my mind drifting in every direction. This is why I need a drink. I dont like my sober thoughts. My mums words seep into my head I've tried to not think about what she said about me looking like someone but my gut tells me there is more to her words than just the ramblings of a mad woman. I've always thought I look like my mum but her words have me questioning a lot of things. The past couple of weeks I've been comparing every part of me to someone in my family trying to figure out who I'm supposed to look like but I always come up blank. I seem to have similar eyes to someone and my nose looks like someone else's which confuses me even more. The one person that I seem to have constant similarities to is Sne. If I didnt know better I'd think she was my birth sister.

I feel Lu slide in behind me handing me a glass of orange juice.

"Orange juice?" I ask laying back and resting my head on his chest.

"Yes. Its midweek you're not allowed to drink alcohol." I'm officially putting this day down as the worst day of my life. The last time I had a man tell me what to do I was ten. Now I am a full grown adult and another man wants to control me. I more deep breaths than necessary. I need strength to deal with this but I also need to be smart about it. Fighting him will only feed into the idea that I have a problem which I dont.

"Dave wants to see me tomorrow."

"Okay I'll be there."

"I dont think that's a good idea. I mean it's not a formal meeting." I say hoping he will let go of the idea. All I have to do is make Dave understand this whole thing from my point of view. I mean Lu is right about one thing Mapaseka started this whole thing now I'll have a written warning on my record for something she could have easily sat down with me and sorted it out instead she went all Rambo on me.

"Why are you so reluctant to fight this?" He asks I can feel him kissing the top of my head.

"I dont want to lose my job." And that's the honest truth. Jobs dont come around like taxis on a busy morning. For some of us getting a job is a struggle all on it's own. As much as I got this job through Scelo I cant always rely on other people to save me. And I can't expect other people to always give while I take take take. I am grateful for my job and I will do whatever it takes to hold onto it. Even if that means accepting just one written warning.

I feel him sigh if there is one thing Lu understands is that we are from completely different backgrounds and as much as we are working towards being on the same level how we view things can be polar opposites at times. And this is one of them. I'm letting him win now but it wont last forever.

"You wont lose your job just because you choose to fight for yourself Milani." I turn and look at him and he laughs.

"You know this is becoming a habit. A bad one at that." He wont stop laughing. I dont know what's funny because I'm not laughing.

"Okay Ngiyaxolisa MaPhangela wam. (I'm sorry)" He says and I can feel the whole butterfly garden around my tummy. And his pearly whites on full display. My weakness. I turn back and lay on his chest again.

"The next time you call me by my name I wont reply."

"Baby that's your government name." He reminds me.

"To everyone else yes not to you."

"Understood. As I was saying fighting for yourself wont make you lose your job. Sthandwa sam you're a fighter you've always been one. What happened to that girl?" She grew up and realised sometimes it's better to lose the battle in preparation for the war. I think to myself.

"I will talk to Dave tomorrow and see what happens. If he insists on the written warning then I'll have no choice but to call my superman and let him deal with Dave." I feel his breath on the side of my neck before i feel his lips on my skin.

I close my eyes and savor the feeling of his warm lips on me igniting little fires everywhere he touches. His hand goes around me cupping and fondling my boobs. I dont know how safe or hygienic it is to have sex in the tub but I'm about to find out. I feel him slowly growing behind me and my excitement goes up a notch. Until the demon knocks on the door. I'm guessing Lu didnt lock the bedroom door.

"Food is ready." Nkazimulo shouts over the door.

"We will be down in a second." His brother shouts back. His not my sibling so I don't owe him shit. In fact all I want is for him to leave and let me enjoy a new experience.

"Hurry up loadshedding will hit in about twenty minutes." Now I'm starting to think he is just jealous.

"We should go and eat." I silently curse Nkazimulo for ruining our moment. I mean it's not like we can't eat with candles or flashlights. Oh well we will have to recreate this moment some other time.

55♥

I dont know why I am nervous it's not like there is anything major Dave will say. I'm glad Lu made me see reason but it's still not something easy to do. All I want to do is get this over and done with.

I'm making lunchboxes for me and my boyfriend. His brother will have to make a plan. I am not his girlfriend or his sister or his maid. I place everything inside the lunch bags and set them aside then start on breakfast. I decide on making soft porridge since Lu loves it and Nkazimulo hates it.

I leave the pot of soft porridge simmering on the stove and hurry upstairs to get dressed. I hear the shower running as soon as I get in. I quickly change from the silk robe to a brown midi knit dress with brown block heels. I'll be on my feet a lot today so I need to be comfortable and what's better than block heels. Lu walks out of the shower just as I put the final touches to my hair. Which reminds me I need to get rid of this weave and do something else with my hair. Something that wont make me sweat from morning to sunset.

"You're done already?" He asks getting rid of the towel wrapped around him leaving him in his glorious birthday suit. I watch him through the mirror as he lotions.

"Almost. I just need to do something." I say absentmindedly. I see him look up at me with a smirk on his face.

"And what's that something?" He is standing with his arms on his waist gently moving side to side making his dick dance. He notices me starrng and he literally starts moving faster making me laugh.

"You're crazy." I say between laughs.

"You love me anyway." He starts getting dressed while I finish doing my makeup. When we are both done we head down to the kitchen. I dish up for us and we sit around the kitchen Island. The door

opens and a sweaty out of breath Nkazimulo walks in with his shirt hanging from the hem waist of his pants his phone strapped onto his arm with air pods in his ear. I must admit he looks good. Yes I am human and I have eyes.

"Hi lovebirds." He says grabbing a bottle of water from the fridge. I'm not sure if he is being sarcastic or not so I just give him a faint smile and continue eating. He starts a conversation with Lu about soccer or whatever. I'm still not sure why he has a key honestly. I also dont understand their sudden brotherhood. Well technically speaking they are blood brothers but my life was easier when they were on each other's throats most of the time. It was easy to pick a side but now since they have made up or whatever they are doing I now have to be a decent girlfriend and be nice to my boyfriends brother. Even though we all know he is not to be trusted.

"Babe?" Lu says. I look up at him and see the worried look on his face. "You got lost there for a moment. What are you thinking about?"

"Nothing. I'm just worried about my meeting with Dave." I lie.

"You want me to come with you?"

"No. I'll be fine. But if anything happens I'll definitely call you." I give him a small kiss on the cheek just to put an end to the subject but this toe of satan has other ideas.

"Who is Dave?" He asks sipping on the cold water. My self control keeps my eye roll at bay. I dont know why he is interested in my life. Oh wait I do know because he likes sticking his nose where it doesnt belong.

"No one important." Lu says bringing a smile to my face. "Baby let's get going or else you'll be late." I pick up the bowls and wash them while Lu heads back upstairs to get our bags.

"You look nice." Nkazimulo says. I mumble a simple thank you hoping he goes away. But he doesnt. I smell his sweat infused cologne behind me and my heart starts racing. For his sake I hope he is not planning on doing anything stupid. I wipe my hands and turn around. He is so close. Too close.

"Do you know what I'd like to do right now?" He says so softly I can barely hear him. "I'd give anything to kiss you right now. I've dreamt of it for so long and now you're here right in front of me and its taking every cell in my body to hold myself back." He adds. He takes a step back and walks away. I heave out a deep sigh thanking the heavens that Lu did not walk in on that awkward moment.

"I'll see you at the office." I hear Nkazimulo telling Lu as he walks down the stairs.

"Sure. Baby let's go." I can feel Nkazimulo watching me as I follow Lu out. I need to put a stop to his bullshit as soon as possible. Especially if he will be here for a while. Lu opens the car door for me and I get in.

"Shandu how long will your brother be here?" I need to know how long I have to put up with Nkazimulo.

"Why? Did he do something?"

"Not really. I'm just curious."

"Well. He rented out his apartment when he left and now that he says he is not going back to school he doesn't have a place to stay. So he asked to crash with me for a while until he figures out something." He says. Great so he will be here for a while. But now I don't know how long 'a while' will be. For all I know he will be here for six months or a full year.

Walking into work I decide to go straight to Dave's office before I do anything else. His PA is not here yet so I just walk in since his door is wide open. He is sitting on his desk looking out the window like someone who has a lot on his mind. I walk around and stand in front of him placing my bags on his desk.

"Hey." I can tell he is breathing through the wound. Mapaseka really has turned his life upside down.

"Hey. I didn't hear you come in." Even his voice is not his usual icy cold Dave.

"You wanted to see me." He folds his arms across his chest. I'm not sure if he is trying to intimidate me or what because he is failing.

"Yes. So Enhle tells me you want to lay a formal complaint against Mapaseka?" He is really trying so hard to be icy Dave right now but he forgets I can see right through him. And right now he is conflicted. He knows Mapaseka was wrong to attack me like that. Yes I was wrong too but she is my senior and if there's anyone who should know better it's her.

"Yes. So I've thought about it. Mapaseka attacked me. First and foremost she wasn't supposed to open an envelope that was addressed to me. It was not her business to snoop. Secondly I didn't steal her client if she had a problem with me speaking to Tshego she should have come to you or Christine and not do what she did. So I don't think it's fair that I should get the same punishment as

her. I know I was also wrong but it's still not fair." He nods his head. I was expecting him to say some bossy things instead it seems like he is deflated. I hate seeing him this way.

"Okay. I wont give you a written warning." He says in a monotonous way. It's like he is here but he is not really here.

"Look I know that you have a lot on your plate with this whole Mapaseka issue but you cant allow it to consume you like this." He roughly rubs his face with his open palms. Frustration seems to be his default mood lately.

"Its not that simple. In a few months or weeks even my life could be turned upside down completely."

"Dave get a DNA test done before driving yourself crazy. Plus this whole thing wasnt some cosmic joke the universe decided to play on you. Mapaseka planned this whole thing." I blurt out. His eyes widen in surprise.

"What did you just say?" Hr questions. I take a couple of deep breaths and tell him everything. By the time I am done I can literally see steam coming out of every pore in his body. Now Icy Dave is back. "So she played me?" He asks as if I hold all the answers.

"There is a possibility the child is yours but you won't know until you get a DNA done. And lucky for you science has advanced enough for you to be able to get it done now and it wont be a danger to the baby." I dont think he can hear anything I'm saying because he keeps nodding his head one moment and chuckling the next. I'm not sure what kind of floodgates I just opened I'm just praying I dont get caught in the flood.

I walk into the office and find my friends already sitting at my desk.

"You didnt say goodbye yesterday." Sebastian tells me. I could pull a Lu on them and greet first before entertaining them but I decide not to.

"I know and I'm sorry. I was just too angry." I place my bags down on the floor and sit down.

"I can imagine. But that punch was worth it though." Sizakele says.

"Babe I felt that punch even though I was a few feet away. Remind me to never ever mess with you." He says before animatedly replaying the whole thing over again. Mapaseka walks in while these two are laughing and making jokes.

I feel a pang of guilt seeing the bandage sitting across her nose. Oh God I felt that punch even though I was a few feet away. Remind me to never ever mess with you." He says before animatedly replaying the whole thing over again. Mapaseka walks in while these two are laughing and making jokes.

I feel a pang of guilt seeing the bandage sitting across her nose. Oh God I broke her nose. I shouldn't be feeling this way but I feel so bad right now.

"How much surgery do you think it will take to fix that?" Sebastian asks so loudly even Mapaseka glares at him.

"Okay enough you guys. Will you help me with Tshego's place?" I ask giving them my best version of the puppy eyes look.

"Girl you dont even have to ask. Plus we don't have any inventory right now so we are in." Sizakele says. They high five me before heading to their desks.

My morning is not as eventful as i thought it might be. After calling Lu and updating him about my meeting with Dave then going to HR to drop my charge I meet up with Tshego. Lucky for me she suggested we meet at a restaurant just down the road. I find her already sitting with a cappuccino in front of her. Her LV sunglasses are on the table together with her LV neverful monogram bag. A sneak peek under the table and I see even her boots are LV. I guess she's one of those people who likes to match.

For someone who is facing the biggest trial of her life she either has faith in her lawyers to get her off or she just doesn't care. Either way I'm glad she's living her life. Plus we all know laws were made for poor people to follow. People like Tshego barely ever get jail time. If she is guilty she'll probably walk away with a slap on the wrist or probation at most. But if it was Mbali from down the street she'd be looking at life behind bars.

Enough about the politics. I take a seat after greeting her and getting a hug in return. In the two times I've met her I personally dont see her killing her husband I know a killer is not stamped on the forehead for everyone to see but she seems so genuine and sweet. In another life we would have been great friends.

"I didnt keep you waiting too long I hope." I say as a waiter makes their way to us. I order myself an espresso. I need the shot of caffeine.

"No I was supposed to meet some friends here but they all cancelled on me at the last minute. I guess they still have hang ups about being seen with someone accused of killing their husband." She says. Even though there's a smile on her face her voice is laced with a bit of sadness. Some shitty friends she has. I know mine would not do that. Heck I'm sure they would help me kill and bury the man if he'd done half the things to me that Tshego's husband did to her.

"Well you need new friends." I say and she laughs.

"Maybe you're right. Thank you for not treating me like I have leprosy." I smile at her as the waiter places my espresso in front of me.

"I'm not one to judge because I dont like being judged. Anyways..." I hand her the envelope with the contract and the final quotation. She gives both a once over then signs on the dotted line. It's done. My second contract is done.

I order some food and we chat. She tells me about her family her kids and she even has some fond memories of her husband. But when she talks about her kids it's like there is a whole fireworks display in her heart that reflects in her eyes. She loves her children. It makes me envious a bit. Not for my future children but for me. Sometimes I wonder how my life would have turned out if things didnt happen the way they did. I wonder sometimes if I would have been able to dream far beyond what my mind can comprehend instead of surviving. I guess I'll never know now.

She pays the bill and we gather our stuff. The little restaurant we are in has dark tinted windows that make it hard for people on the outside to see in. But the moment we descend the stairs from our hidden table we can see the flurry of journalists gathered outside. Someone must have called them and told them Tshego is here.

"These people never stop do they?" She whispers defeat etched in her voice. Not that I blame her. It must be hard having that much scrutiny over your life especially for something like a murder.

"We can ask to use the backdoor. I'm sure they wont mind." I say trying to look around for a waiter but it seems they've all vanished.

"They wont let us. Chances are they called the press themselves. You know what they say publicity is publicity. Good or bad. We will just have to fight our way out." She sounds like someone who has done this a zillion times already. The problem though is that I have to walk to the office. And

journalists have been known to run next to cars just to get their scoop. Now imagine me walking. Wait I am getting a little ahead of myself here. Why would they follow me. I'm a nobody.

"Okay how about you go out first and then once they leave I will go too. I have to walk to work so...."

"Dont worry I'll drop you off. We just have to fight our way to the car." She says like it's a matter of jumping through a puddle and hope to God you dont fall in. Before I can say anything she grabs my hand and pulls me towards the door. She takes a deep breath before we walk into an abyss of constant questions and cameras flashing from every side.

"Mrs Malope did you kill your husband?"

"Tshego how are your preparing for your trial?"

"Tshego Tshego this side."

"Mrs Malope are you ready for prison?"

"Tshego is this your girlfriend?"

"Were you cheating on your husband with her? Is that why you killed him?"

I'm not even sure how we made it to the car. All I remember is putting my head down and following Tshego. Now that we are in the car we still have to navigate getting out of the parking.

"Are they always like this?" I ask as soon as we are able to make it out of the parking and on to the road. She laughs even though it's clear she's affected by this whole thing.

"No. Usually they barge into the restaurant or the store I'm in. Sometimes they will even come to my work. Trust me this is nothin compared to what they have done before." Shes trying so hard to be strong but the cracks are showing. I decide not to poke too much into her life and just let her be.

I get to the office and head straight to my desk. I start making orders for the furniture. Some of the things Tshego wants will have to be custom made so I put those orders in and hope they will be able to finish them on time. By the time we knock off Tshego is trending on twitter. There are even pictures of us at our table laughing and those are the ones that seem to have caught people's attention. Tshego has never tried to hide the fact that she's bisexual and now people are making up

their own conclusions. In one picture Tshego is holding my hand and I don't even remember why but people are saying I'm her new fling. My saving grace though is that they don't know my name.

"Her husband is barely cold and she's already moved on to the next. What a floozy." One tweet says.

"I hope the girl knows she might just end up just like Mazwi once Tshego is done with her." Another tweet reads.

One after the other hundreds of tweets slam her and tear her apart. I feel so bad for her. I get a notification that someone wants to send me a DM on Instagram. When I check the message it's from a journalist asking to send me questions about Tshego as her friend. I immediately decline the request and block her before making my account private. Lucky for me there aren't any compromising pictures on there so I'm good.

I want to call Tshego and make sure she's okay but maybe she hasn't been on twitter so I might just send her over the edge. I text Lu instead and ask him to check on her. He is her lawyer after all. E texts back saying he will give her a call. I request a cab and head to our apartment. I need to find an excuse to give Lu as to why I am not going to his place because I don't see myself being in the same house with Nkazimulo.

Just as I walk into the apartment I get a call from an unknown number. I immediately reply even though I'm praying it's not a journalist.

"Milani Mbokazi."

"Miss Mbokazi hi its Dr Nkomo your mother's psychiatrist." As if I don't have enough problems to deal with today.

"What can I do for you?"

"I have a request. Your mum has been opening up a bit and she's been speaking about you. I am wondering if you can make time and come see her." The devil is testing me today.

"What exactly is she saying because I don't see a reason why I should come all the way there for something useless. I have a lot of work and I don't think I can come there."

"Please it's important. Please just find the time. Even if it's just half an hour." She begs. I sigh and tell her I will try and find the time. I wonder what my dear mother has to say.

6♥

NKAZIMULO

Karma! That's what white people call it. And that's the only way I can explain the mess that's happening right now. I am neck deep in love with someone I'm not supposed to be. Screw the fact that I saw her first and not only that I spent one of the best nights of my life with her. I guess this is my punishment for all the wrong I've done in the world watching the woman I loved being loved by someone else. And not some random stranger but my own brother. My ancestors must have hearts of stones to make me suffer like this.

Seeing her this morning in that tight dress send chills all over my body. I might have crossed the line by saying what I said to her but i couldnt help myself. For a while now I've been trying to figure out what it is about her that makes me feel hot and cold at the same time maybe if I know that then I might be able to get over her but I keep hitting blank after blank. Instead I find more reasons to fall in love with her. I know by now I should accept that I can't have her but how am I supposed to do that when I believe she's my soulmate?

I thought being here and maybe seeing her with Lulonke would make me feel disgusted and probably hate her but I'm not there yet. I dont even think I will get there.

"Earth to Nkazimulo." My PA says snapping her fingers in front of my face.

"Sorry what did you say?"

"I came to give you this file Lu said you should look it over and then bring it home with you." She says. I grab the file and place it in front of me.

"Where is my brother? Is he in the office?"

"No. He went to check on Tshego. She had a run in with the media earlier and now she's trending on twitter and people are brutal." She tells me. I can tell she wants me to ask what's being said but I've never been the type to listen to gossip or people being savage for no reason. That's one of the reasons I am not on social media.

"Okay. Thank you." I dismiss her and I can see the disappointment on her face when she realizes I don't need the details of her gossip mongering. She walks out and a thought crosses my mind. Milani might be alone at the house. That thought brings a smile to my face. I pack up and head home.

I decide to go past the shops and get some snacks and drinks. It might not mean much but maybe it can be a peace offering especially after this morning. I'm not sure what her favourite snacks are so I get anything and everything. I know girls like chocolate so I also get that. Hopefully she likes something.

When I get to Lulonke's place it's oddly quiet. Maybe she's taking a nap. I leave everything on the kitchen counter and make my way upstairs. The bedroom door is slightly ajar so I slowly push it open. Nothing. Even when I call out her name there's no response. I try and call her then remember the last number I had no longer exists. Bummer. There goes my plan.

I head back downstairs when I hear Lulonke's car pulling up. Lu walks in alone and way sooner than I was expecting him. I hope everything went well with Tshego.

"Where's Milani?" I blurt out before I can control myself. "I'm just wondering since you're always joined at the hip these days." I add seeing the look on his face. I know he doesn't trust me around her. Again I can't blame him.

"Milani has a life outside of being my girlfriend Nkazimulo. And anyways I spoke to my estate agent and there's a flat available at a complex in Sandton. It's close to work and you'll get your freedom back. Plus it comes fully furnished since all your furniture is in storage." He says throwing me for a loop. He is trying to get rid of me.

"I thought there were no available places right now?" He smiles. I wonder what Milani said for him to go to these lengths.

"There weren't until my agent got a call from the owner of the place saying they will be staying the rest of the year in the UK so now there is a place available. And I did the honors and secured the place for you. Consider it an early birthday gift." He says his smile going all the way up to his ears.

"Are you trying to get rid of me?" His smile quickly disappears. We've tried so hard to fix the rift between us. It took a while but we were making progress. Good progress. And now he can't wait to get rid of me. I haven't even spent a week in his house and he is ready for me to disappear. Bukhosi must be turning in his grave.

"Of course not. I just think you need your space. Plus I dont think Milani is comfortable with you around here." And there it is.

"She's the reason you're kicking me out?" I dont even know why I'm asking when the truth is right in front of me.

"No. She's part of it but the main reason is that I believe you need your space."

"Bullshit. You were fine when I asked to stay with you a few days ago. What did Milani say that made you change your mind?" I'm getting hot under the collar right now. "You knew when you agreed for me to stay that Milani spends most of her time here and yet you agreed. If you didn't want me here I would have just stayed at the hotel." I tell. Not that that has any effect on my brother.

"And now you wont have to. I found you a place. It's a win win situation." He says shrugging his shoulders.

"Damn it Lulonke I am your brother."

"I know. And that's why I found you this place. For the sake of peace it has to be done. I'm going to take a shower. I have to go and see Milani before I sleep."

I grab my car keys as soon as he disappears upstairs. I cant believe he is actually kicking me out. My own brother. I decide to drive back to Joburg to see my friends. If my brother doesn't want me in his house then I'll give him the space he needs.

I text Kumkani to find out where they are and he tells me to meet them at the hotel. My head is buzzing as I'm driving and not in a good way. I can't believe our relationship has come to this. All because of a woman. Again. I made a promise to Bukhosi before he died that I'd fix our relationship and I'd do whatever it took for us to be good again and right now it feels like I just took Town steps back.

"You look like you haven't slept in a week." Kumkani says when I take a seat at the hotel bar. I ignore him and order a double shot of whiskey. I chuck the liquid down my throat and it burns. If only it could make it's way to my heart and burn my feelings for Milani.

"Okay can you give us the bottle." Langa tells the bartender while Smilo leads us to a table. It's already dinner time and most tables are already occupied. Even on a Tuesday night this place is packed. Smilo must be proud of his hardwork.

Langa hands me another double shot of whiskey that j just swirl around instead of drinking.

"What's going on with you. Thought you'd be spending time with Milani." Smilo says laughing. Now I regret coming here. These idiots will laugh at me like I'm crazy.

"She went back to her place."

"And let me guess that's why you're sulking? You do know shes not yours to be sulking over right?"

He says. Him and Kumkani are the ones with a little more sense and Smilo is the one who will tease me till Jesus comes back.

"I know that man. Plus Lulonke is kicking me out." I chuck the drink down and I can feel the alcohol already taking over. My friends are silent for a moment before they burst out laughing. I didn't expect any pity from them but a little empathy can go a long way.

"Wow how long have you been there again two days?" Smilo teases.

"So where are you going to go?" Kumkani asks. He is not laughing. Of all my friends he is the one who got to see how bad my rift with Lulonke was. I shrug my shoulders as the teasing continues. I wish I could switch off my feelings and forget about Milani but it's hard to do. I thought her history would have poured cold water on my feelings but it didnt.

Smilo sees a group of women at another table and he decides to make his move with Langa next to him

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but it's hard to do. I thought her history would have poured cold water on my feelings but it didnt.

Smilo sees a group of women at another table and he decides to make his move with Langa next to him leaving Kumkani and I alone. I pour another shot of whiskey adding some ice before swirling the blocks around inside the glass.

"You know you should have gone back to school. Maybe it would have helped you with your feelings. You could have met another girl there and maybe even married her." Kumkani tells me.

"Easy for you to say you have a girlfriend and a baby on the way. I am 32 years old and I have no one. I had plans and all those went up in flames the moment I got on the plane the first time. Maybe if I had stayed then things would be different." I take a sip of my drink trying to imagine how different my life would have been had I been a little nicer to Milani the first time. Maybe if I'd made my feelings known then I could have been the one she comes home to.

"You know all these could haves should haves and maybes are not going to help you. Instead you will drive yourself nuts trying to paint a picture that will never come to life. She's gone my guy. Right now all you should be focusing on is making peace with Lulonke and keeping your promise to Bukhosi. Everything else will come when the time is right. This time last year if you'd told me that in a year I'd be expecting a child with a woman who was supposed to be a one night stand and instead turned out to be exactly what I needed in my life I would have laughed at you. I know you had plans but it's time for those plans to go up in flames. I know it's hard but things will work out. I promise you."

MILANI

For someone who doesn't like cuddles Lulonke gives the best cuddles. We've been sprawled out on my bed for the past two hours since he got here. I didn't think I'd see him tonight but here he is fed and content. I haven't explained to him why I came back here yet. I'm not sure if I should but we did promise each other honesty and the truth no matter how bitter it may be.

"Shandu?" I whisper looking down at him. My poor man is tired he is already falling asleep. But I have to tell him about this morning because if he finds out from his brother it might cause a problem for me.

"Mhmmm."

"I have to tell you something." I start. I swallow some saliva as if it will make the words come out smoother and less hurtful. "About your brother." He opens his eyes and they are red. He is really tired. I should just let him sleep. Right? We can always talk about this some other time.

"Don't worry about him by the time you come back he will be gone." He says and my heart starts racing. What if Nkazimulo already said something and twisted the whole scenario to make himself a victim? But then again Lu wouldn't be here if that was the case.

"What do you mean?"

"I found him a place to stay. I saw this morning that you were uncomfortable around him." I open and close my mouth like a fish out of water. I mean he is right but how did he figure that out? "Its my job as your man to know when you're not happy or upset and then turn it around." He says. I think he is answering my unasked question until I realise I said it out loud.

"Okay I'm grateful for that but he is your brother Sthandwa sam. And it's not like he was going to stay there forever." Even though my heart is doing flips inside me I also can't be the one causing division between them.

"Either way it's done now. So you can come back home." He kisses my hand making me question everything I thought I knew about love. I feel tears sting the back of my eyes and he notices me blinking rapidly. "Are you crying?" He asks concern laced over his voice. I lay back down and rest my head on his chest.

"I'm not crying. I'm just happy." He pulls me close wrapping his arm all around me and kissing my forehead.

"So when are you going to see your mum?" Nice way to dampen the mood just when I'm ready to proclaim hashtag love lives here.

"Maybe during the weekend. I'm not taking time off for her. Not when I still have to get Hlumile to Cape Town and help her settle in."

"Okay. I will drive you then." He says gently tapping the side of my arm.

I hear him snoring lightly and I can tell he's ready out. Its quite weird how easy he falls asleep these days. This case is taking its toll on him and now I understand why he is more corporate than criminal defense. This is daunting.

Watching him sleep like the stalker that I am I cant help thinking about what Nkazimulo thinks about being kicked out. And even worse what will his family think about it. I know Nkanyezi will have plenty to say about it and probably his mum too. He assures me every chance he gets that when it comes to his family he will always protect me. And I believe him. I really do but it also scares me because

loving me might mean he has to be on fight mode every day. I just pray our love can withstand literally everything.

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"Are you not going to go inside?"

"Why? Do you want me out of your car?"

"I dont think this is the time for you to be giving me attitude. I just asked a simple question." I close my eyes and take slow deep breaths. He is right though. We've been here for almost half an hour and I'm yet to step out of the car. I dont know why Dr Nkomo thinks this is a good idea and the only way I will know that is to walk through those doors but my spirit is not here at all. I feel like this is a bad idea but everyone keeps telling me I wont know until I talk to my mother.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't be snapping at you." He grabs my hand and kiss my knuckles. I've been debating if he should come with but right now i feel like his presence might just be more important than i care to admit. If it were up to me i would have gone in there gun blazing but Lulonke has been sweet the whole way here trying to make me see the bright side in all of this. I dont see it yet but he says it's there so I'll believe him.

"I know you're nervous but it will be fine you'll see. And when you're done I'll be right here waiting." I nod my head and for the first time since we got here I open the door. It takes me another five minutes to actually step out. He gives me a reassuring smile before I walk in.

I find Dr Nkomo already waiting at reception. Her gently smile sets me at ease. Maybe things wont be as bad as I have imagined.

"Milani I'm glad you could make it." She says her hand held out for a handshake. I take it and give her a smile. Forced as it is but a smile nonetheless.

"Well I'm here now so can we get on with it."

"Of course. Follow me." She seems to have a bounce in her step. For someone who deals with crazy people you'd think she'd be more subdued and serious but not her. Even her crocs have rainbows and stars as accessories. Maybe she also takes a happy pill every morning before she comes here. I know I would.

She leads me past the recreational area where people are busy putting together puzzles while others are looking out the window seeing God alone knows what. We end up in an area with bright white walls on one side and one side with a painted mural of rainbows and clear blue skies.

"You can have a seat." She shows me to a white couch with red and yellow cushions. It looks like a high class pre school with bright books on a shelf and even legos and soft toys which is extremely weird for me. I was expecting padded walls. I take a seat while she disappears down the passage. This side is a little more quiet and serene than the area we went past earlier.

The wait is nerve wracking. It's just a couple of minutes but it seems like hours before I hear footsteps coming down the passage. Dr Nkomo walks out first and mum follows behind her. Everytime I see her she looks different but in a good way. Physically she might look fine but mentally now that's up for debate.

She smiles when she sees me. For a split second I see my mum. The woman I last saw as a child. But like everything else when it comes to my mum she disappears as quickly as she came. She takes a seat on the seat opposite me and we sit face to face. Dr Nkomo sits on my left with her notebook and pen in hand.

"Okay can we start?" She asks looking at both of us. My eyes are glued to my mum who is busy playing with her hands. She looks nervous but I'm still not buying her little act. "Grace do you know the woman in front of you?" My mom looks up and smiles again.

"Yes she's my daughter Milani." Okay that's a start.

"Good. Can you tell me more about her. Where she was born how you felt when you held her in your arms for the first time." Dr Nkomo urges. My mums smile quickly disappears and a dark demeanor falls over her. Even Dr Nkomo notices.

Mum lifts her feet up on the chair tucking them under her. She wraps her arms around her knees clasping her hands together burying her head between her legs before she starts rocking back and forth. I'm not even sure how she's doing that. I look at the doctor and she is just as confused as I am.

"What is she doing?" I whisper. Dr Nkomo shakes her head and takes a seat on the coffee table right in front of my mum.

"Grace. Remember what we talked about? I told you Milani would come to see you." Its like talking to a child. I know she's sick and I dont mean to be insensitive but this better not be what I was called here for because there is a lot I could be doing right now instead of watching my mother break down in front of me.

She stops rocking herself and looks at the doctor before her eyes dart past the doctor to me. Now I'm afraid. I can feel my heart beating in my throat right now. She stands up as if someone put her in slow motion and she walks towards me. I stand up to I want to run but Dr Nkomo signals for me to stay put. But it's hard with my mother literally walking towards me as if she's ready to pounce. Anger musks her face and in a split second she has me pinned against the wall her hand wrapped around my neck constricting any oxygen from reaching my lungs.

"Its all your fault." She hisses over and over again as the Dr calls for security. "He never would have left me if it wasnt for you. This is all your fault." She adds tears running down her face. "I just wanted him to be happy. He was so happy when I was pregnant you were supposed to make him happy. You were supposed to make things right."

I catch a glimpse of two buff guys running in as I begin to lose consciousness. They pull her away from me and I fall to the ground. I gasp as oxygen finds passage down my throat and revives my dying lungs. I cough as she is dragged away shouting and screaming that it's all my fault.

"Are you Okay?" Dr Nkomo asks crouching down and rubbing my back. She hands me a glass of water and I gulp down the water.

"Is this what you called me here for?" I ask between coughs.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know she'd do that." She says common sense tells me she's really just as surprised by all this but my anger isn't having it.

I pull myself up from the floor with my legs shaking and my heart threatening to jump out of my mouth.

"I'm really sorry she was doing so well."

"I really dont care how well she was doing or will do. Please do me a favor and never ever call me again. Even if she dies inform the government to bury her. I want nothing to do with that woman. Ever again." Now I'm screaming just like her. If I'm not careful I might just end up with a room right next to hers.

"Milani I know how upsetting this is but you need to understand that your mother is sick." Dr Nkomo pleads.

"I'm also sick. Sick and tired of her and whatever demons are running around in her head. I am tired of constantly having to be the bigger person and look past her faults. And since she is sick you can keep her here. Dont call me and dont call my sister either. I know you got my number from her. Stay the fuck away from both of us and keep that woman even further away." I grab my bag and walk out.

My wobbly legs carry me all the way to the parking lot faster than I expected. I open the door and get in the car slamming the door behind me

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slamming the door behind me waking up a sleeping Lulonke.

"You're back." He says yawning and stretching. I cant even answer him because I am busy replaying the whole thing in my head. I knew this was a bad idea and I should have listened to my gut. "How did it go?" He asks. I'm trying not to look at him because I'm sure my neck is bruised. And it doesn't help that i am wearing a low cut dress with spaghetti straps.

I feel his hand on my China she gently turns me around to look at him.

"What happened to your neck?" He asks between clenched teeth. I feel a tear run down my cheek and sadness washing over me. I don't know what I expected to happen but this is not it. Ever since I can remember my mum has never been the violent type. Even in her deepest darkest times not once has she ever laid a hand on us or made us fear her. But right now right now I'm not sure I know the woman I just encountered. The vile angry woman I just met is not my mother.

I'm not sure when I ended up in his arms crying my eyes out. With my sobs slowly dying down i feel a heaviness over my heart. Now I'm glad Hlumile didnt come. I know she's more hopeful for our mothers recovery and seeing her like that would not have been good for her. Especially right now.

I pull away from Lu and wipe my face. Good thing I decided not to wear makeup today.

"Now will you tell me what happened?" He asks handing me a bottle of water.

"My mother did this. I dont know who I'm supposed to have made happy but apparently I failed and that's why he left." That's why he left? That's what she said and finally it dawn's on me she blames me for my father leaving.

"I dont understand."

"She blames me for my father leaving her. That's what she meant. She said I'm the reason he left. She blames me for it." I say as her words keep replaying in my head. She really does blame me for it.

"Okay I dont understand how that works. But where was the doctor when she was busy choking you? Didnt she know how violent she can be? This is what she called you here for?" Lu fires getting angrier with each question. Unfortunately for him I cant answer any of his questions because i have no answers either.

"Can we go past the house to see my father?"

"Milani!"

"Please I just need answers and I'm here now so I might as well get them." He sighs and starts the car. The drive to our former home is silent. I can feel the bruises on my neck. Each time I touch it I feel some pain.

Lu parks the car just a few feet away from the gate across the road.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Lu asks. I look over at the house. There are two girls running around the yard while a woman is busy washing clothes under the tree. I cant see my father anywhere. I take a deep breath and open the car door.

"I need to do this or else I'll go crazy over thinking it. I know my mother is crazy but she seemed well aware of what she was saying." I tell him. He nods his head and gets out of the car. I follow suit and then remember my bruises. I grab Lu's sweater from the backseat and put it on. Its so hot but I have no choice. We cross the road hand in hand.

On the outside the house is the same way we left it except for some overgrown weeds and roughly cut grass. I take a deep breath as we walk through the gate. The kids stop playing and the woman pretends like she can't see us. But under the huge straw hat she's wearing it's clear she can see us. We walk up to her and greet. Lulonke does most of the talking while my eyes roam around what used to be my home. To think I put so much time and effort into making this a home only for my father to waltz back in and claim it as his own.

"Let's sit down." Lulonke says getting me out of my head. He leads me to two beer crates just a stone throw away from the woman. I give Lulonke a side eye before he pulls me down to sit.

"Where did she say he is?" I whisper low enough for the woman to not hear me.

"She's going to call him." He says just as she disappears into the house with the girls behind her.

"Do you think those are your siblings?" He asks me. Its quite obvious really one of them looks like the female version of my brother.

They walk out of the house one of the girls holding a tray with two yellow plastic tumblers and a blue plastic jug. The other girl carries another beer crate. They greet us and place the crate in front of us before placing the tray on top of it. Lulonke does the honors and pours the liquid from the jug to the tumblers. He hands me a tumbler. I dont think I want to drink what's inside but it would be rude of me to not take.

The woman comes back and continues where she left off just as my dear father walks through the gate with his sister in tow. They look like they've been running. I wonder what madam told them. Te girls run into the house and come back with two plastic chairs. How hospitable. Guests sit on beer crates. The closer my father gets I can see that he is angry. My aunt on the other hand is smiling like a Cheshire cat that got the milk. I hope for her sake she doesnt think I'm here to stay.

They greet and sit down.

"So to what do we owe this visit?" My aunt asks.

"I hope for your sake you came here to apologize for the mess you left here." My father says. He sure can hold a grudge.

"Actually I came for something else. I just came from the hospital to see my mother." I start I'm looking at him straight in the eyes. I need to know if he is lying or not. "She told me the reason why you left." He swallows and blinks more times than is necessary. He definitely wasn't expecting that.

"All I need is for you to tell me if what she said is true."

"And how am I supposed to know what she said?" He asks.

"She told me you left because of me. I always thought you left because you needed to find a job. Was that a lie?" I feel the heaviness in my chest again. As much as I need answers I don't know if I'm ready to hear the real reason why he left. Especially if that reason is me.

"Its true. I left because of you." He says so proudly. I feel tears sting the back of my eyes.

"What did I do?" No matter how many times I try to think of something I could have done as a child that would make a grown man leave his home and children behind I come up blank. Nothing makes sense at this point except the pain in my heart.

"She didnt tell you that part?" He asks a huge grin filling his face and exposing his discolored teeth. "Well since she left me to do the honors I'll do it." He leans forward his elbows resting on his knees. My heart is racing if I'm not diagnosed with high blood pressure today it will be a miracle all on it's own.

"I left because I found out you are not my child." He blurts out. I swear my heart just stopped. Everything and everyone in front of me suddenly becomes blurry. I'm not sure if it's my tears or I'm losing it. "Your mother lied to me. She said you are my child but you're not. I dont even know if she still remembers who fathered you because it certainly wasn't me." He adds. He is so smug about it you'd think I'm the one who lied to him.

I stand up and slightly lose my bearings. But Lulonke is here to keep me steady. He picks up my bag from the ground and pulls me to the car. I've never done drugs before but I'm sure this is how people feel when they are high. My mind and body feel like two different entities right now. While my brain is trying to process everything I just heard my body is numb. Even going through a speed bump feels like I am floating on air.

LULONKE

"What happened to her?" The doctor asks as soon as she has Milani on the gurney. I decided to rush her to the hospital since she wasn't responding to anything.

"She just got some shocking news. I dont think she is taking it very well."

"Clearly." The doctor says sticking a light in her eyes. "She's definitely in shock. Let's get her on a bed so I can do a full check up on her." She tells the nurses who quickly rush her to a ward. They stop me from going in with her.

I start pacing up and down the passage and peeping through the small window. I cant see anything. I pull my phone out of my pocket and call Sne.

"Yeah yeah I know. She's sleeping over at your place again." She says before I can say anything. Usually that would make me laugh but not today.

"Milani is in the hospital." I blurt out. I dont think there is a better way to say it.

"Why?"

"Something happened. I'll send you our location." I say and quickly hang up. I send her the location and wait.

The doctor walks out with a nurse and a security guard who decides to stand right by the door.

"How is she?" The doctor and nurse look at each other before looking at me squarely in the face as if I did something wrong.

"How are you related to the patient?" The doctor asks. Her clipboard in hand ready for whatever I say.

"She's my girlfriend." I reply and she notes that down.

"Well Mr....."

"Mbatha."

"Well Mr Mbatha we will be keeping the patient over night. Plus I'm sure the police would like to have a word with you. Our security here will make sure you stay put." What in the hell is happening right now?

"Okay but why do I need to speak to the police just because my girlfriend is in shock?" These two glare at me like I am an enemy of the state. "Can i see her at least."

"No. Please take a seat. The police are on their way." The doctor says and walks away.

Now I'm the one in shock. Until I remember the bruises on Milani's neck. They think I abuse her. Great.

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LULONKE

I have never ever in my life been treated like a criminal like I've been the past half hour. The doctor is convinced I'm responsible for the bruises on Milani's neck. The security guard takes instructions very well he hasn't taken his eyes off me. And he's standing by the door like a damn concrete wall. Not even a tractor can go through him.

I hear footsteps coming towards me. I don't even bother looking up as they get closer.

"Mr Mbatha this is officer Masemola and officer Nyathi. They are here to question you about your girlfriend." The doctor tells me. I look up and see the two officers. They look like rookie officers who just joined the force. I could make things hard for them but I want to see Milani and if I have to get through these people then so be it.

"I'm listening."

"Mr Mbatha the doctor tells us that you brought your girlfriend in with bruises around her neck. Could you explain to us how she got those bruises." Officer Masemola asks taking out his notebook.

"I don't know maybe you should ask her first." They look at each other and I see the doctor roll her eyes. It's quite commendable that she wants to make sure her patient is not being abused but right now she's got everything so wrong. And even if I tell them what really happened it will look like I am deflecting so it's best Milani tells them what really happened.

"Can we talk to the patient?" Officer Nyathi asks. I look behind them and see Sne Hlumile and Scelo coming towards us.

"Hi where is she?" Scelo barks taking all the attention. Everyone turns to him.

"I'm sorry who are you?" The doctor asks.

"My name is Scelo. Milani is my sister. Where is she and what's wrong with her?"

"Well thank you for coming. We've admitted her and we suspect a case of GBV." She says so proudly as if she has discovered a wanted terrorist.

"What did you do to her?" Scelo screams pushing through the officers to get to me. He lands a punch on my jaw and I stumble back before the police hold him back.

"Let me go." He screams fighting to be free from the grasp of the officers.

"Let us handle this." One officer screams. He gives a mean punch and my jaw is testament to that.

"Can we please just see Milani?" Sne asks. The doctor leads them into the ward leaving me outside nursing my possibly broken jaw.

It doesn't take long for the doctor to walk out again. The look she's giving me is questionable.

"She'd like to see you." She says sadly. I swear it's like her little 'save Milani' crusade just lost momentum. I get up and follow her into the ward. Milani is sitting on the bed she's better than she was when I brought her in. She frowns the moment she sees my face.

"What happened to your face?" She asks holding her hand out for me. Sne takes a step back allowing me to get close to my girl. I sit on the bed and she runs her hand over my jaw.

"It's nothing. I'm just glad you're okay." I lean to the side resting my face on her soft hand.

"Yeah but what happened to you?" She insists.

"Okay now that everyone is here will you tell us what happened to your neck?" Scelo says.

"Oh that." Milani replies touching her neck.

"Yes that what happened?" Scelo insists.

"It was my mother. Her psychiatrist called me so we could have some family therapy. My mother went into a fit of rage and strangled me."

"Are you sure about that? This is a safe space." The doctor butts in. If she wasn't a woman I probably would have punched her by now with all these not so subtle attempts at making me out to be something I'm not.

"Safe space? I just told you what happened?" Milani argues. She's getting irritated and so am I.

"Ma'am you were brought in here with bruises on your neck do you understand why everyone is worried?" One officer asks her. Milani heaves out a heavy sigh.

"I know. And I'm grateful for everyone's concern but I promise you my mother did this. If you want I can give you the psychiatrist's number and you can ask her what happened." She offers. Of course Scelo is the first one to pull out his phone.

Milani gives him the doctor's number and he calls. The phone is on loudspeaker as she answers.

They question her about what happened and she reiterates Milani's story.

"I guess that concludes that then." An officer says. I have my back to them so I'm not sure which one of them speaks. My only concern right now is getting Milani home so she can rest and enjoy what's left of her weekend.

"The doctor walks out with the officers following behind her. None of them are brave enough to offer an apology. Not even the big headed idiot who decided to punch me for no reason.

"Okay now that those three are gone please explain to me why I wasn't invited to this family therapy? Am I not family?" Hlumile asks.

"Please don't not right now." Milani says. "I just want to go home."

"Let me get the discharge papers." I kiss her forehead and walk out on a mission to find the doctor and get out of here. I see her standing at reception so I make my way to her.

"Hey wait up." I turn around and see Scelo walking towards me. I stop and wait for him. "Listen I guess I owe you an apology." He says although I am not sure if his apology is really genuine but I'll let it slide.

"It's fine."

"No it's not. I shouldn't have jumped to conclusions." Okay maybe he is genuine.

"Really it's fine. I have sister's too and I probably would have reacted the same way." He nods his head and turns back. If we had met in a different life we probably would have been friends.

MILANI

"Okay you can tell us the whole story now." Sne says as soon as Scelo follows Lulonke out. I can't believe they actually though he is abusing me. But at the same time I'm happy to know they will fight for me should that happen.

"Honestly my gut told me not to go there but I guess my curiosity just got the best of me. And this is my price." I say pointing to my neck.

"So why wasn't I told about this session?" Hlumile is not letting this go. I know she would have jumped at the opportunity to be there but I am happy she wasn't. Seeing our mother like that would have been heartbreaking for her. I know she's hopeful she'll get better but I don't see it.

"I don't know I think the doctor wanted me to have a one on one with mum so we can fix our issues. Maybe she'll call you too and you'll have your own session." A smile forms on her lips Hlumile will take anything that points at mum getting better and run with it. "I'm sorry she hurt you though." She adds inspecting my bruises.

"Yeah well it is what it is. Did you cook anything

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it is what it is. Did you cook anything I'm hungry." They laugh. I'm hungry I haven't had anything to eat since breakfast. Although my throat is painful and I'm not sure if I'll be able to eat but my stomach is already grumbling.

Scelo returns first. It's cute how protective he is. I've never had anyone fight for me so it's heartwarming to have someone on my side even without me saying a word. I also notice he keeps glancing at Sne and frowning then he shakes his head as if telling his brain not to think whatever it is thinking.

"So your boyfriend is getting the discharge papers." He says scratching the back of his neck.

"Did you also tell him to get his jaw checked out since you decided to punch him." He stops and stares at Sne then Hlumile. "Oh no they didn't tell me I figured it out by myself."

"Well I thought he choked you what else was I supposed to do?" He argues. Well I cant argue with that.

Lu returns with the doctor the discharge papers and an ice pack on his jaw. The doctor gives me some ointment to help with the bruising and some medication for my sore throat. Once the discharge papers are signed we leave. I'd be lying if I said I knew when or how I got here. After my father's well Peter's confession it felt like my mind was just floating and nothing made sense.

As shocked as I am about this it doesn't hurt as much as I would have expected. I guess my hatred and anger for him was enough to cushion the blow. But now I have questions that I doubt my mother will ever be able to answer. I also dont think Peter knows anything about who my father may be.

I've always felt the void of not having a father in my life but my anger would quickly remind me that my father left us not the other way around. But now the trajectory has changed. Now I need to know who my father is and if he knew about my existence and if he did then what did he do about it? If I'd known my life would take a whole 180 degree change in just one day I would have stayed in my apartment and focused on doing whatever I could do.

We drive home in silence. If it were up to me Lu would have had his jaw checked out at the hospital before leaving but he insisted he is fine.

"Are you hungry?" He asks hearing my stomach grumble.

"Yeah." He drives into a KFC drive through and orders food. Sometimes I wish I was the kind of person who cant stomach food when I'm upset but my stomach mind and heart all have their own brains. And when I'm hungry I'm hungry screw whatever else is happening.

"My place or yours?" He asks when we pull out of the parking lot.

"Mine." I reply biting into the crunch burger. He nods his head and keeps driving.

"Are you going to tell them everything?" I'm not sure I want Hlumile to know what led to our mother strangling me or what Peter told me. She has a lot on her plate. In a few days she'll be going to school and starting a new life for herself. She doesn't need the weight of this hanging over her. Not right now.

"Not yet. Maybe Sne but Hlumile doesn't need any of this right now."

"I guess. How are you feeling though? I know hearing the news was a shock." He parks the car just outside the gate killing the engine.

"I dont know how I feel. I'm tethering between anger and relief and everything else in between. Maybe once I figure out what exactly this means for me I'll be able to decide on a way forward. Right now all I want to do is eat and sleep." He takes my greasy hand and kisses it.

"You know I'm here if you need anything right?" I lean in and kiss his jaw.

H"I know. And thank you for being there. I dont know how I would have reacted if you were not there."

"You know you can still come with me and I'll take care of you. I wont be able to sleep if you are not next to me." And they say I am a drama queen.

"Tell you what how about you pick me up tomorrow morning and we can have breakfast together. And then we will spend the day together doing absolutely nothing." His lips form into a smile although it's clear he is still in pain. My poor baby.

"Well I can live with that. I guess I'll get some work done tonight and then tomorrow it's me and you."

"Definitely."

Quiet moments always offer one an opportunity to reflect on whatever but right now I wish my mind can just be silent for a moment. Even a moment of quietness would be welcome right now. But today's events have been a recurring movie in my head since I got home. I want to believe it's just one bad nightmare but the fact that my eyes are wide open it's clearly not.

Instead of tossing and turning im bed I decided to come sit in the lounge and watch TV. Or rather let the TV watch me. I hear footsteps coming down the passage. The tv is on mute so I know I didnt wake anyone up. Sne walks into the lounge and looks at me like I'm crazy. She goes to the kitchen and returns with a tub of ice cream and two spoons. She joins me on the couch and gets under the blanket.

"Dont you think it's a bit late to be having ice cream." I take the spoon from her and open the tub. Its vanilla. She hates vanilla. "You hate vanilla." I remind her.

"Ice cream is ice cream." She says digging in. Cravings! "So tell me what happened today. I know your mum strangling you is half the story." I take in a deep breath and narrate everything that happened. When I'm done she's starring at me with the spoon in her mouth.

"So she seriously thinks he left her because of you?" She questions.

"She doesnt think. She knows. He confirmed it too. For a moment I thought maybe there was something I did that was so bad he had no choice but to leave but my sin was not being his child. The sad part about it is that I'm not the only one who suffered because of his absence. Hlumile and Siyabonga suffered too his own children and he didnt care. All along I was under the impression he left for better job opportunities meanwhile it was all because of me."

"It wasnt because of you Milani. You can't hold yourself accountable for decisions that were made by grown adults. Your mother made her own decision and so did your father or Peter. None of this is your fault. In the grand scheme of things you are a child." I know she's right but my mind is yet to get to a point where I actually believe it.

I lay my head on her lap and just allow my emotions to take over. I feel tears quietly roll down my face. For the first time today I actually allow myself to just cry. Just when I think things are going right in my life something always has to go wrong. It's like in order for my life to progress there has to be some shitty painful thing that happens first. That no way for anyone to live.

"I am tired Sne I am tired of everything. It's like I always have to keep fighting for what I need what other people get easily I have to fight for. I am just tired."

"Remember what mum always says God always gives the hardest battles to his toughest soldiers." She tells me.

"I didnt sign up to be a soldier. Even yena self he cant show me a contract I signed asking to be in his army." She laughs at me. This one always finds the worst possible moments to laugh.

"But weren't you singing 'like a soldier in the army I'm set for war' at Sunday school?" She asks making me laugh.

We sit in silence for a long while just staring at the screen. You'd think I would be used to disappointment and heartache by now but I guess I'm not.

"It will be Okay you know that right?" Sne asks gently running her hand up and down my arm. Instinctively I nod my head in agreement but I'm not sure anymore what being okay entails or if I'll ever be Okay.

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I drag myself into the apartment after a long day of picking out new furniture for Tshogo all I want to do is get in the tub and scrub today off and get some sleep. I didn't think that she'd be this demanding but I've also come to learn that she's a perfectionist and she just wants things done right. And since her case didn't even bother going to trial because the real killer has been found thanks to Lulonke and Nkazimulo's joint efforts she's been working hard to get her life back on track. Including torturing me about this house.

It hasn't been easy these past couple of weeks. Hlumile has started school and she seems happy. I feel a bit useless right now. For most of my life I spent all my time and focus on making sure my siblings are Okay but now with Siya and Cebo gone and Hlumile standing on her own two feet and me literally not knowing who I am I feel empty and useless.

I've come to the realization that I was so used to taking care of other people that now it's hard for me to function with just me alone and having to look out for me. If I wasn't scared of having kids I'd probably get pregnant right now so I can have someone to focus on but I guess Sne's baby will have to do for now. I can't wait for her to be born. We don't know the sex yet but I am praying for a girl.

As soon as I toss my shoes behind the door and throw my laptop bag on the couch I head to the kitchen and do what has been my daily ritual for a while now I open a bottle of chardonnay and pour its light yellow contents into a glass. I chuck the first glass like I'm drinking water and pour another one. Usually my second glass is the one I massage until Sne or Lu come home just so they don't label me an alcoholic. Although Lu is more vocal about it. Thanks to him being in KZN for a couple of days now I can somewhat drink in peace. Unless Sne is around of course.

I see the side eyes she gives me each time I pour myself a glass. I've had to hide a few bottles in the closet just so I can drink in peace in the sanctuary of my bedroom. Today I chuck down the second

glass and then pour another one. Even that goes down my throat like water. It's been ten minutes since I walked into the apartment and I've already murdered one bottle of wine. Yippie for me.

I press the dustbin lever and the cover swings open. Its empty with just a refuse bag waiting to suck in whatever I throw in there. I think for a moment Sne took out the garbage and if she comes back and sees the bottle inside the bin I'll get another lecture and I'm not ready for that.

I close the bin and chuck the bottle in the cupboard at the far back of some empty food containers that haven't been used in a while. I say a silent prayer asking God to not give Sne the urge to open this side of the cupboard. I open another bottle this time of red wine and pour the burgundy liquid onto the glass.

After taking out a tray of chicken pieces and putting them in the sink I open the water to defrost the meat. While that defrosts I throw a couple of potatoes in a pot and put them on the stove. I leave the stove on low before grabbing my bottle and going to the bathroom. I set my wine on the floor and turn on the water and go to my room.

I take off my work clothes and put on a short silk robe and head back to the bathroom. I turn my water off and get in the tub. The warm water feels like a massage to my tired muscles. I take another sip of the wine and lay back on the tub eyes closed and slowly drifting off to wherever my mind will take me.

Laughter. It's the first thing I hear. Its loud and melodious. It's like music I just want to take it all in and savor it. All of it. But the glaring sun wont let me. I open my eyes and immediately bring my arm up to shield myself from its glare. I blink a few times allowing my eyes to adjust to it. When I'm sure my eyes can handle the heat I look around me.

I'm laying on my back on the grass facing straight up to the sun. I pull myself up and sit on my butt. I see two figures in the distance a boy and a little girl. They are chasing each other around. Even as far away as they are I can still hear their laughter. The boy grabs the girl and it looks like he tickles her. She laughs so hard begging her brother to stop but he wont. After a while he let's her down and she runs away from him. He follows her laughing with no care in the world.

I get up from the ground and take slow steps towards them. The weather suddenly changes and rain clouds form just above their heads. Thunder and lightning strike violently from every corner. The weird thing though the rain clouds are only above them. On my side it's still sunny and clear.

I start running towards them their faces getting clearer. Its Siya and Cebo. I see fear in their eyes. I scream for them to run to me but with each step they take the clouds follow them. It feels like I'm running in the same spot over and over again. They reach out their hands to me but I cant reach them. I need to save them. I have to. I cant let them die again.

"I'm coming. Hold on. I'll save you." I shout. My feet feel heavy and I feel my chest closing up. I can't reach them. Tears race down my face because no matter how hard I run I cant reach them. They keep calling out for me their screams are deafening.

A bolt of lightning strikes right in front of them and a fire erupts. Their screams are loud and filled with pain. But I still cant get to them. Their cries slowly die down and everything falls silent. The rain clouds disappear and their bodies lay there burnt and black like coal. I couldnt save them. Again. I failed them. Again.

My ringing phone wakes me up from my short slumber. I was dreaming. I've had this dream over and over again for a while now. And no matter how many times I have it it still scares the shit out of me. I wake up panting and drenched in sweat. No

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it's not the heat from the water. It's fear and guilt. I keep failing them. And since I found out I am not Peter's child I think it's my conscience punishing me for not trying hard enough to save them.

I grab my phone and check the caller ID its Lulonke. I know if I dont reply he'll probably call Sne and then they will discuss my drinking like a fish. I press the green button and put the phone in my ear.

"Hello."

"MaMbokazi. Uyaphila? (Are you well?)" Hearing his voice makes me a bit emotional. He is such a great guy but lately it feels like I've been slowly drifting away from him. I keep wondering what he sees in me or how long it will take for him to realise maybe I am too much of a burden to take on. I'm

afraid that like everyone else in my life he will eventually hurt me too. "Are you Okay?" He asks sounding worried.

"I'm okay." I say between breaths.

"You dont sound good. What's wrong?" I shake my head holding back my tears.

"I'm fine. I just took a nap when I got back from work and I had a bad dream." I hear him sigh and cuss under his breath.

"You really need to see someone about these nightmares." Its just one bad dream replaying itself like a DVD on repeat but Okay.

"I'll think about it."

"You say that all the time."

"I know. But I promise I'll think about it. When are you coming back?" I try to steer the conversation away from my nightmare because I know that can go on forever. If he is not suggesting therapists he is suggesting traditional healers. As if any of them can get rid of the guilt and the inadequacy I live with every single day.

"Tomorrow. My family is also coming up tomorrow to have a housewarming dinner on Sunday and I'd like for you to be there." I keep quiet hoping maybe he will say he's joking. But it doesn't look like he is.

"Lulonke I dont know your family doesnt like me you know that."

"I know there will be tension but I'll be there too and I wont let anything happen to you." He argues. I know he is right he does fight for me but I'm still not certain about it.

"It will be cold on Sunday I dont think it's a good day for a get together." He bursts out laughing. Making me laugh. I know my excuse is dumb but I had to try something. The only positive thing about this dinner is that Nkazimulo will still be out of the country. Hopefully. He has been in Botswana for a week now chasing some lead on a case he is working on otherwise I'd be screwed. I'm not sure if his parents know about my encounter with Nkazimulo but having Nkanyezi there might prove problematic since she knows everything and knowing her she's dead set on me getting out of Lu's life.

"Nice try. I'll see you tomorrow when I get back. Maybe you can sleep over." This man is crazy.

Sleep over with his family there. I think not. I pick up the glass of wine and pour it down my throat.

"Uyaphuza?" He asks. I shouldn't be drinking while on the phone with him. I exhale and take a slow sip.

"Just one drink."

"I thought we agreed you'd stop drinking for a while." He says sounding annoyed.

"Its just one glass Lulonke. I had a long day and I needed to let off some steam." I argue. I can mentally see him shake his head. Some times I wonder if his head is screwed on straight. The way he shakes his head at the most random of things you'd think he is an old man who regrets his actions when he was younger.

"If you say so."

"I am. Anyways how are the contract negotiations going?" He sighs.

"Good. We just have a few things to sort out and then the contract will be signed and the construction will go ahead."

"That's good. So the community is on board?"

"Almost. Nhlendla will have a meeting with them tomorrow and everything will probably be sorted." I hear his phone beep and twenty bucks says he didnt charge his phone.

"You didnt charge your phone again right?" He laughs. A hearty warm laugh that never fails to calm my restless spirit. "You do realise you're overworking yourself right? Kudla kona udlile nje? (Did you even eat?)"

"I am going to eat. I just have a few things to sort out and then I'll go have dinner with my cousin." I wont even bother asking which one of his cousins. His aunts and uncles understood the assignment when God said be fruitful multiply and fill the whole earth.

"Then charge your phone. I don't want to call you later and find you offline."

"Yes ma'am." He says laughing.

"I'm not playing with you. Anyways I have to go I left potatoes on the stove." I get off the tub and dry myself with the phone between my shoulder and ear.

"Okay. We will talk later then. Ngyakthanda uyezwa? (I love you okay?)"

"I love you too." I say.

"We will talk later. Bye." I quickly hang up the phone and exhale.

I finish drying myself and clean the tub then go to my room. The house is still quiet which means Sne is not back yet. I put on some shorts and a tshirt then gulp down the remaining wine in the bottle before stashing the empty bottle in the cupboard. I can feel myself getting tipsy but I open another bottle anyway. Lately I seem to have a high tolerance for alcohol. Maybe it's the need to hide how much I've been drinking.

I pour the wine in a glass and continue cooking. An hour later my mashed potatoes roasted chicken and vegetables are ready. Just in time for Sne who walks in looking like she has the world's problems on her shoulders. She puts her laptop bag on the couch and walks over to the kitchen.

"The way I'm so tired and hungry I could eat a whole cow by myself." She says grabbing a glass from the cupboard and pouring some juice. She picks up the bottle of wine and looks at me when she realizes its empty. "Really?"

"Don't look at me like that." She puts the bottle down and glares at me and I feel a tinge of guilt. I can almost see the wheels turning in her head.

She opens the bin and then turns to me. "You're checking up on me now?" She crosses her arms on her slowly growing chest her eyes glued to me.

"Can you blame me? Lately you drink as if alcohol is going out of fashion. And you have no idea the kind of damage doing." She says.

"And what damage are you talking about? I put the drink in my mouth and it burns my liver. So how does my drinking affect anyone else?"

"When was the last time you checked on Hlumile?" I ignore her and dish up for myself. I grab my half empty glass.

"Hlumile is grown she can take care of herself. And if she needs anything she knows where to find me. Until then I'll drink my wine in my room in peace. I prefer it without the lecture." I head to my room and close the door behind me.

I gulp down the last wine and lay down on the bed looking up at the ceiling. People are quick to judge. Hlumile is just fine. She calls when she needs anything and I'm always here. I've always been here and I dont see how a couple of glasses of wine can change that. She is fine I know the first few weeks in varsity can be overwhelming but she'll adjust. We all did.

Whoever said time heals all wounds clearly hadn't walked a mile in my shoes. Trying to forget everything mum and Peter told me has proven to be an uphill battle and time is not helping at all. Just when I think I've let it go it comes back harder leaving me with more questions than answers

Trying to bury myself in work hasn't really helped much. But for every rainy day there is always a rainbow. Or so they say I'm not seeing it right now but maybe eventually I will. Life has to carry on though because no matter how hurt or broken I am the world does not revolve according to my emotions.

Today is one of those days where everything my mood my emotions and everything else in between is down to the gutter. But work awaits. I drag myself out of bed and get ready for the day. Hlumile is already down at the coffee shop. Today is her last day since we are flying to Cape Town tomorrow so she can start school. I'm just glad she got a bursary that's going to cover most of her education tuition books her res fees and an allowance that had I been given five years ago I would have definitely counted myself as rich but Cape Town is a rather expensive city so I'll have to add something for her to survive. And her savings will come in handy so I can breath a bit and try to focus on me. That alone will be a struggle.

When I'm done with everything it's quite clear to those who know me that not everything is okay. Even my outfit doesn't inspire any confidence even in me. But it is what it is. I get to the lounge and find Sne with breakfast on the table and my lunchbox already packed. I wrap my arms around her resting my head on her back as she cleans up the kitchen.

"What is going on with you?" She asks looking over her shoulder.

"Nothing. Thank you for breakfast." I let her go and take a seat with the bowl of oats in front of me. I'm not a fan of oats but it's been her favorite thing to eat in the morning for weeks now. That baby is driving her nuts.

"Is Lu picking you up or do you need me to drop you off?" She wipes her hands then throws the dishcloth in the water before joining me.

"I haven't called him so I'm not sure." And on cue my phone rings and his name flashes on the screen. "Speak of the devil."

"Shandu."

"MaPhangela unjani? (How are you?)" He sounds sleepy. Maybe he just woke up. I know Tshego's case is giving him sleepless and sometimes late nights. Especially now that her trial date is right around the corner.

"I'm good. Why do you sound like you just woke up?" He chuckles.

"I did. Which is why I'm calling I dont think I'll be able to pick you up so I'm sending a cab." He says.

"There's no need for that I can always take a taxi or Sne can drive me." I give Sne a wink and she rolls her eyes and disappears down the hallway.

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure. Get some rest I will call you later." I hear him sigh before a yawn erupts. He really is tired.

"Okay if I'm not too busy I will come and pick you up later."

"No problem." He doesn't hang up. I can hear him breathing on the other end. I sit there and listen to him inhaling and exhaling as if it's some soothing lullaby.

"You know I love you right?" He says after a long while.

"I know. And i love you too." I hear him chuckle before the line goes dead. I expected him to have run as far away from me as he can by now I come with too much baggage but he doesn't seem to be going anywhere. Not anytime soon anyway.

Sne drives me to work and that's after going through a drive through and ordering enough food to feed the whole of Mgababa. She's always had an appetite I know sometimes when people see how skinny we are they assume we survive on one apple and nothing else but we have healthy appetites and even healthier metabolisms. Recently though Sne's appetite has doubled and her metabolism has slowed down.

She drops me off work and the first thing I see is my aunt well now a stranger apparently standing by the side of the building. She sees me and immediately makes her way to me. A huge smile on her face. And that alone irritates me even more because I know she knew this whole time that Peter wasnt my father. Maybe that also explains her treatment of me.

"Milani I've been trying to call you for the past week now and your phone keeps taking me to voicemail." She says pulling me into an awkward hug. I dont know if I should hug her back or just stand there. I decide on the latter. The awkward hug ends in seconds and she takes a step back.

"You look good." She adds her eyes roaming over me. I'm sure she expected me to be halfway into a depressive state by now.

"What are you doing here?" I'm not in the mood for small talk and I have work waiting for me.

"I wanted to make sure you're Okay. I know finding out the truth must have been shattering." Of course it was but I'm not about to show her that.

"I'm fine. Why didn't you tell me before?" I'm not sure how that would have helped but I'm certain it would have maybe prevented me from having any type of expectations from her or her family.

"Honestly you were a child and there was no easy way to say it. But the truth is out now so maybe we can find a way to move forward together as a family." She wants something. She's being way too nice for me right now and I don't like it. Not one bit.

"But we are not family. Ever since mum fell into her depression you've never treated me like family. So why now? Were you waiting for the truth to come out so you can put your act on?" She gasps as my voice gets louder drawing attention from people walking into the building.

"Okay I know this is hard right now but that's why I'm here. I think we need to sit down together with your father and discuss a way forward for everyone especially you." I laugh. A guttural sound void of any joy or emotion.

"Which father are you talking about? The same father who ran for the hills when he found out I wasn't his child. That father?" I take a deep breath and calm myself down. "Aunty....." I'm trying so hard to be respectful right now and for her sake I hope she can see it because I'm not ready for my name to be erased from God's nice list. "I'm sure you mean well but let's not pretend we were ever a functional family or that we will ever be one. So please from the bottom of my heart

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save the pretense and let's move on." I walk past her and make my way to the building but she's not done.

"So when are you planning on doing a cleansing for your siblings?" I stop dead in my tracks. "You might not be able to stomach the truth right now but if you loved your siblings you'll do the cleansing unless of course you want the dark cloud hovering over you to follow you through out your life." If! That's what she said. If I loved them? IF!

I close my eyes and silently count down from ten to one and back up again. It's not working. My heart is still pumping blood like I'm about to have a heart attack. I do a slow turn to see the smug look on her face before it quickly disappears again. I cover the distance between us in two seconds flat and the fear I see in her eyes doesn't help ease my heart.

"IF I loved my siblings? IF Aunty? You are seriously going to stand there and question my love for my siblings? I knew you were cruel but this is taking the cup even for you." She opens her mouth to say something but I stop her. "Let's say I do decide to do this cleansing let me guess this is how it's going to go. I'll send you money so you can prepare for the cleansing since I'm so 'busy' then you'll tell me I need to buy a goat and a cow and food worth thousands of rands only for that money to keep getting lost or disappearing." She swallows her eyes looking at everything but me. "I'd rather have my dark cloud it's carried me this far. And you know what they say better the dark cloud I know or something along those lines. Now I've said this to you before and I'll say it again. Don't ever come back here. Next time I'll ask security to not even let you through the gate."

I turn and walk away I don't know how I feel right now but Spongile has certainly ruined my day and it's not even nine o'clock yet. This day will be a very long one.

My day goes from bad to worse when I get a letter of demand from my ex father. This man claims I vandalized his house and stole all the furniture. I shouldn't worry much about that because I have the receipts and every proof available to show that I paid for everything but his failure to even consider that I am going through the most right now is what bothers me. By the time the day ends I feel like throwing myself on a bed and not waking up until Monday.

Lu picks me up and we head to his place after getting takeaways from his favourite restaurant. I notice a bottle of champagne in the backseat with a large bouquet of roses he keeps tapping his fingers on the steering wheel and humming a song. This is a far cry from the Lulonke I spoke to this morning. Everytime I ask him why he is in a good mood he will either take my hand and kiss it or give me a huge grin. Something is definitely up with him.

We park in front of the house and he quickly rushes to my side and opens the door for me. I mean he occasionally does that but not with a bow added to it. I head into the house while he gets everything out of the car. Nkazimulo is officially out of here his mother is not happy about it. She was quick to call out Lulonke for 'choosing a skirt over his own brother'. She was shouting and screaming

and even threatened him saying his ancestors would turn their backs on him. I should hook her up with S bongile they could make great friends plus they both hate me so they already have one thing in common.

He walks in singing Big Zulu's Vuma Dlozi very loud.

"Idols auditions are open you know." I say joining him in the kitchen.

"Maybe I should audition I'm sure I'd make it to the top three." He says proudly. Top three of wooden mic maybe. But I'm not about to burst his little bubble.

"So what's with the good mood? You've been on cloud nine since you picked me up. What's happening?" He places a glass of champagne in front of me. I stare at the glass my mouth salivating I look up at him wondering if he realizes he gave me alcohol after telling me I drink too much.

"Relax its non alcoholic." Why am I not surprised. "By this time tomorrow the NPA will make an announcement saying they are dropping the charges against Tshego." He tells me his smile going all the way up to reveal his last molar.

"Really? How did you manage that?" His good energy is contagious and I need more of it. I might be a leech right now but I need all the good vibes I can get.

"Okay so it turns out even people with high walls are also scared of crime in this country. Anyways behind Tshego's place there is a plot that has overgrown grass and weeds and all of that. The day Mazwi died someone broke into Tshego's house and they came in through that plot they managed to go past the cameras. Until a couple of days ago all the footage seemed like a dead end but there was one camera that caught the whole thing. Plus with footage from the neighbors and a garage just five minutes down the road we found the real killer. He sang like a canary when he was cornered. He tried to tell the cops we forced him to take the fall for killing Mazwi then Tshego submitted nanny cam footage that she'd forgotten about and as gruesome as it is it shows Tshego was not in the house when Mazwi died. Once he saw that video he admitted who sent him and how much was paid to him. So tomorrow the case will be dropped and the people responsible will face the full might of the law."

Watching him speak so animatedly about this makes me happy. This is the pick me up I needed to end my day.

"That's great. I'm proud of you and I'm sure Tshego will be ecstatic." He wont stop smiling. Its quite adorable and cute. I dont even think I will tell him about my day tonight is about celebrating his major achievement he doesn't need my 'dark clouds' hovering over him.

"She is. I'm just so happy this is all over." He sighs and sips his imitation champagne.

"Me too. Now I'll have you to myself. If I'm not busy." He laughs and dishes up the food.

"I'll be happy to be at your service. So how was your day?"

"Not as eventful as yours."

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As much as I've grown a tolerance for alcohol I'm yet to do the same for a hangover. And as nice as wine is no one ever talks about the terrible hangover you get. Especially after finishing three bottles of wine.

I try to grab my phone from the side table but my hand dips into last night's dinner. Shit. Sne must have finished cooking and then dished up for me. I try to get off the bed and my heavy head drags me back to the bed. I could say I'm quitting alcohol but I've already done that a hundred times this year alone and it's not even June yet.

I get off the bed and head to the bathroom. I knock and when I get no reply I get in and wash my hand. I open the cabinet and take out some ibuprofen. I take a couple before washing my face and brushing my teeth. I go back to my room to get my plate and the empty glass of wine to take to the kitchen. I pick up my phone and look at the time. It's almost midday. Good thing it's a Saturday otherwise I would be screwed.

When I get close to the kitchen I hear murmurs and whispers. It sounds like Sne has company. I try to quietly go into the kitchen but the downside of an open plan apartment there is no hiding from people in the lounge. I greet and proceed to the kitchen putting the plate and glass in the sink. When I turn around I find sixteen eyes looking back at me.

My heart starts beating quickly. The others I can handle them but I don't think I can handle Mr and Mrs Cebekhulu. Their elders and I have to respect them. They've been kind and respectful to me so it would be rude for me to be disrespectful to them.

I take a deep breath before going to the lounge.

"I didn't know we had guests." I say looking at Sne. She stares back at me arms crossed on her chest.

"After last night's episode I figured we need to sit down and talk." She answers.

"Last night's episode? What are you on about?"

"Milani hlala phansi so we can talk properly. (Sit down.)" Mr Cebekhulu says pointing to an empty chair. I dont know what the heck is going on but I dont like it one bit. I sit down and look at them. All of them. Especially the one I call my boyfriend. How did he even get here so early because he is supposed to be coming back tonight.

"Milani we are worried about you." Mrs Cebekhulu says looking at me. I've always admired her. She has this calm spirit that when you're close to her you cant help but be drawn to her. Ever since I met her the first day I met Sne I've admired her. I know it's probably a slap in God's face but I've always wondered why God couldnt give me someone like her to be my mother. I wish she was my mother.

"Worried about what?" I ask already knowing the answer. I know Sne has told them about my drinking. I don't know why anyone sees it as a problem. I am just fine. She looks at Hlumile and Sne and the two of them get up and go to the kitchen. I dont turn around to see what they are doing but the opening and closing of cupboards gives me a clue. They found the empty bottles.

They come back to the lounge and place a refuse bag on the rug. They pull out bottle after bottle placing them on the coffee table. Both empty and full ones. Each bottle they place on the table makes my heart race. Seeing all of them sitting there gives me a slow painful realization maybe I do have a problem.

"These are this months bottles." Sne announces and sits back down on the couch. "The sealed ones I got from her closet." She adds making me mad. I was nervous but now I'm angry. She had no right to go through my things and invade my privacy.

"So we go through each others things now?" I ask her. She glares at me her arms back on her chest. I cant believe she did this.

"If you hadn't drank three full bottles of wine last night and then passed out you would have seen and heard me go through your things. But you didnt because you were too drunk." She says.

"I wasnt drunk. And that doesn't give you the right to invade my privacy."

"Okay shut up both of you." Mrs Cebekhulu calmly says. "Milani everyone here is worried about you. We dont want to see you throwing your life away. You've worked way too hard to get here. This...."

she says pointing to the bottles. "This is not good for you. You shut people out and push everyone away. Alcohol might seem like a good way to numb the pain right now but it wont erase it."

I feel tears prickle the back of my eyes and I try so hard to push them back. I look down at my hands sitting on my lap. They dont understand. They really dont.

"Milani we know the kind of pain you've been through. We get it." Mr Cebekhulu says. "Its hard for you that much we know. Losing your siblings cut deeper for you because you raised them. In essence they were your children. Finding out the truth about literally everything we know has been hard. But drowning your sorrows in alcohol will not bring them back or fill the void they left. It wont automatically erase everything that's going on in your head." I feel a tear drop into my hands and I quickly wipe it away.

I dont drink to fill any void or drown my sorrows. Heck if that were the case I'm sure that void would be overflowing by now and those suckers I'm supposedly trying to drown would be down at the bottom of the ocean by now.

I hear Lulonke clear his throat next to me before reaching his hand out to hold my hand. And before I can stop it a tear falls and lands on his hand.

"Look Milani you're more than just my best friend. You're like a sister to me and I hate seeing you do this to yourself. For as long as I've known you you've never been the type to drink every single day. You drank to celebrate or just for fun. Never like this. I'm begging you from the bottom of my heart you cant keep doing this." I look up at her and see tears glistening in her eyes. I feel a tinge of guilt seeing her cut up because of me.

I take a few deep breaths before looking around the room.

"Look I am grateful for each of you and your concern. But I am fine. I understand your concerns and I'll try and cut down on the alcohol. Is that better?" I look around the room and see pity in their eyes. I hate pity. And right now they are pissing me off cause they are making it seem like I cant control myself.

"Are you hearing yourself?" Hlumile says. I havent spoken to her in over a week and this is the first thing she says to me? She seems to forget I'm older than her. "Look at the bottles in front of you? I think you are way past the point of cutting down. You need to quit alcohol all together." She adds and gets a few nods

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making me angrier.

"I think if we are done here I'd like to go take a shower." I say standing up. Lulonke holds my hand and pulls me back down earning himself a deadly side eye.

"There's a rehab I can get you into. Just say the word." Scelo says. I swear today must be another episode of test Milani day.

"Rehab? Are you for real?" At this point I am fuming. I can feel steam going out of my pores.

"Yes rehab?" Lulonke reiterates. For the first time ever he is agreeing with Scelo. I can see even the shock in Scelo's eyes. I pull my hand away from him and turn to look at him. "You can sit here and deny it as much as you want but we all know you have a problem." He adds unaffected by my deadly stare.

"Okay Doctor Mbatha since you seem to be so well vested in diagnosing people tell me what's my diagnosis."

"You're an alcoholic." He answers with no hesitation. My mouth shoots open and I see in the corner of my eye everyone else looking at me shock all over their faces. I dont know why cause I know they've probably been thinking the same thing. Lulonke is just the only one brave enough to say it.

"And no it's not because there is some disorder in your brain that makes you easily addicted to alcohol. Its simply because you choose to drink even when you know you shouldn't. There is a reason why you drink and until you deal with it you wont stop. They do say the first step to healing is admitting you have a problem."

By the time he is done with his twisted diagnosis the room is silent. Everyone is watching us like we are on their TV screens. I sit there dumbfounded and shocked at what he just said. Of all people I expected him to be a little more gentle not this brutal. Sure I've been drinking more than usual but to term me an alcoholic is a bit extreme. I feel more tears sting the back of my eyes I expected him to be on my side but I guess I was wrong. He is not on my side. Never will be.

"Wow." I say after a while. I let out a deep breath and get off the chair. Lulonke tries to pull me back but I pull my hand away from him. I'm trying so hard to not let my tears fall again. Not in front of them. "Well thank you for that doctor." I quickly walk back to my room and slam the door behind me. My nerves and emotions are all over the place. I pace up and down the floor trying to calm myself

down but it's not working. I need something strong but Detective Sne took my stash so I have nothing.

I sit on the bed breathing in and out. Lulonke's words keep ringing in my ear and each time the word 'alcoholic' rings in my head I get more angry. I need something to drink. And it's obvious I'll have to go out to get one because as long as they are here it's not happening. I stand up and try to busy myself by making the bed. I decide to go out and get some air cause the house feels stuffy and suffocating right now.

I grab my robe and go to the bathroom. I get under the shower and just stand there letting the water cascade over me. I only start scrubbing when I feel the water getting colder. By the time I'm done the water is cold. But it does help me clear my head. I go back to my room and change into a pair of high waisted jeans and a crop top. I throw all my dirty clothes into my laundry bag. I find my converse sneakers and put them on.

Someone knocks on the door before they walk in. I look over my shoulder and see Lulonke walking in with a tray of food and a glass of juice. I turn back to the mirror fixing up my wig. Right now he is the last person I want to see.

"You're leaving." He says as if I didn't know that. I ignore him and continue with what I'm doing. "I brought you food. Sne and Siza cooked." He places the tray on the side table and sits on the bed. "Where are you going?" I grab my sling bag from the closet and transfer my things from my other bag to it. All I need is my phone my cardholder my wallet and some lipgloss. I add some tissues and hand lotion before throwing the bag over my shoulder. "Milani ngkhuluma nawe. (I'm talking to you.)" He says his voice laced with a bit of annoyance and anger. I sigh and turn to look at him.

"Yes Lulonke I am going somewhere. I need the fresh air. This apartment is too crowded for me right now." I turn to the mirror brushing my wig.

"Every person out there actually cares about you and they are worried about you."

"Well they have nothing to worry about. I am fine. I'll cut down on the alcohol I've already told you that." He sighs and gets up running his hand down the front of his pants. He walks up to me taking my hands in his.

"MaPhangela you know I love you right?" Is this a trick question? "I know this seems like an attack but at the risk of sounding like a broken record we are all genuinely worried about you. I've said this to you before and I'll say it again. You need to deal with your grief the right way. Not like this." I pull my hand away from him and grab the laundry bag from the floor.

"I have to go. I'll see you later." I walk out the door silently praying and hoping everyone is gone but the voices speaking in the lounge and kitchen tell me otherwise. I ignore them and head straight for the door.

"You're going somewhere?" Sne asks and everyone goes silent. I swear today is not my day. I lift the bag up.

"Yes. Laundry."

"I'll come with you." Hlumile offers.

"No need. I don't need a bodyguard."

"How long do you think you can keep this up?" She asks making me turn to look at her.

"Keep what up?"

"It took mum three years of drowning her own sorrows in alcohol before she reached her breaking point. So how long do you think yours will take?" I can't believe she is seriously comparing me to mum.

"I'm nothing like her." I hiss anger rising from the pits of my soul. I'm nothing like my mother. I'm stronger than her. Way stronger.

"You could have fooled me." She says and walks away.

I walk out and close the door behind me. I take one deep breath before going to the lift and request a cab.

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She's staring at me. Her cold stare sends shivers down my spine. This is my mother the one person whose presence should bring comfort and joy to me but instead it does the opposite. Coming here wasn't even part of my plans for today but with the crowded apartment and everyone watching every move I make I might just strangle myself.

There are two burly men standing behind her. Just a 'precaution' according to Dr Nkomo. If it were up to me there would be steel bars and a bullet proof glass between us but this is a mental institution not prison so I'll have to make do with the weighlifters behind her.

"Why are you here?" I guess I win the silent contest because she speaks first. The starting contest is still ongoing. Neither of us wanting to look away. For me I want to be prepared in case she attacks but for her I know she's itching to pull my eyes out.

"I came to see you." I reply and she chuckles looking away from me and crossing her arms on her chest.

"What do you want? Haven't you ruined my life enough?" She asks. I thought she would have calmed down by now but if I want to get the answers I need then I need to make sure I don't show her just how deep her words cut. Our relationship has dissipated to a point of no return. I thought I hated her before but now I realise I was just angry. Right now right at this moment I hate the woman sitting in front of me.

"I need answers. The last time I was here you strangled me and almost choked me to death." She blinks a couple of times before scratching the back of her neck. For a moment I see guilt in her eyes but the veil quickly drops and she is back to her cold hateful self.

"You didn't die." She tells me. The little broken girl in me wants to run out of here and pretend all this is a nightmare but the big girl in me who needs to heal and move on with her life refuses to run. Not now.

"Peter told me he is not my father." I say. Her jaws clench at the mention of Peter's name and a level of vulnerability washes over her. She still loves him. Thirteen years later and she is still in love with him. I see tears pool in her eyes before she blinks rapidly most probably begging her tears to not embarrass her. She fails a tear runs down her one cheek and she quickly wipes it away.

I've always seen her as weak for allowing a man that much control over her. But now I see it wasn't weakness it was love mixed in with some mild obsession that seem to have grown into something bigger.

"So what do you want from me? You already have your answer. You're not a Mahlangu." She says her voice a little shaky.

"I know I'm a Mbokazi. I've always used your name. I guess it's a good thing you didn't give me Peter's last name. But I do want to know who my father is."

"And how am I supposed to know that?" She asks. My brows automatically scrunch up a million and one questions popping off from every corner of my brain.

"You're my mother. If anyone should know my father it should be you." My voice is a little higher than it was a moment ago. I can feel my anger rising. She breaks out into a cold spine chilling evil laugh. I watch her find amusement in my words tears even escaping from the side of her eyes. Now I'm the one wishing I could cool my hands around her neck and shut her up. But I need to control myself be the same one in this moment.

After a while her laughter dies down. She wipes the tears from her eyes and stares at me.

"I am not your mother." She says and starts laughing again. I feel a wave of cold air leave my body like a deflating balloon. This cannot be real. I know the woman hates me but why would she deny birthing me?

I take a deep breath willing my racing heart to slow down even for a second. But it doesn't. Instead it starts beating so fast I can feel my blood starting to boil.

"I. Am. Not. Your. Mother." She repeats.

"What is that supposed to mean?" I'm not sure I want to hear the answer but I started this so I might as well finish it.

"You are not my child. I did not carry you in my womb I did not push you out and your sure as hell don't have Mbokazi blood running through your veins." The smug look on her face tells me she is enjoying this. My strength and willpower have finally deserted me and my tears are pouring down my face like a broken water pipe. I don't even have the strength to wipe them away.

"If you're not my mother then who is?" I ask my voice breaking with every word.

"I don't know." She turns and looks at the men standing behind her. "Please take me to my room." She says. She turns back to me leaning on the table her face so close to mine I can feel her breath on me. For once I wish she could wrap her hands around my neck and do what she did. Take the life from me because I don't see how I am supposed to go on from here.

"You know I've made a whole lot of mistakes in my life

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her face so close to mine I can feel her breath on me. For once I wish she could wrap her hands around my neck and do what she did. Take the life from me because I don't see how I am supposed to go on from here.

"You know I've made a whole lot of mistakes in my life you are the worst one. I could have had everything I wanted in life if it wasn't for you. You're a curse a God forsaken curse. I curse the day I laid eyes on you." She says then walks away.

This room is big enough for a dozen people but right now it feels like a tiny box. I am suffocating I keep breathing but I can't seem to get any air in my lungs. I stand up and walk out. I hear Dr Nkomo calling my name behind me but I ignore her. My wobbly legs carry me out to the front of the hospital. I take a seat on a bench outside and try to breath. It's late afternoon. The sun is close to setting and I still need to head back to Joburg. But my legs are too heavy and I can't seem to lift them.

LULONKE

She's still not back. I fetched my parents and family from the airport and took them to Waterfall and then came back here but she's still not back. I should have just gone with her earlier. Giving her space was a bad idea.

"Maybe we should call the police." Sebastian suggests.

"Its too early for that. They will tell us to wait 24 hours." Sne tells him. I try her number one more time and it rings unanswered. Maybe the fact that it's still ringing means she's okay. I mean if she was in any danger her phone would have been switched off by now. I try again and get the same reply.

I excuse myself and go to her bedroom. I need to make a call. Protocol says wait 24 hours but I'm sure my connections can throw that out the window. The phone rings a couple of times before he picks up.

"Mbatha. What can I do for you?" Mthethwa asks he sounds like he is eating which is no surprise because him and food are two things no one can separate. It's also a good thing he is the station

commander and he doesn't have to run after criminals otherwise they would have a field day with him.

"Nyambose. I need a favour." Before I can elaborate I hear commotion in the lounge. Maybe Milani is back.

"I'm listening." He urges since I've been silent for a moment.

"Listen I'll call you back." I hang up and head to the lounge. Sure enough I see Milani in an embrace with Sne.

Even from where I'm standing I can see something is wrong. Her eyes are red and puffy. She's been crying. I'm not sure if everyone else can see it but it seems they are just focused on her being back. Sne however is also sniffing around probably wanting to make sure she wasn't drinking.

I get close to her and she gives me a faint smile. Something is definitely wrong. She was angry when she left but now it's like someone hurt her or something. Mam'Cebekhulu pulls her to the couch and she sits down.

"Nana we were worried sick about you. Where have you been?" Lani shakes her head she's trying to hold something in and knowing her she knows her voice will give away whatever she is feeling right now. All I want to do right now is wrap my arms around her and let her just be but I have to respect the elders in this room. They might not be her biological family but they mean a lot to her.

"I just needed some fresh air. I'm sorry I didn't mean to worry you. And I promise I didn't drink." She says.

"Its okay nana as long as you're okay. Are you hungry? The girls cooked." Mam'Cebekhulu asks. Milani gives her a faint smile. She never says no to food. Before she can even reply Sne and Siza get up and head to the kitchen.

"I'm not really hungry." She quietly says. I keep my eyes on her while everyone chats. She keeps quiet and slowly retreats back to herself.

"I should get going." I announce. My phone hasn't stopped buzzing and I know my family is the one calling. I left them alone in the house.

"I'll walk you out." Milani says standing up. I say my goodbyes and we walk out in silence. When we get in the lift I pull her to me and just hold her. She wraps her arms around me and exhales. The lift opens and we get out. By some miracle no one else got in. Thank God. We walk to the car and I lean on it. It takes a moment before she steps back and looks at me. Our hands are still intertwined.

"What happened?" She shakes her head biting her bottom lip as if she's holding in her tears.

"Sthandwa Sam tell me what's wrong." Her willpower fails her as tears start running down her face. She quickly wipes them away as if they make her any different in my eyes.

"I went to see my mother." Of course she did. That woman seems to have the power to break Milani each time she comes anywhere close to her. I know she's her mother and all but she doesn't deserve her. Milani deserves better. So much better than this.

"What did she say?"

"She told me she is not my mother. I thought she was just being spiteful at first but she made it pretty clear that I don't have her blood running through my veins that I am a curse to her and she regrets the day she met me." She says her voice breaking as she sobs. I pull her to me and just let her cry. I swear if there is a woman who doesn't and has never deserved to be called a mother it would be this woman. I don't think there's anyone who is evil and malicious like her.

I hold Milani in my arms and just let her be. I feel and see people staring at us as they pass by but I don't care. It's dark anyway and their opinions mean nothing to me. After a while she lifts her head up wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. I open the car door and pull some tissues from the cubbyhole.

"I'm sorry." I'm not sure what other response is there to something like this. Milani shakes her head and blows her nose. "How are you feeling?"

"I don't know how I feel. All I know is that I am tired. It's like every day the sun rises it has to come with some earth shattering news for me. I know I'm not a saint let alone a good person but this is too much. If this is my punishment for whatever then maybe God truly hates me. There is no other explanation. And the worst part is that she refuses to tell me who my supposed mother is." She says her eyes getting watery again. I sandwich her face between my hands and make her face me.

"MaPhangela you're not a curse. You've never been a curse. And you are a good person. Everything you've ever done has always been for the good of others. You're the most selfless person I know. I don't care how it looks like right now but I need you to know that I love you. You have people up there who love you and they would do anything for you to be happy. Just because one woman has failed to see how incredible you are doesn't mean everyone else feels the same way. I know you won't believe me now but maybe one day you will." I'm not even sure if it's getting through to her.

I pull her to me and just hold her. No words just her in my arms. I made a promise to myself and to her that I would protect her especially against my own family. But now I think I might have to have a little chat with her mother. If she wont give her the answers she needs then maybe she will give me. If I'm persuasive enough.

63♥

LULONKE

I've never been a late sleeper today however I didn't get any sleep. I couldn't stop thinking about Milani. Of all the things she's gone through this is probably one of the hardest. Her mother or whatever that woman is to her seems to get off on watching her suffer. I don't understand how she can blame Milani for that man leaving her and then turn around and deny being her mother. I'm still not sure if all that she said was true or it was just her being spiteful and evil. I guess I will find out when I see her.

Usually on a Sunday if we are all together mum will insist we all go to church. But this is not Durban and I doubt there is a church close by she will like so my guess is they will be getting ready for the lunch because they have to leave later tonight. I love my family and I'm glad they are here but I wish they weren't right now. I just want to take care of Milani. As much as I would have loved for her to be here today I know she has a lot on her plate and I can't expect her to deal with my mother and sister. Not today anyway.

I look at the time and it's just a few minutes past four. If I hurry now I may just be the first person Grace sees when she wakes up. I get off the bed and take a quick shower. I put on a black tracksuit and black sneakers. I grab my pouch from the back of the closet and head out.

"Going somewhere?" Nandi says just as I descend the stairs. Its four in the morning and she's only coming in now. I'm pretty sure this is her way of trying to distract me from her coming in now.

"Where were you?" She swallows and takes off her shoes. Nandi has an impressive poker face. No matter how nervous she may be she'll give you a straight face and you'll begin doubting yourself.

"I just went out with some friends. Listen about the lunch today. Am I going to see your girlfriend?" She asks giving me a wide smile. If I wasn't in a hurry I'd take her to task for coming home this early. This is Joburg and I'm not even sure she knows anyone around here. But maybe she does.

"Maybe some other time. I have to go. Give me my remote."

"Come on. I want to see the woman giving your mother heart palpitations." She says pouting. Last born tendencies. That's not going to work right now though. I have a long drive ahead of me. I take the remote from her.

"You might want to go change before your mother sees you."

The drive to the hospital is not as bad as I thought. Its Sunday and early morning so there's little to no traffic. Which works for me I should be back just as quickly. By the time I get to the hospital it's not opened yet. But its nothing a little palm greasing can't fix. I hand the security at the gate some cash and the frown on his face quickly disappears.

"Hhay no now we're talking." He says shoving the notes in his pocket. "Someone will be waiting for you by the door." He adds and opens the gate. I drive in and sure enough there's a guy waiting for me at the entrance. I park the car grab my pouch and walk up to him. I hand him another wad of cash and he leads me into the building.

"The cameras have been switched off you have thirty minutes before people start waking up and getting to work. So you better be done in twenty." He tells me. I don't have know their names but I have their surnames memorized.

"I'll be done by then." I assure him. He leads me down a hallway with frosted glass doors. Each room seems to be occupied. We head further down and turn a corner.

"This is where we keep the super crazy ones. The ones who will likely be here forever." He tells me. I'm not here to tour the place so I don't care. I just nod my head to be polite. He opens a door and ushers me in. "This is Grace Mbokazi." He whispers. "I'll be back to get you in fifteen minutes. Lock the door and make sure you hurry up. Soon they will be up and they will need to bath. You should be gone by then." He hands me a small key and he walks out. I lock the door and pull down the blinds on it to completely give us privacy.

She's still sleeping. Weird. Not even the sound of our voices wake her up. Her room is private and the walls are padded. I always thought that was an American thing but I guess I was wrong. Her bed looks like its just three mattresses piled on top of each other. This is extreme I must say.

I poke her a couple of times before she stirs. She looks up at me with sleep in her eyes. She blinks a few times starring at me her brows snapped together and her eyes squinted.

"You're not my doctor." She tells me sitting up straight. She may be right though. She has zero resemblance to Milani.

"No I'm not." I pull the chair and sit down placing the pouch on the small side table. She looks at it then looks back up at me.

"What do you want?" I see fear fill her eyes and for a moment I feel bad. Then I remember why I'm doing this. I'm not the type of person to threaten or hurt people that is a territory I left to my brothers. Right now this is me playing a game I know no rules of. I have to be careful not to cross the line.

"Answers. I figured since you couldn't give Milani the answers she wanted you'll give them to me." I say. Even though my heart is beating rather too rapidly for my liking I need to carry this through. Her fear has somehow been replaced with anger and loathing if the her clenched jaw and her flared nose are anything to go by.

"I want nothing to do with that demon child." She hisses her arms crossed on her chest.

"Demon child? The same child who raised all your children when you failed to the same child who had to grow up too quickly because you were too weak and too much of a coward to take care of your responsibilities. You mean that child? The one who hid your dirty laundry built your home and hid your shame. That child?" Whatever nerves I had seem to calm down with each word I utter. In its place comes anger.

"I didn't ask her to." She replies.

"You didn't have to ask her. She's your daughter or she thought she was. And everything she ever did she did because she loved you. Yes she was angry at you but she still loved you. And this is the thanks she gets?" Silence falls between us as a staring contest ensues. Any other day I would win it but today I don't have much time.

"Who is Milani's mother? Her real mother." She breaks eye contact and stares out of the small window. The sun is out already and people will be up soon. I don't have anymore time to beg and plead with her. "Who is she?" Silence. I open the pouch revealing the blades safely tucked in. I pull out the clip point blade. The swish sound the knife makes draws her attention back to me. I take the knife and gently spin it around. Fear and hesitation returns to her eyes.

"You know

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my brother used to love knives. He was good at throwing them if he had a knife in his hand he would never miss his target. He never liked guns he preferred knives." Her eyes get wider she almost reminds me of Hlumile. How did kids so nice and sweet end up with an evil spirit for a mother? "Why are you telling me this?" She asks.

"Well he used to teach me or rather tried to. I never could get the hang of it. When he died it's the one thing I regretted. I wish I could have spent more time with learning. The knives are the only thing I have that belonged to him. I throw the knife and it lands on a padding next to her head and she screams.

"What are you doing? Are you crazy?" She screams at me.

"Tell me who Milani's mother is or else the next blade will land right on your head." I get up to grab the knife and she flinches. I pull the knife out and sit back down. "I know a few months ago you wanted to die but I can see things are different now you want to live even if it means your sole purpose for living is making Milani's life a living hell." I twist the knife around again and she watches me. "Now will you tell me who Milani's real mother is?" Time is running out and this woman seems determined to prolong this. I throw the knife and it grazes her arm making her flinch and scream. She covers her arm and I see blood dripping through her fingers.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" She hisses before she starts screaming for help. I pull the knife out of the padding and place the tip on her neck and that quickly shuts her up.

"Tell me what I need to know and this knife won't go through your neck." I push the blade a little and pierce the skin a bit making blood drip from the tiny opening.

"Okay I'll tell you." She says. I pull the knife away from her and sit down.

"Speak."

"When I was pregnant with my baby Peter and I got into a fight. I decided to leave home and go visit my aunt eNdwendwe in KZN. I stayed there for a few weeks. I went to town one day to buy some more clothes for the baby and I went into labour. A kind taxi driver took me to the hospital. Getting in there was a struggle because the nurses at the time were on strike. The hospital was shortsaffed and even the staff that was there was on a go slow. It took hours before I was admitted. I didn't have a phone then so I couldn't call home to tell them where I was. There was another woman in the same ward as me most of the patients had been transferred to other hospitals and it was just the two of us there." She sighs putting more pressure on her arm. "My contractions got worse during the

night. The woman I was with gave birth first. We were alone and the nurses came in after she gave birth. She was exhausted so as soon as the nurses had done making sure she's fine if that's what you can call what they did she fell asleep. I ended up giving birth alone in the toilet. My baby was born with the umbilical cord around her neck." She continues as tears stream down her face. My conscience is getting the better of me. Even as I constantly remind myself why I am doing this.

"She wouldn't cry. She turned cold right in my arms. I knew she was dead. Peter wanted a child and as much as we would fight he was excited about the child. The prospect of disappointing him was daunting. I cut the umbilical cord with a broken glass I'd found in the bathroom and then cleaned the baby. I then went back to the ward and found the woman still sleeping. She'd also given birth to a baby girl. I swapped the babies then rushed back to the bathroom with the other baby. I started screaming and when the nurses came in they find me with the other baby and the cut umbilical cord. They helped me back to the ward and made sure the baby was fine. When they checked the other baby they realised it was dead. They woke the woman up and they did all they could to save her but nothing. I could see that woman's world shattering when the nurses told her the baby is dead." I can't believe the can of worms I just opened. I should have just kept my nose out of this mess but it's too late now.

"Did you even care about that woman and her pain. All these years you could have given her back her baby....."

"I needed that baby more. Peter was going to marry me after I had the baby. She was married she could have more kids with her husband. I needed that baby to make sure Peter marries me." She argues.

"But he didn't marry you. Three children later and he still wouldn't marry you." I remind her. This woman is far crazier than I thought. Who even measures how much one woman needs a child over the other. She played God with peoples lives and she seems to have zero regrets.

"He could have married me. If it wasn't for Milani he could have. If he hadn't found out he would have married me. I would have been Mrs Mahlangu." She says her mouth curves into a smile and she holds out her injured left hand staring at her ring finger. Well the guard did say she was part of the super crazy bunch and it's clear she will be here a long while.

I manage to get the name of the hospital out of her before I leave. The drive back to Joburg feels longer than the drive here. I'm torn between telling Milani this or finding the woman who gave birth to

her first. Telling her that she was stolen at birth especially now when she's going through the most might break her even further. But not telling her might break the trust she has in me. Last night she told me she thinks maybe one of her aunts is her mother. She thinks Grace was exaggerating about her not having Mbokazi blood in her. I know that's just her mind refusing to believe everything. Whether I tell her the truth now or later it will still hurt.

One's identity is important it determines one's history and one's future. Our names and relations define us and what we stand for telling Milani she's really not a Mbokazi might send her deeper into emotional turmoil and she might not consider quitting alcohol. As it stands right now she drinks like a fish. This will be the straw that broke the camel's back. And the worse part is that because of Grace's conditions this whole thing might just be a fairytale she concocted in her mind.

4♥

I never thought a day would come where I would hate Grace Mbokazi. No matter how angry I was at her throughout my childhood I would always remind myself that she's my mother and I loved her. I was angry yes but the love was always there. I never thought a day would come when I would fully hate her. And now I do.

I've never pretended to be a saint or made myself holier than though I never saw myself getting a first class ticket or even an economy class ticket to heaven. I always thought I'd be one of those that would be on standby hoping someone doesn't check in on time so I can take their space. But it seems God has made the decision to unleash hell on earth for me. He is not waiting for me to make my way to hell. Each day for me is a living hell and I'm afraid there is no way of making it better.

Grace's words keep replaying in my head over and over again. After everything that I've done and gone through to make sure she and her children are okay this is how she thinks me. Not that I expected a whole red carpet gala dinner in my honor but a little appreciation would have gone a long way. It's like her brain somehow skimmed over everything that has happened the past thirteen years and only focused on one thing her hatred for me. For something i don't even know about. And the worse part is that she refuses to tell me who my real parents are.

I carefully get out of the bed making sure not to wake my friends up. Sne Hlumile Sizakele and Sebastian decided to spend the night in my room. There isn't enough space for all of us so Sebastian and Sne decided to blow up the air mattress while Hlumile Siza and I squeezed ourselves

on the double bed. I know they mean well but last night I just wanted to be alone and wallow in my own pity party but they wouldn't let me. In hind sight though I am grateful for their presence.

I tiptoe out of the room and head straight to the kitchen. I need something to drink before the others wake up and give me nasty looks. I open the fridge and all I find is juice and milk. Not the kind of drink I need. I search through the cupboards and they are empty. Of course they are. Apparently the first rule of living with an 'alcoholic' is not to keep any alcohol close by. But I need something. Anything that's going to make me numb. Neither tea or coffee can do that.

I tiptoe back to the bedroom and change into one of Lulonke's sweatpants that he left here. I throw on a sweater sneakers and a Nike cap and head out. I don't know which place is open right now but I won't know till I find out. I grab Sne's car keys from the coffee table and leave.

An hour of driving around and nothing. All the shops are closed restaurants are not serving alcohol at this time and no clubs are open. I'm tempted to drive to elokshini to find something but that will just be too far. I settle for breakfast at wimpy. I know by now everyone will be up and they will be wondering where I am. It doesn't help that my phone is not even charged. I'll be lucky if I make it back with the fifteen percent it's on.

The restaurant is practically empty with just a group of partygoers probably hungover from a night of partying sitting on the far end of the restaurant. A waiter leads me to a table.

"Would you like something to drink while you go through the menu?" The lady asks. I order a cup of black coffee and she leaves. She comes back in less than five minutes with my coffee. I place my order for an omelette and she disappears again.

The bitter liquid doesn't help ease my mind. Instead it sends my mind on a caffeine induced tailspin. My name is not Milani Mbokazi. On paper that's who I am but now that i know it doesn't align with anything in my life. If I am not a Mbokazi then who am I? Who is my mother? Do I have parents? What if they are dead? Do u have siblings? What if they hate me? Why would my mother give me away?

Each question sends me down into a dark abyss that I'm not sure I can easily come out of. I've always prided myself in my name. After my father left I was proud of the fact that I didn't have his

name to constantly remind me of his betrayal. I valued my last name because that was my identity who I am. Before anything else my name was the first thing I had. And now I don't even have that.

I blow on the scalding hot coffee before taking a sip. My phone vibrates on the table Lulonke's name flashing on the screen. I watch it ring until it stops. Truth be told I'm not sure I want to speak to anyone. I hate the pity I see in their eyes the judgement and the walking around in eggshells. Quite ironic if you ask me. One moment I am labelled an alcoholic and the next they want to make life as comfortable as possible for me. I know its probably because they care but right now I'm not feeling that. Right now everything is just suffocating and a bit too much. I love them but I just need to breathe and figure out my own life.

The waitress brings my food. I ask for another cup of coffee before digging in. It's not the best omelette I've had but it's also not the worst.

"Hey Milani?" Someone says next to me. I look up and see Coco I don't even know what her real name is. But I know we had some good times making money.

"Coco I haven't seen you in a while." She laughs pulling down her dress. The only thing it covers is her ample behind. Her thick thighs are on full display. She takes the seat across from me making sure her dress doesn't ride up. Its leather trust me it will. But i know Coco gives zero fucks.

"You know when you walked in I thought I was seeing things. Where have you been?" She asks.

"I'm around. Great night?" She smiles and glances at the people she came with. I know one of them is a lucrative bag judging by the smile on her face.

"Amazing. Speaking of which I've been trying to call you but your number keeps saying it doesn't exist. Bragga is hosting some rather important people in Cape Town next weekend. Are you game?" She says excitement written all over her face. I know where her excitement is coming from Bragga is one of the best club promoters in the country. His contact list is filled with the best of the best when it comes to entertainment and business alike. He is the go to guy for the rich who want to have a guaranteed good time without the exposure to the media. No he is not a pimp or a trafficker he is just the kind of guy who is always happy to hook us up with the right people. Okay maybe there are some pimp tendencies except the taking of eighty percent of one's earnings as if they own you.

"As tempting as that offer is I'll have to pass." Her jaw drops to the floor. I never say no to Bragga's events. One night with any of his contacts and I'll be able to pay the rent for three months or more.

"Girl this is Bragga we are talking about and this is a guaranteed bag. Plus he told me one of the guys coming asked for you personally." She tells me. I'm not sure who would ask for me personally. "I know. But I'm out of the game." The way she keeps getting shocked by responses I'm sure by now her hangover is gone already.

"Out? Hhaybo Milani you're too young and fresh for that. Here." She grabs the napkin and pulls out lipstick from between her boobs and hands it to me. "Give me your number. I'll call you and we can talk about this properly when I'm not hungover." She says. If this is the only way to get rid of her then so be it. I take the napkin and write down my number and hand it back to her. She folds carefully and shoves it in her bra before standing up and pulling down her dress.

"Okay I will call you. Keep your phone on." She says blowing me a kiss and walking away. Good thing my phone has an active block button. I go back to my food that's almost cold. I feel a presence around me accompanied by a beautiful musky scent. I slowly look up and come face to face with Nkazimulo. Today is definitely not my day.

"Milani. May I?" He asks gesturing to the chair. I roll my eyes and he sits down. "I thought you'd be with your boyfriend. Where is he?"

"I don't know." I tell him and he smiles.

"Trouble in paradise already?" He asks a smirk filling his lips.

"Even if that were true

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"I don't know." I tell him and he smiles.

"Trouble in paradise already?" He asks a smirk filling his lips.

"Even if that were true why would I tell you?" My food is getting colder by the minute and my ego refuses to look away from Nkazimulo. For some reason with how I feel right now I refuse to let anyone else get the better of me. Especially him. And knowing him he is always up to no good.

"I'm just concerned." As if! "Anyways will I see you at the braai later?" I completely forgot about that. I was going to force myself to go but my mood is not at its best right now and we all know Mrs Mbatha and her little minions are always on hand to try me. So today for Lulonke's sake I will stay away and let them enjoy their little get together without me. I know its important to him that I be there but he will have to understand right now is not a good time.

"No. Last i checked it's a family thing." He laughs playing with his car keys.

"Arent you my brothers girlfriend?" He asks adding some bitterness to the word.

"Why are you here Nkazimulo? What do you want from me?" He shrugs his shoulders and lays back on the chair draping his arm over the empty chair next to him.

"I'm just making conversation. But if you decide not to come I'm sure Sane will be more than happy to keep Lu company. You know she's been dying to get her hands on my brother. And I'm sure he won't mind. Anyways it was nice seeing you again." He gets up and walks away proud of his stupid work. Here I was thinking this is braai is just a family thing but if Sane will be there then I might as well be there as well.

.....

Getting back to the apartment I'm half hoping everyone is still asleep. I walk in and my hope's are dashed. Well partly. Ma nobaba are still sleeping and only my sister and my friends are in the kitchen busy cooking.

"Where have you been?" Sne asks when I sit down placing my phone on the charger. I have a braai to attend. They decide to gather around me trying to sniff out any alcohol.

"You know you could at least pretend to be subtle about it and not sniff around like dogs on heat. I just went out for some fresh air. I did not drink." My friends step back but these two are starting to irritate me. Being watched like a child.

"We were just worried about you." Sizakele says. I give her a smile putting her at ease. I know they are all dying to know what happened yesterday but I don't know if I'm ready to tell them anything. Right now the only person who knows is Lu. The only things I'm worried about is finding out my true identity and how this new information will change the dynamic of my relationship with Hlumile. She's the only sister I have left in the world. Blood or not she's my sister. We've been through a lot together and I don't want this mess to change all that.

After breakfast I decide to tell Mam'Cebekhulu and Bab'Cebekhulu everything in private. Right now they are the closest thing to parents that I have and I'm sure they are going to give me sound advice on how to go about this whole thing.

"I don't understand if your father is not your father and your mother is not your mother then who are your parents?" Mam'Cebekhulu asks after I've narrated everything to her.

"I don't know Ma. You know I want to believe that she is just crazy but I don't think she's lying about this. Now I'm not sure how to deal with it." She places her hand over mine and the other gently rubs on my back.

"This is going to be a difficult task nana but we are not going anywhere. We will be here with you. Whatever decision you make we are going to support you." She says. Her gently aura washing over me like a warm home choice blanket.

"Your mother is right we are going to support whatever decision you make. Just know that you're not alone. You have a family in us Milani so let's put the alcohol aside okay and let's focus on making sure you're okay." Baba says.

Getting everything out of my chest has taken a load from my shoulders. That's why I decided to go to the braai earlier. If not for me then for Lulonke. I know he wants me there. I've gone for more than twelve hours without shedding a tear hopefully I can go for another twelve more especially with the headache I'm fetching going to this braai.

The cab drops me off outside Lulonke's place. I use my remote and get in. This is more than a small family thing. There's more than ten cars in the driveway and outside the gate. And those are the ones I can count. There's music coming from the back so I'm guessing that's where the party is. I pull my phone out of my bag and call Lulonke.

"Sthandwa Sam." He answers.

"Hey I am outside." He hangs up the phone and within seconds I see him walking out of the front door. His smile lighting up his face. I see someone peeping through the window watching us before someone else joins them.

"Sthandwa sam I didn't think you'd come." Lu says pulling me into a warm hug. He is happy.

"I know I changed my mind. But I thought this would be a small thing." He pulls back not letting go of my hands.

"I know my mother decided to invite anyone and everyone she knows. Come on let me introduce you to everyone." He pulls me to the house and each step we take my nerves get the best of me. I'm not sure who is in there and what they will think of me. When we get to the door I stop.

"What's wrong?" He asks worry etched on his face.

"Maybe this was a bad idea. I know your mum won't be happy to see me here." He smiles pulling my hand up to his lips and kissing me.

"I don't care who is happy or not happy to have you here. As long as you and I are happy then nothing else matters. Plus I have to tell you something later. For now let's just go in and enjoy ourselves." Hesitation drifts away like mist under the morning sun. I take a deep breath and follow him in ready to face whatever comes next. In the midst of my own trials and tribulations Lulonke has been one constant that refuses to change and I can fully say I am grateful for that.

65♥

I can mentally hear AKA and Burna Boy singing all eyes on me as we walk in. This is not just some small family gathering it's an entire party. The only friendly smiles I see are Lulonke's friends. Nhlendla is here with his fiancée. Mpumelelo is also here with a new woman sitting pretty on his lap. Hopefully this one doesn't pull the wool over his eyes. I greet them as Lulonke pulls me outside with the promise to introduce me to someone. The smile on his face and the glint in his eyes tell me he is excited.

The first person I see when we get outside is his father. His sight alone sends my heart soaring. Nkazimulo is on the braai while another older man sits on a chair with a bottle of Johnny Walker black label a glass and what looks like peanuts on a bowl served on a tray. He must be important. There is a small stretch tent perched out on the grass with rectangular tables connect together to make one huge table. There's even some decor going on inside the tent. Talk about being extra.

They all turn as we approach. I see Nkazimulo clenching his teeth before masking it with a forced smile. Did he really expect me not to come after what he said? Idiot. I put my best smile on and hold my head high. His father has seen me in a not so favourable light but he should get over it now. It's done and we've moved on. At least I have.

"Ndabezitha you have a guest." The older gentleman says with a mile wide smile on his face making things a tad bit easier on me. At least he doesn't seem to be coming with some judgement.

"Mkhulu this is my girlfriend. Milani." He says his smile as wide as his grandfathers. Now I'm glad I decided on a dress instead of the bum shorts I wanted to wear. "Baby this is my grandfather you know my dad and Nkazimulo."

I hold my hand out and shake his grandfathers hand.

"It's nice to meet you Mkhulu." He takes my hand staring into my eyes like he is reading me. His eyes get darker and darker making me uneasy. I gently try to pull my hand away but there's some resistance.

"Mkhulu?" Lulonke says. Immediately he turns to his grandson the darkness fades away. He lets go of my hand and smiles again.

"Ngyajabula ukukwazi nkosazana. (Nice to meet you.)" He says. He is no longer the same person he was a moment ago. I wonder what's going on.

I greet Lulonke's father and Nkazimulo shaking their hands. It feels weird having to pretend like I don't know them especially his father.

"Let's go inside." Lu says saving me from the awkwardness.

"You didn't tell me your grandfather would be here?" I whisper as soon as we get inside.

"I'm sorry I didn't think you'd come with everything going on. What made you change your mind?" I shrug my shoulders looking over his shoulder sending daggers at Sane. One of these days I will wipe the floor with her ass. Lu sees me looking behind him and he turns his head. He sees her too and he laughs turning back to me. "And here I was thinking you came here just for me." He wraps his arms around my waist pulling me to him.

"Of course I did. How else am I supposed to protect what's mine against leeches." He throws his head back laughing.

"I've never figured you to be the jealous type." He finds this amusing.

"I am not jealous. I am just..." I close my eyes trying to think of the right word. "Protective. That's the word I'm looking for." He kisses my cheek then pulls me into a hug.

"Well there's no need for all that. No one can take me from you." He says. It might not seem like much but his words give me some remnants of hope. Even with my world falling apart all around me I have this small circle of people around me who've chosen me and keep choosing me. I can't let them down. No matter what happens I can't let Grace win.

Walking into the kitchen hand in hand with my man I am nervous. His mother is here and her little devil apprentice. The mood is jolly light and warm. It feels homely and welcoming. Of course the mood goes down ten notches as soon as Mrs Mbatha and her mini me lay eyes on me. I hold on tighter to Lulonke's hand. Right now he is my anchor and my shield.

"Ladies this is my girlfriend Milani. And baby you know my mum and my sister Nkanyezi that is my other sister Nandi and my sister in law Thabile." He says so proudly I can't help but smile.

"What kind of girlfriend shows up late to her 'boyfriends' event? Shouldn't you have been the first one here to welcome guests?" His mother asks.

"I'm sure you have everything figured out already. Plus shes not my wife yet so she can't be moving around in the kitchen." Lu answers.

"Oh but she can have sex with you in the lounge in front of everyone?" She fires back while the others gasp. Her little minion is busy laughing like this is a comedy show. I can't believe this woman can say this in front of an audience.

I feel like I just had a bucket of cold water poured over me. But the man next to me doesn't seem to be fazed. Not one bit.

"Actually it wasnt in front of everyone. We were alone until you walked in unannounced. Your fault not hers."

"So now she can't speak for herself?"

"She can. She just doesn't have to. Anyways baby let's go put your bag upstairs." I'm not sure if making an enemy of his mother is a good thing but I'm not the one going off at her so maybe I should just stay out of their issues.

I feel the daggers her mum is throwing my way. Before we left the kitchen I noticed Nkanyezi clenching her jaws. I'm sure if there were no guests she'd be ripping into me right now.

Thank heavens I did not trip and fall going up the stairs

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Thank heavens I did not trip and fall going up the stairs that would have been a sight and a joke for the rest of the year. We get to the bedroom and I throw myself on the bed and breath out. I lay on the bed facing the ceiling. Lu joins me and we lay there for a while just staring up at the ceiling. He takes my hand raising himself up to lay on his side. He props himself on his elbow staring down at me. I stare back the love in his eyes makes me wonder what I did to deserve him. This man loves me. With all my flaws my past my choices and my mistakes. He loves me. It would have been easy for him to walk away from me when he found the truth but he didn't. He stayed. He loved me and he continues to love me.

I lift my hand up and cup his cheek tears welling in my eyes.

"What's wrong?" He questions seeing my tears. I shake my head holding them back.

"Nothing is wrong. In fact in my imperfect world you're one of the people that's been consistent. I don't know what I did to deserve you Shandu KaNdaba plus God and I have a shaky relationship but I thank him every day for you. I know i don't say this as often as i should but I love you." He leans down and plants a kiss on my cheek before moving to my lips. Just that alone makes me feel like everything is right with the world. It's not but it feels like it.

"I love you too Sthandwa sam." He says intertwining his hand with mine. "I know things might seem bad right now but it will be okay. Trust me everything will work out the way it's supposed to." He lays back down again and pulls me to his chest. I want to prolong this moment for as long as I can but there is no rest for the wicked.

Mrs Mbatha budes into the room huffing and puffing. I try to pull away from Lu but he tightens his arm around me. He turns to his mother who is standing there with her arms on her chest pushing up her ample bosom up to her throat.

"Ma what's wrong?" He asks her. His relaxed demeanor a huge contrast to my galloping heart.

"The party is downstairs." She says staring at me. I swear this woman thinks Lu is a teenager and I'm going to corrupt him.

"We will be down in a second." He tells her and turns back to me pulling me even closer to him. I hear his mother snort before walking out and banging the door.

"We should go down." I suggest. The only reason I came here was for Sane and her trifling ways not to anger his mother. He sighs and gets up pulling me up with him.

"I'm giving them an hour before I throw everyone out. You and I haven't spent time together in a while." He says sounding serious. I hope he is just joking because if I am not careful his mother will send inkabi my way.

LULONKE

Having Milani here is all the motivation I needed to enjoy this day. I wasn't looking forward to it but her presence here makes everything so much better. My mother has gone out of her way to make this day special but I still don't know why. It's not like this is the first house I've bought for myself. I make sure Milani is comfortable and with people I know won't be giving her a hard time before I join my dad and grandfather outside. The meat is coming along just fine.

I grab a beer and sit down next to my grandfather.

"So when are we sending the cows?" He asks staring at me. I take a sip of my drink. If it were up to me the cows would have been sent already. Milani is everything I could have ever wanted or needed in a wife. She's strong she's fearless and just downright incredible. I know it my heart and soul that this is the woman I want to spend the rest of my life with. I've never been the kind that dates for the fun of it. I always have an end goal in mind and with Milani I saw it the first few weeks I knew her. If it wasn't for everything happening around her right now I would have already sent my uncles to her

father. But now we need to figure out her real identity before we can even think about going down that route.

"Soon." I reply and he laughs. I am way closer to my grandfather than I am to my father. I spent a lot of school holidays with him. When I passed grade seven he gave me a cow as a gift. It seemed useless at the time but now that one cow has multiplied enough for me to be able to pay lobola and still have a couple left over to start another herd.

"You know I am not getting any younger. Soon I will be joining my ancestors. I want to see your children before I die." He says his voice subdued. His death threat has been his constant go to each time we meet up. Even before Bukhosi died.

"Mkhulu you already have four great grandkids." Nkazimulo chimes in.

"And speaking of grandkids you should ask him about that before coming to me. He is older than me." I say pointing to my brother. Mkhulu bursts out laughing.

"This one? I've given up on him. I've never even heard about him being serious with someone. Atleast you have a girlfriend. But just make sure you do the right thing before planting the seed because the child needs to be born the right way." Mkhulu says.

"Who is having a child the right way?" Mpumelelo asks walking out of the house with Nhlendla behind him. They pull up chairs and sit down.

"Him." Mkhulu answers pointing at me with his glass.

"Its about time." Nhlendla adds. These ones forget that neither of them have kids but I'm the one who is expected to have them. Mxm.

In spite of my mother going over the top unnecessarily so I am enjoying myself. My girl is here my friends are here and my family so right now things feel right.

"Attention please can we all go to the tent." Mum announces walking out of the house. She's changed into her sunday best. And I though this was just a mere braai. I see Milani walking out of the house behind Sane so I wait for her. I hook my arm with hers and we stroll to the tent.

"Are you good?" She sighs and takes a sip of her juice. I know she probably hates it but I'm glad she is trying at least.

"I'm good. MaNduli has been super nice. Plus Nandi and Thabile do not have devil horns. I take it your mum and sister haven't poisoned them against me." She says.

"Or they are genuinely nice people who see you as another nice person."

"Well there's that too."

When we get to the tent I realise there is only one chair available. Everyone is already seated. I take one look at my mother and my sister and I can tell they planned this. Probably trying to humiliate Milani.

"I'll get an extra chair." Nandi says standing up.

"No need." She sits back down and I pull Milani to the chair. I sit down and pull her to sit on my lap.

"What are you doing?" She whispers.

"There are chairs available." My mother says and everyone turns to look at us. She definitely did not think this through. "You can't be fondling girls in front of your grandfather." She adds. Her anger is rising slowly. I turn to Mkhulu and he has a smile on his face.

"Dont worry about me. I love seeing young people in love." He says giving me a wink. For some reason my mother also thought it would be a good idea to have speeches. One after the other everyone stands up to congratulate me on buying a house. Plus they brought gifts most of which I already have in the house.

"Another microwave." I whisper. The second one for today.

"Did you not tell anyone that your house is already furnished?" Nhlendla asks leaning over. I shrug my shoulders and shake my head.

"Dont worry baby I'm sure we can sell all those gifts." Milani whispers. This one always has a plan to make money.

As the speeches and gift opening is going on I notice my Nkanyezi walking towards the tent using the side of the house. She's not alone. Behind her is a woman pulling a child next to her. The child looks about four or five years old. The closer I get the harder my heart beats. I can recognize Slindile even with her back turned to me. But now the thing throwing me off is the child she's pulling.

"Look who I found." Nkanyezi announces. Silence fills the tent as they turn to look at her.

"Sanibonani." Slindile says looking around until her eyes find me. She smiles and picks up the child.

"Who is the cute boy?" Mum asks her. I can feel my body has tense up.

"This is my son Makabongwe." She replies. I hope and pray that Milani can't hear my heart thumping in my chest.

"How old is he?" Someone asks. I'm not sure who because my eyes are glued to the boy.

"He is four and half years old." Slindile replies. I do the math in my head and it balances. The child she is carrying is a Mbatha. The question now is who is his father? Me or my brother?

66♥

I didn't need her to fork out her ID so I can see who she is. The moment she walked in I could feel Lulonke tense up. Of course his mother and sister's happiness was at its peak. I'm not sure what kind of game they are trying to play but it won't end well. Not for them anyway.

Ever since I've met them I've been patient and putting up with their bullshit. But if they think they are going to use this girl and her child to drive a wedge between Lulonke and I then they dont know me very well. I didn't get to be where I am by being a pushover. They will know me.

It's been tense since she showed up. I've seen Nkanyezi and her satan mother giving me side eyes. I'm sure they think I should be gone by now but I'm dying to officially be introduced as Makabongwe's step mummy. That's if he is Lulonke's child. I have my doubts though. A lot of things dont add up. If this child was Lulonke's she would have told him before and not wait four years before making her grand entrance. If it was me I would have used the child as leverage to get back with him. But maybe she didn't love him as much as he thought she did. One thing I envy about her though is her body. I dont know what kind of water they drink in KZN that gives them ass because I would be there all day every day. Shame yena she is beautiful. Light skinned thick around the hips and ass a figure that doesn't look like it carried a child her boobs are still perky and her innocent face. God her innocent face if I didnt know about her I'd say Lulonke is making up stories about the poor girl.

"When are you leaving?" My future mother in law asks as soon as the last guests trickle out. I wipe my hands after making sure all the dishes are in the cupboards. I hate a dirty kitchen and they've made a mess. Of course she was more than happy to tell me to clean up since I wasnt here to help in the morning. I turn around and look at her. This woman looks like she always has something bitter in her mouth. It must be hard being her.

"I'm not going. I'm actually sleeping over." I did not have any plans to sleep over especially with them here but I will be damned if I allow them to shove that woman in Lulonke's bedroom as if she belongs there.

"Sleeping over? Didn't your mother teach you that intombi enesmilo does not sleep at a man's house?" This woman has seen me naked riding her son and she thinks she can lecture me about Ismilo.

"If she had raised me in 1920 she probably would have. But it's the 21st century. We do whatever we want." I reply after making sure no one is close by to hear us.

"You know he will never marry you right? You might think you have him right where you want him but now he has a son. That boy needs a father and knowing my son he will not let his child grow up without him in his life. And you know what they say distance makes the heart grow fonder." I want to laugh. This woman is as transparent as spring water.

I walk around the island to stand in front of her. I can't be shouting when speaking to an elder.

"Do you know how pathetic you sound? Mhmm? After everything that woman did to your son you still think bringing her back in his life is a smart move? Do you even love Lulonke because from where I'm standing you treat him like an unwanted stepchild."

"Dont you dare question my love for my son. You got here yesterday and you think you have the right to question me? Dont try me little girl." She hisses I can see the steam coming out of her ears. I touched a nerve.

"If you loved your son as much as you say then why can't you let him be happy with the woman he chooses. That girl she had a chance and she blew it when she had an affair with your other son. Have you forgotten that? I'm not going anywhere Mrs Mbatha. Give it a year or two and you and I will both be referred to as Mrs Mbatha."

"Over my cold dead body."

"That can be arranged." I say before walking past her and heading to the lounge.

Makabongwe is laying on the couch watching cartoons alone. Last I checked he was with his mother. I wonder why he is not upstairs with the other kids. He is a cute boy. He is definitely a Mbatha. I sit on the one sitter couch and watch the cartoons with him. I keep taking glances at him he smiles a lot. When he doesn't have his thumb in his mouth he is laughing. I'm not sure what's enjoyable about a child giving a bear a hard time. But I'm an adult so I reason better.

I hear someone approaching the lounge. Even though I am tempted to see who it is I decided to focus on the cartoons. I can't believe I'm truly concentrating on this disrespectful child.

"Are you okay?" I hear someone speak. I turn and see Slindile pulling Makabongwe close to her. For her sake I hope she's not about to accuse of mistreating her child. Makabongwe nods his head his eyes still glued on the screen.

Mr Mbatha walks in together with Mkhulu Nkazimulo and Lulonke. They've been in the back for a while now probably discussing the elephant in the room. The demon battalion walks in from the kitchen looking like they are ready to pounce. Nandi and Thabile decided to go out. Lucky them.

"If you dont mind we would like the room. We have family business to discuss." Demon junior says standing in front of me. Out of respect for Mkhulu I decide to be respectful and excuse them.

"Sit down." Lulonke says. And we all know whose word is final. I put my skinny behind back on the seat. Of course the devil and her minion are not pleased. But I guess today they are making the conscious decision to choose their battles. Good for them. Everyone takes a seat and the tension rises to a hundred. For the better part of the day the elephant in the room was being ignored. But now its time to address it. I'm just happy no one wants to wait till tomorrow to talk about it.

"Well I'm sure we all know why we are here." Mkhulu starts. Seeing this man and his son now I understand why Nkazimulo and Lulonke have this strong powerful aura whenever they walk into a room. Of course Lulonke is a little more approachable and kind but it's still there. The need to respect them. It's not just a them thing it's a generational thing.

"Can we just get this over and done with. I have somewhere to be." Nkazimulo says earning himself cold stares from both his father and grandfather. "Sorry." He adds when he sees the looks he is getting. So there are people he is also afraid of. Interesting.

"Anyways. As I was saying. We need to talk about this child." Mkhulu says pointing to a now sleeping Makabongwe. "Whose child is this?" Talk about being direct. We turn to look at the main culprit. She swallows and pulls her baby close to her. The way she's nervous I'm pretty certain coming here was not her idea. She opens and closes her mouth like a drowning fish.

"Its obvious this is a Mbatha child. UNdabezitha uShandu KaNdaba." The devil says. The smile on her face is almost genuine.

"That's not under debate." Mkhulu argues. "What I want to know is who is the childs father between Nkazimulo and Lulonke?"

"What difference does it make?" The demon asks. "I mean Lulonke paid Lobola for Slindile and his cows are still in her father's kraal. That means she is still his fiancée." Ever put mentos inside a coke

bottle and then watch as the two bubble up ready to pop off? That's me right now. It's getting harder to keep my feelings inside.

"It makes a difference." Lu says. "A huge difference. And since it's clear we won't get the answers we need. I've scheduled a DNA test at a hospital tomorrow." They were not expecting that. Well the two devils and their new recruit but the men seem like they already knew. Maybe they planned it while they were outside.

"Which clinic? I have a doctor friend who can speed up the process." Nkanyezi offers. Call me paranoid but I don't trust her doctor friend. One word from Nkanyezi and the results will say whatever she wants them to say. I look at Lulonke and he seems to get my skepticism.

"No need. My doctor will conduct the tests. Plus I trust him."

"Oh what are you trying to say? That my doctor is not trustworthy?"

"Your words not mine. I am tired and I have work tomorrow. So I am going to sleep. You'll figure out the sleeping arrangements. Baby let's go." Be stands up holding out his hand to me. I take it and we walk up to the bedroom with everyone staring at us.

I take a shower

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"Your words not mine. I am tired and I have work tomorrow. So I am going to sleep. You'll figure out the sleeping arrangements. Baby let's go." Be stands up holding out his hand to me. I take it and we walk up to the bedroom with everyone staring at us.

I take a shower I wonder how I will get my laptop tomorrow. Or maybe i can just do an onsite visit and see how work is going at Tshepi's. Turning a house into an open plan design is a lot more work than I anticipated. But we have the best contractors on call so I know it will be fine. Lu walks out of the bathroom with a towel wrapped around his waist. I've been sitting on the bed trying to lotion for a minute now but i can't stop thinking about Slindile.

"What are you thinking about?" Lu asks standing in front of me and dipping his finger in the lotion. I should buy mine and keep it here instead of using his.

"Didn't you find it weird?" His brows furrow in confusion. "Slindile. She didn't say anything throughout the meeting. Your mum and Nkanyezi were her spokespeople. Yena she didn't utter one single word."

"I would either. She knows what she did and I'm sure being in the same room with my brother and I can be unsettling. This is the first time we've been in the same room together so I understand her nerves." I'm not certain it's nerves. Guilt maybe. Nerves I doubt it.

"Maybe. So tell me why are your cows still in her father's kraal?" I don't remember telling me he got his cows back and now Nkanyezi is going to use that as a weapon. And maybe even Slindile thinks she is entitled to him because of the cows. He shrugs his shoulders and pulls up his shorts.

"I don't know."

"That's not an answer Lulonke." He sighs.

"I'm being honest. I don't know. After everything that happened I wanted nothing to do with her or anything that has to do with her." That's not even a lukewarm answer if I ever heard one. But just for today I'll let it slide.

"Fetch them." He looks up from his phone his one eyebrow raised and a smirk on his face.

"What?"

"I said fetch them. If it's really over between you two then it shouldn't be a problem. Plus both families know it's over so they shouldn't have a problem." He nods his head I can see the laugh he is trying to hide.

"Okay." That was easy.

"Which doctor are you going to use for the DNA test?" I have a little plan in my head. I hope I don't mess things up.

"Mpumelelo will be doing the tests. He will be in Joburg for the next month for some programme he is running at a private hospital in Midrand." Now how do I get Mpumelelo's number without Lulonke being suspicious?

A knock on the door disturbs my little scheming.

"What?" Lu shouts.

"Hey baba wants to talk to you." Nkazimulo shouts back.

"Can't it wait till tomorrow?" Lu asks. He is not even in bed yet I don't know why he is being dramatic.

"Babe just go. It could be important." I swear sometimes men can be babies. He throws the phone on the bed and gets up grumbling all the way out of the door.

I pick up his phone and its unlocked. I quickly search for Mpumelelo's number then copy it to my phone and dial. He is quick to pick up.

"Hello."

"Hi Mpumelelo its Milani."

"Oh hey. How are you?" I dont have time for pleasantries but I also dont want to be rude.

"I'm good. Listen Lulonke tells me you will be doing the DNA tests that he wants tomorrow." He laughs. I wonder what is funny..

"Yes. Why? Do you want me to change the results?" I'm sure he would but that's not what I want.

"No. But I do need a favour. A huge one."

LULONKE

I walk down to my study since that's where my father has decided to be. I hope he doesn't take the opportunity to snoop around in my study. I knock once and walk in. He is sitting on my chair like he owns it and my grandfather is sipping on the whiskey Milani brought me. I've had one drink from it and here he is drinking it likes its water. I need to remind them that kukwam la.

I take a seat next to Mkhulu. He notices the side eye I'm giving him. Milani is rubbing off on me.

What man gives a side eye.

"This is nice and smooth." Mkhulu says taking a sip and savouring it.

"Of course it is Milani bought me that." He laughs.

"That's why it's so nice. The one you gave me earlier was bitter. This one tastes like it was diluted with love." He takes another sip acting like he is drinking from the well of life.

"Your mother told me about what happened between your girlfriend and your brother." My father says. There goes the nice bonding ambience.

"Okay."

"Okay? Is that all you're going to say?" His voice is rising.

"What else am I supposed to say?" I don't know if I want to discuss this with my father. Milani's past is her past and I'm not about to let anyone else in this family judge her.

"She slept with your brother. Why isn't she being held to the same standard as MaMbhele? Why is her sin better than MaMbhele's?" I can't believe he is asking me this.

"Baba I'm only going to say this once. Milani and Slindile are two different people. Whatever happened between her and Nkazimulo happened long before we met. What happened between Nkazimulo and Slindile happened behind my back. When I thought my fiancée was in Johannesburg studying to better her life she was busy fucking my brother. So yes they are definitely different."

"What about the rest of it? You do realise it will be a huge scandal when the public finds out a partner at our law firm is dating a former prostitute." He says.

I'm not sure what my mother and sister thought they were doing telling my father all this. Wait I do know. They were hoping he would be the one to get through to me.

"Baba Shandu KaNdaba Sontshikaze Gumbi lamagwala. I'll say this once and I won't ever say it again. Not to you anyway. I love Milani. She's never pretended to be a saint and she's always been honest about who she is. Her past her present and her future. From the moment I met her she never sold me a dream of perfection. I love her and I am going to marry her. If that is a problem for you tell me now so I can make sure we get out of your way." His jaws clench and unclench. He is staring at me his eyes cold and lifeless.

"You will regret this." He says getting up and marching out of the office.

Mkhulu and I stay there in silence.

"You really love her." He says pouring another glass of whiskey.

"Yes."

"I can see that." He takes a sip of the drink and lays back on the couch. "She's a good girl. Before you marry her though help her find her way back home. She is closer than she thinks." He adds before getting up and walking out with the whole decanter. I'm not getting my whiskey back.

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White and purple Rose's adorn the church altar each huge bouquet sitting on its own tulle draped stand on either side of the pastor. The white marble floors give the church a modern to the elaborate

sunken ceiling with different old school designs on it. I'd choose this church to get married in to if that day ever comes. Silk ribbons are draped around the pews with flowers next to them.

The sounds of a piano playing accompany the groomsmen as they walk in. Black tuxedos with white shirts and black bowties look like they were sewn directly on to the men's bodies. I don't know the first few men walking down the aisle. I see Nkazimulo's friends walk down followed by the man himself. They climb the stairs to the altar with Nkazimulo standing on the last step right next to the pastor.

Everyone stands up as the piano melody changes. We all turn to the door and the groom walks in. I thought Nkazimulo was the groom. What the heck is going on? Lulonke walks right past me he is in a black and white tuxedo that looks like he just finished shooting an editorial for a bridal magazine. He is getting married?

"Lulonke." I call out but he doesn't reply. I try again and he flat out ignores me. This cannot be happening. This is not what we talked about. I try to go to him but it's like my legs are stuck on the floor with iron shackles holding me back. As soon as he gets to the altar he turns and watches the door. This whole thing just feels weird. And the worse part is that I can't seem to scream or put a stop to it. Everytime I open my mouth it's like I scream into a vacuum that sucks up my voice and completely obliterates it to nothing.

The music starts again and the bridesmaids walk down the aisle. And leading the pack is our favourite demon Nkanyezi. She gives me a smug smile as she walks past. My heart starts racing as Slindile walks down the aisle with Makabongwe walking in front of her. He looks so cute in his little tuxedo it matches Lulonke's. He is marrying her after he promised me forever. He lied. Every word that came out of his mouth the declarations of love and a lifetime of happiness they were all lies.

I feel the tears stream down my face as I watch him declare his love to her. He makes a promise to always protect her fight for her and be her constant happy bubble. Those are promises he made to me. I fight the shackles holding me back till I feel them break. I rush down the aisle towards the altar. People are laughing but I don't care. He can't do this to me.

"Lu baby. What's going on? What are you doing?" He won't even look at me. His eyes are glued to her. Even as she walks down the steps a smile on her face.

"He is mine sweetie. He has always been mine. So this is me taking back what already belongs to me." She says and everyone breaks out into a synchronized evil laugh. Lu wont even look my way. He picks Makabongwe up and they stand there the three of them like a perfect little family.

"You should have left when I told you to." Someone says behind me. I turn and it's like the entire congregation is having the time of its life. Mrs Mbatha looks like she just won the Powerball laughing in my face. It feels like the walls are slowly close in on me. The laughter gets louder just as my breathing starts being shallow. It's like the louder the laughs get the harder it is to breathe.

I open my eyes just as someone spits saliva on my face. But now its silent. And I'm no longer at the church.

"Hey is everything okay? Did you have a bad dream?" I turn to find Lulonke looking at me concern and worry evident in his eyes. I was dreaming. No screw that this was a nightmare. One made for horror movies.

Instead of being relieved to see him I get sad. Tears run down my face. He pulls me to him laying my head on his chest as my sobs get louder.

"Baby sthandwa sam yin kani? (What is it?)" I don't even have the energy to answer him. I lay there sobbing till I calm down. He keeps rubbing my back and assuring me it was just a dream. A bad one at that but my brain refuses to believe that its not real.

"I need to pee." I say getting off the bed. I go into the bathroom and take a deep breath. "It was just a dream. It wasnt real. It was just a dream." I mumble to myself trying to calm my heart. I wash my hands and face before heading back to the bedroom. Instead of being calm I get angry at the sight of him. It might not have been real but it sure felt real to me. And you know what they say about dreams being visions or our subconscious trying to tell us something.

He looks up at me from his laptop. It's almost three in the morning and he is still working. Was he working this whole time? He closes the laptop and puts it away. For some reason I dont even feel like getting on the bed now. Maybe I am being dramatic. But everything felt so real. The DNA results will be out in a few hours. Mpumelelo postponed them a couple of times because of some irregularities. Spell that as satan and satan junior.

"I need a glass of water." I walk out of the bedroom making my way down to the kitchen. I get a glass from the cupboard and fill it with water. I stand there for a hot minute not even able to swallow the water. This whole dream just left a bitter taste in my mouth and I hate it. It doesn't help that Lulonke's cows are still at Slindile's home if the child is his what's going to stop his family from insisting he marries her. And knowing him he will want to do the honourable thing and make sure his son is a Mbatha in every way. I just don't know if that may include him marrying his mother.

I feel his arms wrap around me. I was so lost in my own thoughts I didn't even hear him come in. I close my eyes taking in his scent and touch. By this time tomorrow I might have to share him with two more people. The child I have no issues with him. He is an innocent little human who deserves to be loved by the people who brought him into the world. His mother on the other hand is a whole different mess I have to deal with.

I'm sure when she broke up with Lu years back she didn't think she'd come back with a child. Now with the backing of his mother she might just use this as an opportunity to fight for him. Now I've never been the type to go at it with another woman over a man. But this one this one I will fight for. I pull his arms tighter around me asking God to not take this one from me. Of all the things he has taken this would be putting the last nail on the coffin.

"Sthandwa sam what's wrong?" He whispers his chin resting on my shoulder.

"I had a bad dream. That's all." I'm not sure if I should tell him about it just yet. Maybe once the results are out. He turns me around to look at him. Thanks to the moonlight and the outside lights illuminating the kitchen I can see the worry in his eyes.

"A bad dream? What was I doing in the dream for you to be this upset?" He asks. I tilt my head to the side as I feel my brows furrow together. I don't remember telling him anything so how does he know he was in my dream?

"What makes you think you were in my dream?"

"Because you called out my name a couple of times asking what I'm doing. And then you cried. I tried sprinkling some water on your face and that's when you woke up." He tells me. So the saliva I thought someone was spitting on my face was actually water. Nice. "So what did I do to you?"

I sigh before taking the sip of water then placing the glass in the sink.

"You were getting married." I blurt out. "To Slindile." His face softens and his lips curl into a smile. He cups my face in his hands

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gently pulling me up to kiss me.

"The only person I will be marrying is you." He says kissing me between each word.

"But in the dream...."

"I dont care what happened in your dream. You're the one I am going to marry and no one else." He assures me.

"You dont understand. You guys looked like the perfect family. Makabongwe was wearing a tuxedo that looked exactly like yours. He was like a mini version of you and you looked so happy." I feel tears sting the back of my eyes as the dream replays itself in my head. He pulls me to him engulfing me in his signature bear hug before lifting me up and placing me on the countertop.

"Listen to me. It wasnt real. Even if Makabongwe is mine which I'm praying he is not the only person I'll be walking down the aisle with is you. And no one else. Well except maybe if Halle Berry looks my way now that would be different." He says. I'm laughing at the Halle Berry part because I would not let her come within fifty feet of him.

I know he means well trying to reassure me but there's a fifty fifty chance Makabongwe is his. Trying to deny that is a waste of time. For all of us.

"What if he is yours?" He smile disappears again. It would be nice to pretend the issue doesnt exist but it's there. Alive and well.

"Then we will cross that bridge when we get to it. We only have a few hours before we find out then we will figure out a way forward. Until then can we please go and sleep. We both have work tomorrow." He says. I nod my head and he picks me up and throws me over his shoulder. I slap my hand over my mouth keeping my giggles in. His parents and his grandfather are still here so I need to keep my mouth shut. Probably another reason why my nerves are shot. We haven't made love in almost a week.

The day refuses to go any faster. The results will be out in a couple of hours. And since Lu wants me to be there I asked Dave earlier if I can leave early and he agreed. Speaking of Dave his potential baby mama is doing the most. Now that everyone knows she is pregnant she's made sure to go back to her usual tight fitting dresses. Her bump is always on display and she never forgets to cradle it and speak to it. It's cute but it still makes me wonder how far Dave is on finding out if the baby is his. I seem to be surrounded by potential baby daddies.

I get an email from the contractors just as I pack up to leave. Sebastian and Sizakele are working on a project in Cape Town. If it wasn't for Tshego's place I would also be there basking in the sun and having round the clock cocktails instead of being here stressing about being a potential step mother.

I check the email and they tell me they are done. All I have to do is do some inspections and make sure they did what they were supposed to do and then we can bring in the furniture. And with that we are a step closer to being done with this house. I grab my things and walk out with Maps calling out my name. I ignore her pretending not to hear a damn thing she's saying but she seems to be running behind me. I get to the lift and press the button hoping it just opens but just as my luck would have it I have to wait. Maps catches up with me bending over with her hands on her knees trying to catch her breath.

"Are you seriously going to pretend you didn't hear me calling for you?" She asks standing up straight with her hands on her waist. Her bump seems to be bigger than it was yesterday. She sees me staring at it and a smirk forms on her lips. Her hands automatically cradle the stomach brushing it a bit. "He is growing isn't he?" So it's a boy. I look up at her face and her smile is so wide it goes all the way up to her ears.

"Why were you calling me?"

"Oh yeah leaving already?"

"Yes I am. What do you want?" I'm getting impatient and the lift being slow is not helping. Now Maps is here wanting to piss me off even more.

"A little unprofessional don't you think?" She sees the annoyed look I'm trying to project and she gets it. I'm not in the mood to go back and forth with her. "Anyways tomorrow I need you to come with me to Pretoria. I have to check on a project and since you're a first year apprentice you can help me with the heavy lifting since I can't you know because of my condition." She says it like it's a sickness. I

could tell her to shove it but that would mean arguing with her and that's not on my to do list for today.

"Sure I will see you tomorrow." I fake a smile and she buys it. And then the lift decides to show up. I get in and wave goodbye before the doors close. Heavy lifting my foot.

Lulonke is already here. I get in the car and greet him. He gives me a faint smile before he drives off. I guess he is not as confident as he was this morning. I'm tempted to make small talk but I doubt that's what he needs right now so I keep quiet. The drive to Midrand feels like a long distance road trip. The only sound in the car is the sound of the radio. The closer we get to the hospital the more nervous I get. Even though I made sure to put measures in place to make certain Satan and her daughter don't change the results it's still a nerve wracking process.

We walk into the hospital with our hands intertwined. I can feel the claminess in his hands. He is nervous. His silence is also something that speaks volumes. We find his parents and Mkhulu already here sitting in the waiting area. It looks like a private one too because there aren't any other people. I greet and only Mkhulu replies his warm smile on full display.

"How was work?" He asks me.

"Good. The project I'm doing is nearing the end." I tell him. I know they are leaving tonight and I must say I will miss him. Probably the only other person in this family who doesn't see the scum of the earth when he sees me. Thabile and Nandi are also nice but it's heartwarming for an elder to acknowledge and accept you.

"That's good. When the project is done you should come visit me and I'll show you the cows we will use for your lobola." He says giving me a wink. Of course Mrs Mbatha just snorts and rolls her eyes. "I will definitely do that." Mkhulu and I are the only ones who seem to be chatty right now. Lulonke is in a world of his own and the couple just looks bored. Until Nkanyezi and her twin walk in followed by Slindile. They greet and take their seats.

"Are we late?" Satan junior asks looking at her watch.

"No we were waiting for you guys." Her mother tells her. Her mood has drastically improved from what it was just minutes ago.

"I'll go find Mpumelelo." Lu says standing up. He doesn't need to go far though because Mpumelelo walks in with two brown envelopes in his hands.

"I'm sorry to keep you waiting. These are the results from the hospital lab." He says handing an envelope to Ly and the other to Nkazimulo. The brothers share a look before they open the envelopes. My eyes dart from one to the other looking for some clue as to what's happening. I see Nkazimulo's lips began to curl up in a smile and I get my answer. Lu's face is stone cold. There is no indication of what is going on in his head.

"I am not the father." Nkazimulo announces proudly. I notice the look shared between mother and daughter before everyone turns to Lulonke. He doesn't look up from the paper even as he gently pushes it back inside the envelope.

"It says I am the father." He announces his eyes still cast down. Right now I am not sure if he is happy or disappointed.

"Thank you. I told you he was your son." His mother says squeezing Slindile's hand.

"We should get going before we miss our flight." Mr Mbatha says standing up.

"Actually baba before you leave there is something else we need to discuss." Mpumelelo says breaking into the celebration happening on the other end of the room. Everyone keeps quiet staring at him waiting for him to say something. He pulls out a bunch of brown envelopes from his pockets. He hands three of them to Nkazimulo and the other three to Lulonke.

"What's this?" Nkazimulo asks looking at the envelopes in his hands.

"I had a request before the DNA tests were done. I was asked to take atleast three other samples to three independent labs just to make sure the tests were not tampered with. Now depending on what those three results say unfortunately you will have to discard the first one's done in this hospital." He tells us. My eyes are glued on the devil and her spawn and the shock in their faces is as clear as daylight. But also the confusion is beautiful to see.

"I dont understand." Lu says. My power baby. He is so confused.

"Just open the results and I will explain." Mpumelelo urges. They open the results and Nkazimulo's smile disappears just as quickly as it appeared. He tears through the second envelope and fear washes over him. By the time he gets to the third one I can see some perspiration on his forehead. Lu is just confused probably thinking he is losing his mind.

"These results say I am not the father. All three of them." Lu says and a joyful feeling takes over me.

"That's impossible." Nkanyezi says getting up and grabbing the envelopes from Lu and looking through them. "What the fuck is this?" She asks looking at Mpumelelo.

"The real results." He replies unfazed by her shouting and acting like someone with no sense. "It turns out someone paid one of the lab technicians in our lab to change the results hence the first results. And since these were done by three independent labs that only I knew about it means those are the real results. The child in question is not Lulonke's but Nkazimulo's." Nkanyezi sinks back in her chair.

I turn to Lu and his face is still unreadable. I'm not sure what is going on with him. I will get to the bottom of that later for now I'm just glad he is not the father.

68♥

I've never seen this much confusion in my entire life and it's quite funny to watch. The parents ending up not leaving because no one understands who ordered the second batch of tests. Right now we are all gathered in Lu's lounge questions are being asked and no one has answers. Should I tell them I did it? Nah. I like the chaos.

I leave them in the lounge and head to the kitchen. I'm not sure if I should cook for everyone or just let them be. I doubt they will want to eat anything though. I decide not to bother. If they want food we will order or the demon spawn will cook. I need to stop calling them demons. But they act like them so that might just be hard.

I close the fridge and turn around to find Mkhulu watching me with a smile on his face. He walks in and takes a seat on the counter. The way he is looking at me is and the smile plastered on his face makes me think he is up to something. What if he knows what I did?

"Can I make you a cup of tea Mkhulu." He shakes his head laughing. Yeah he knows something.

"I'd love some tea." He replies. I boil the kettle deciding to focus on the tea making. Even with the loud voices coming from the lounge the silence in the kitchen is a little unnerving. I place the tray with a teapot a cup and saucer together with some milk and sugar in front of him. I pour the tea add one and half teaspoons of sugar and a splash of milk. When I look up I see the smile is still there.

"You've mastered how to make me tea. Ten points for you." He says sipping on the hot beverage.

"I'm a fast learner." He nods his head placing the cup down on the saucer.

"I can see that. You've even mastered how to protect your home." He says.

"Mkhulu?" I say feigning innocence. I know he knows what I did but I will wait for him to say it.

"Everyone is in there arguing meanwhile you are here unbothered." My eyes dart around the room I can't bring myself to look at him. I have way too much respect to lie to his face. "I was watching you at the hospital you were unfazed when the first results were read and I saw the joy when the others were presented."

I look over his shoulder making sure no one else can hear us.

"Okay so I had a sneaky suspicion that the results may not be what they are so I asked Mpumelelo to take the other samples to three independent labs so we can be sure everything is legit. I'm sorry I know I wasn't supposed to involve myself." I say trying to be polite. I would have got involved either way.

"I'm glad you did. You love my grandson right?"

"Of course."

"Then you have nothing to worry about. All you did was protect him. A child is a blessing that's for sure but he deserves to have his real father in his life. Imagine what would happen years later when he finds out the person he thought was his father is actually his uncle. That would break anyone. And I'm sure whoever paid the lab technician clearly didn't think that far." He says sounding sad and it breaks my heart a bit. "You have to tell them the truth though. Especially Lulonke. He deserves to know."

"I guess." I grab a cup and pour myself some tea. We sit there listening to the chaos happening right now. I know I have to tell Lu the truth but that will have to wait a while. I can't tell him in front of them they will just think I tampered with the results and then turn this whole thing on me when all I wanted to do was get the truth and nothing but the truth.

"Do you think he will believe me?" I ask after a long moment of just sipping tea. For some reason I find it easier to talk to him. He is an elder someone I should respect. And as much as I do having him on my side feels like some sort of a blessing.

"Of course he will. Everything you did was because you wanted to make sure he doesn't get played. Having a woman who fights for you no matter what is a blessing too." I'm not sure Lu will see it that way plus his family well his mother will not be as forgiving.

"I've never had anyone fighting for me. From as far back as I can remember I've always had to be on fight mode. Lu was the first person other than my best friend who just wanted me to live. Not fight or be constantly alert but live. I just hope he doesn't see this as me crossing the line." I feel his hands on mine. His hands feel rough and hard yet they bring comfort too.

"All that you did you did out of the goodness of your heart. If Lu thinks differently then he doesn't deserve to have you in his corner. But I know him he will believe you."

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You'd think I'd be celebrating right now watching them get in the cars and leave should bring me some sort of peace but I still have a mountain to climb. Lu is driving Mkhulu and the devil spawn to the airport. Nkazimulo his parents and his baby mama are in the other one. They've been so consumed with this whole mess they didn't even think about food. But I know Lu is probably hungry. I decide on the simplest thing I can find chicken livers with pap. I put the livers in the microwave to defrost them while I start on the pap.

One hour.

Two hours.

Three hours.

Four hours.

I'm pretty sure it doesn't take this long to drive to the airport and back again. Unless he has decided to drive them to KZN. I try his phone for the hundredth time and nothing. It rings unanswered. I've gone from being nervous to being angry and now I'm worried. What if something happened to him? I try him again and nothing. I take a deep breath preparing myself to call the last person I would turn to in a time like this. But he should know where Lu is.

I unblock his number and wait patiently as the phone rings. Lucky for me he picks up.

"Its definitely going to rain cats and dogs. You're calling me?" Judging by the chirpiness in his voice I'm guessing he has accepted that he is someone's dad.

"Trust me I dont have any other choice. Where are you?"

"I'm home. Why? Do you want to visit?" I knew this was a bad idea. I swear if I wasnt desperate I would tell him to fuck off.

"No

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"I'm home. Why? Do you want to visit?" I knew this was a bad idea. I swear if I wasnt desperate I would tell him to fuck off.

"No where is home exactly?" My guess is KZN but it could also mean his place. We're black people we always have more than one home.

"Home in Hillcrest. What's wrong?" I'm not sure if I should tell him. Nkazimulo is as cunning as they come. He might just use this whole thing to try and break us up. Again.

"Nothing. I was just making sure you got home safe. Goodnight." I hang up the phone and block him again. Lu's one friend is in Durban the other I forgot to take his number. Maybe he is with Mpumelelo. But why not call me?

I go to bed with a heavy heart. I don't know if sleep will come but I have work tomorrow and I can't be waiting up for a frown ass man who also doesn't know how to pick up his phone and let his girlfriend know he will come home late. Now I'm pissed more than anything else.

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When I wake up in the morning he is still not here. I slept alone in this house while he was out doing God knows what. I get in the shower before covering myself up with a robe and going downstairs to make breakfast.

His shirt laying on the one sitter couch is the first thing I see. He is laying on the couch face up with his arm over his eyes. It must have been a long night. I carefully march down the stairs my anger multiplying tenfold. I grab a cushion and hit him with it. He slowly opens his eyes and looks at me. I'm not going to be the first one to talk when he knows exactly why I am angry. He rubs sleep from his eyes and stares at me giving me one of his smiles with his pearly whites accompanying it. My body is a traitor because as soon as I see him smile I feel all sorts of tingles all over me. My mind tries to stay strong but is failing. Dismally.

"Muntu wami." He says holding out his hand. "I'm sorry." I take his hand and he pulls me to lay on top of him.

"You didn't come home." I can feel him smiling. This man is something else.

"I know mama. I lost track of time."

"Where were you?" I ask. I have trust issues and he is not helping especially when I feel him tense up and clear his throat. Now I know whatever follows will either be a lie or some made up story

because he doesn't want me to stress. Either way I hope he thinks carefully about his next move.
"And don't lie to me." I add for emphasis.

He takes a deep breath as his chest momentarily stops moving.

"I went to drop off Slindile and we started talking." He says. I try to pull myself up so I can look at him but he won't let me. He tightens his arm around my waist forcing me to lay there like a stubborn child.
"Nothing happened." He adds. For the mere fact that he felt the need to throw that in there makes me think there's more to the story than he is letting on.

I count backwards from twenty just so I can be sure whatever I say doesn't lead to a fight. Although my antenna is already up and I'm ready to burst I calm myself down.

"Why did you have to drop her off? If I remember correctly she was in the car with Nkazimulo. So why are you the one dropping her off?" My voice is soft and calm. The complete opposite of what I am feeling right now.

"Yeah Nkazimulo left his car at the airport so it was either I drive her or she takes the gautrain or a cab." So she had options and he felt he was the best one.

"Where does she stay?"

"Centurion."

"Okay and what exactly did you have to talk about. Makabongwe is not your child so explain to me what exactly you needed to discuss till the early hours of the morning?" I'm finding it hard to keep my anger in check. The more I think about him being with his ex the more angry I get. I free myself from his hold and stand up. He sits up rubbing his face.

"She just wanted to apologise for everything." A simple sorry would have done the trick but no he had to go to her house sit down and listen to her in the comfort of her home.

"So if Nkazimulo were to ask me to come to his place so he can 'apologise' in the middle of the night would that be okay with you?" He pops his eyes out like the thought alone repulses him. It might be a low blow on my part but he started it.

"It's not the same and you know it." He hisses.

"Really? How is it different? You spent the night with your ex when I called you you chose to ignore my calls because you were busy with her? What were you talking about? Was she comforting you because it turns out her son is not yours? Were you secretly hoping he is yours?"

"Of course not." He stands up and tries to pull me to him but I take a step back. Right now I dont know where his hands have been and I dont need them on me. "Milani?" We stand there for a moment just a couple of feet apart yet it feels like we are miles apart. The tension is thick so thick it's threatening to consume us both.

"I have to go to work." I try to walk past him but he pulls me back his hands wrapping around my arms even in the midst of our 'fight' he is still gently. Making sure he doesnt apply too much pressure on my arm.

"Sthandwa sam please just listen to me." He pleads.

"You know what hurts its not the fact that you spent the night with her because I'd like to think the man I love would not do anything to risk our relationship it's the fact that you didnt even bother calling me and telling me what's going on. You and I are not supposed to have any secrets." I pull away and head upstairs. Quite hypocritical of me to expect no secrets from him while I am keeping one too.

I quickly get dressed and head back downstairs. I find him sitting on the same couch with his head buried in his hands. I'm not sure anymore if its guilt or pain he is feeling right now. He looks up when he hears my footsteps. He stands up and grabs his car keys.

"I already called a cab." I tell him. The guilt on his face is immediately replaced with irritation.

"Then cancel it." He says grabbing my bags and walking out. I cancel the cab and head out to the car.

I guess chivalry doesnt die just because someone is angry. He is waiting by the passenger door with the door wide open. I get in and he closes it behind me. As soon as he gets in the car the tension escalates. As we drive out of the gate his hand instinctively grabs my thigh. And for some reason that action alone calms me down. How am I getting butterflies when I should be mad at him?

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Fall in love they said. It will be fun they said. They lied. There is nothing fun about umgowo. Granted its self inflicted because if I didnt allow my anger and pride to get in the way Lulonke and I would have spoken about this whole mess and I would be back in his arms. But no I am here craving wine or anything alcoholic really but I have a bodyguard who watches my every move. I cant drink in peace anymore.

I've gone cold Turkey for almost two weeks now. To prove that I don't have an alcohol problem there wasn't any withdrawal symptoms or anything to show that I have an alcohol dependency problem. But it doesn't matter because they still maintain I have a problem. It's fine though I can live without alcohol. Somewhat.

"Here have some food." She says handing me a bowl with uphuthu and she places a two liter container of inkomazi on the coffee table. I'm not a big fan of it. Especially now that I'm older. It used to be our 'struggle meal' growing up. Now all it reminds me of is eating it every night. But right now I have no choice but to endure it. Sne's baby has decided she doesn't like spices and anything that's aromatic. So for the past week alone we've been eating either milk inkomazi or plain boiled meat with stock cubes thrown in for taste. If I'm lucky.

"Imkomazi. Again!" She gives me a deadly side eye I know not to continue. But I don't like peace. "You should have just told me to cook."

"Milani." I break out in a fit of laughter. I know hormones have turned her into a whole playground but it's nice to see her squirm a bit.

"I'm joking." She rolls her eyes and goes back to eating. I don't think I'll be able to finish this but I can take two spoons.

My phone rings on the coffee table. I know it's Lu because he hasn't stopped calling me. Even when I tell him I don't want to talk to him he insists on me listening to him. I don't know how many times he's said he is sorry. I do believe him but I am finding it hard to just forgive. I mean he did ignore me while he was with his ex in the middle of the night.

I ignore the call but it's hard to ignore the side eyes coming from Sne. She's on the Lulonke is innocent train begging me to at least speak to him. The phone stops ringing and then it starts again. He does this all the time. Each time he will call numerous times till I get frustrated and pick up.

It stops and then starts ringing again. Sne snatches it from the table and answers. I listen to her speak even with me asking her to put the phone on loudspeaker she refuses. Their conversation is lighthearted and fun. I get a little bit jealous because my name doesn't even enter their conversation. I get up and go to my room. The laughter gets louder and it goes on for a while before there's silence.

Sne walks into my room with a huge grin on her face and hands me the phone.

"What was that about?" I ask. She stops at the door and turns around to look at me.

"What?" Is she really going to play dumb right now?

"You know exactly what I'm talking about." She pretends to think for a moment before she 'realises' what I'm talking about.

"Oh you mean the phone call? Well I figured since you don't want to talk to the poor man I might as well offer an ear. I must say he sounds good. The distance between you two is doing him a whole lot of good. Give it a few more days and he will be over you and Slindile will get her man back." She says and walks out. Her hormones are making her mean.

I think about calling him back but my ego wont let me. I've been thinking about finding out who I am. I've been scrolling through social media going to my aunts profiles and their kids looking for some clue on who I am. I dont even know what I'm looking for. If my mother could tell me who I really am then this would be easier.

I text Dr Nkomo and set up an appointment to come see Grace. Maybe this time she will tell me the truth. I'm hopeful but there's plenty of room for disappointment. Even though I've had plenty of practice when it comes to getting through stuff this seems like the biggest hill I'll have to climb.

There's a knock on the door. Before I can even look up the door opens. His cologne wafts in before he does. I try to focus my eyes on the phone in front of me but I can't seem to get the focus right. His pretense is overpowering and I'm nervous and I dont know why. He places a plastic bag on the side table before the bed dips as he takes a seat.

"Hi." He greets after a moment of silence. I dont know what's in the bag whatever it is though smells divine. I can feel my stomach waking up. It doesnt help that I only ate a couple spoonfuls of the Nkomazi earlier.

"Hi."

"I know you dont want to talk to me so I'll do the talking and you'll listen." He tells me. He doesnt sound as good as Sne made it out. I feel guilty because it's obvious something else is bothering him besides the fact that I am not talking to him. "I know I fucked up. I shouldn't have ignored your calls and I shouldn't have gone to her place in the middle of the night." This is like a replay of everything he has said the past few days.

"You're beginning to sound like a broken record." I say lifting up my head. Instead of the "happy" person Sne described. He looks like someone who has a lot on his shoulders. And the bags under his eyes do not inspire any confidence. Something is definitely wrong.

"I know. And I'm sorry. Please forgive me." He sounds defeated right now. Maybe if I'd listened to him he wouldn't be feeling or looking this way.

"You dont look okay what's wrong?" He sighs laying his head on my lap.

"I missed you." I'm not sure this is the only reason he looks and sounds this way but I let him be. I hold his head brushing it lightly. It doesnt take long before he starts snoring. I tap him lightly and he wakes up.

"Babe get on the bed. You cant sleep like this." He lifts himself up and takes off his shoes.

"I brought you food by the way. Sne told me you're tired of eating Nkomazi all the time." He says getting up on the bed. He lays his head back on my lap and he is immediately out like a light.

I try to open the plastic bag without making noise but fail. Luckily he doesn't wake up. He brought me Spur ribs with wings a burger onion rings and chips. There's also a salad and a litre of orange juice. Sne pokes her head through the door and gives me a thumbs up and closes the door again when she sees us like this.

I eat a bit of the food then turn the lights off

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onion rings and chips. There's also a salad and a litre of orange juice. Sne pokes her head through the door and gives me a thumbs up and closes the door again when she sees us like this.

I eat a bit of the food then turn the lights off allowing Lu to sleep. My phone beeps. I check it and find a message from an unsaved number.

"I hope you're happy now." The message reads. I'm not sure who its from so I ignore it. For the first time in a week I actually have a good sleep.

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I wake up in the morning to find him wide awake starring up at the ceiling. There is definitely something going on with him. I check the time on my phone it's barely past five.

"Why do you look like you have a lot on your shoulder." He turns to me and smiles. A fake smile even.

"Its nothing to worry about."

"What happened to not keeping secrets?" He closes his eyes and takes in a large amount of air.

"Okay I spoke to my dad a couple of days ago. It turns out mum and Nkanyezi decided to tell him everything about you. He gave me a choice either I break up with you or I get demoted and lose my partnership." He says. I feel my body heat rising. This is not a choice anyone should be given. No one should ever be forced to choose between a job they love and someone they love. It makes zero sense in my opinion but I don't come from a rich family so i dont care much about public perceptions or reputations. But it's obvious the Mbatha family cares about it. Why else would they be okay with Lu having to make a choice like this.

I keep starring at him trying to gauge where his mind is right now. He loves his job he might not have been enthusiastic about it at first but he fell in love with it. Now he breathes and lives law. It's a part of him its engraved in every part of his DNA.

"Dont choose me." I blurt out. He pops his eyes out like I just insulted him. "I know how much your job means to you and your family. So choose your job. Choose your family." His eyes are glued on me he is not even blinking. I'm not sure he heard me. "Baby."

"I can get a job anywhere. I wont find someone like you." Tears are running down the side of my face slowly being sucked up by the pillow beneath me.

"But you can never have another family." I remind him. I hate his mother and sister that's for sure but I know he loves them. It was easier when they hated me without all these restrictions. But now giving him an ultimatum my hatred for them has surpassed the hatred I thought I had for Peter and Grace. This is one hateful vindictive family.

"Maybe but I can make my own family. With you. You know what the bible says 'a man will leave his mother and father and cling to his wife.'" I didn't even know he can quote the bible because I've never seen him go to church. Not even to say hello.

"Yeah but we are not married. And this isn't just your family that business is your legacy."

"Its my father's legacy. That firm has always been his dream. And now he has it back." I'm not even sure what him having it back means but I know it's not good.

"What do you mean?" I'm afraid of the words that will come out of his mouth. Even though I am not with him for the money although it does help but I'd hate for him to lose everything because of me.

"As of yesterday morning I am officially jobless. I handed in my resignation and cleared my office." My breath stops for a moment and my heart sinks to my stomach. This is not what people mean when they say someone took your breath away. No it's not him being jobless that I have a problem with Lu is a man who prides himself in making things happen for himself. No matter what he always has a plan. I know he can get another job and he will. What bothers me more than anything is the fact that he gave up an amazing job that he loved and with it possibly his family for me. I should be flattered but right now I hate myself.

I've never felt the need to look back at my choices and be regretful but right now I am. Right now I wish I can go back in time and make different choices. I wish I could relive my life so this moment never happens. I always knew my choices would come back to haunt me one day. ME! Not the people around me. They were my choices no one should have to pay for my choices.

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LULONKE

"One week of unemployment and you already look like a bum." Scelo says sliding into the booth across from me. I might not like him very much but he is like a brother to Milani and I'm sure he wants what's best for her just as much as I do. I dont know why he chose Spur for this meeting but I'm glad he did. I need to watch my pockets now that I'm officially unemployed.

"Thank you I'll take that as a compliment seeing as you look like a bum all the time." He chuckles.

"Good one." The waiter takes his order then disappears. "So now that you're unemployed how are you planning on taking care of my sister?" He asks crossing his arms on the table and staring at me.

"I don't remember telling you I was unemployed." I say. He probably heard it from Milani. Or not. "The law fraternity isn't as big as you think. And when a partner leaves a firm like Mbatha and sons with no valid explanation it will always make people talk." He tells me. I forgot how easy it is for words to get around.

"Well you have nothing to worry about. Milani will not starve. She'll be just fine."

"Is she going to be the one taking care of you now?"

"That's never going to happen. She can take care of me any other way except financially. Trust me we will be fine." He nods his head as the waiter places a glass of Corona in front of him. It's too early for someone to be drinking alcohol but I decide to reserve my comments.

"So why did you call me?" He asks after taking a sip of the drink.

"I need your help. I know your underworld influence is far reaching." He stares at me a little smirk on his face. I know Scelo uses his "consulting" business as front for something else. I'm not sure yet what exactly it is that he deals in but I know everyone I spoke to told me he was the best person to help me with my problem.

"Underworld?" He questions taking another sip of his drink.

"You can relax I am not here to bust you and I'm not going to tell Milani or Sne." He visibly relaxes at my assurance. He leans back on the booth this time crossing his arms on his chest.

"So what do you need me to do? Take out your father?" He asks his smirk turning into a wide smile.

"No. I need you to help me find Milani's family. Her real family." His smile disappears as he leans in again.

"How am I supposed to do that if her mother won't tell her anything concrete to go on?"

"She told me. I asked and she told me everything." His brows rise as he watches me.

"She volunteered the information to you from the goodness of her heart." I nod my head in agreement and he laughs. "Oh come on. What did you do?" I shrug my shoulders and sip my own drink.

"Nothing. Maybe she likes me." His laugh fills the restaurant earning us a few side eyes. It's mid morning and most people just want to eat their food in peace but his loud laugh is not making that possible.

"Fine. I'll pretend like I believe you. So what did she tell you?" He takes another sip of his drink watching me as if he doesn't believe I know the truth.

"She told me where Milani was born and how she came to have her." He tilts his head waiting for me to keep going. "Apparently Milani was born at a hospital in Ndwendwe. And when she was born there was a strike at the hospital. Her daughter was born with the umbilical cord around her neck. And when she realised the baby was dead she swapped her with the child of the only other woman who was there."

His face is blank one moment and the next different emotions take over him. Usually he is calm and collected but right now it's hard to pinpoint exactly what he is feeling.

"Ndwendwe!" He says and keeps repeating the word over and over again. "My family is originally from Ndwendwe." He finally says tapping his fingers on the table.

"Okay that's perfect. All we have to do is find out who lost a child around the time Milani was born. And the good thing is that there were just two people at the hospital so it should be easy to find out the other woman."

"Yeah." He says. "I have to go. I will call you if I hear anything." He quickly drags himself out of the booth and leaves just as the waiter brings out our food.

"Can you make it a takeaway please." I ask the waiter. I can't eat two plates of food alone. The waiter smiles and heads back to the kitchen. I light up my phone and go through my emails. There are documents I need to sign and officially sign over my shares back to my father. I'm not sure if him sending me this email is supposed to scare me straight or it's just a reminder of what I am giving up either way he will have to get used to not having me around.

"I thought that was you." Someone says sliding into the booth. I look up and find Slindile sitting there a smile plastered on her face. Unfortunately for her I don't feel the need to return her smile. "How are you? Nkanyezi told me that you quit the firm." She says.

"What are you doing here?" Her smile quickly disappears and she clears her throat.

"I actually had an interview with a source around here." The waiter brings my takeaways and I pay making sure to leave a generous tip for him.

"So you really chose her over your family." Slindile says as soon as the waiter is out of earshot.

"I'm not sure how that is any of your business." She shakes her head chuckling.

"You know I always thought you valued family more than anything else in the world. I guess I was wrong." Whatever confidence she got from my scheming with my sister and my mother is taking shape right now and I need to nip it in the bud before she further gets out of hand.

"Slindile do me a favour dont let my sister and my mother pull you into their scheming. Their family they might get off lightly. You're not my family so you may not get off lightly. Focus on your child." I slide off the booth and grab the plastic bag. "Another thing that little stunt you pulled at your place by switching my phone to silent mode when you knew Milani would call me you're not as slick as you think." I turn to walk away but she stops me. She gets out of the booth and stands in front of me.

"Tell me something for years you've punished for what I did but she gets a pass. Why is that? How is she any different from me?" She asks. I take a step back and look at her. For the mere fact that I used to love her once I'll be a tad bit kinder.

"How is she different from you? Okay for one she's honest. Milani has never pretended to be something she's not. When she found out Nkazimulo and I are brothers she made sure to tell me all about them. Even though I already knew

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she still felt like I needed to hear it from her too. In my books that's commendable. Secondly she didnt have an affair behind my back that went on for months and lastly she didnt have my brothers child and tried to pin it on me. Milani is not a saint that much I'm well aware off. I also know she has past who doesnt? I also know she's the woman who has given me enough strength and courage to see beyond making everyone happy and completely forgetting about me. She loves me even with all her broken pieces she loves me. So yes she's definitely different from you. Now if you dont mind I have to go." I walk past her and leave.

The moment I get off the lift in the basement parking I am surrounded by camera flashes microphones shoved in my face and a million and one questions being thrown around. Once I get my bearings and my mind catches up to the present I hear the questions. Even though the flashes are blinding its nothing shades and a bowed head can't fix. It's their questions that make me stop for a moment.

"Advocate Mbatha is it true that you're dating a prostitute?"

"Advocate Mbatha is it true you've been fired from the family business?"

"Mbatha sir did you turn your back on your family for a prostitute?"

"Shandu are you not afraid of what this relationship will do to your reputation as a lawyer?"

I push my way past them I can feel every atom of anger rising inside me. But I know better than to punch any of them because that will be another scandal. I make it to my car and quickly get in. They surround my car their flashes refusing to stop till I see security push them away from the car. I drive out with some of them hitting my windows. I'm not sure how they found this out or better yet who told them. But I need to get to Milani before this whole thing blows up.

SCELO

He gets to the airport in the nick of time and quickly checks in before rushing to board the plane. After Lulonke told him Milani's story he booked the next available flight. He is not sure yet of the puzzle pieces he has in front of him but he cant help feeling like all the pieces are right and all he needs is someone to put them together and make them make sense.

He keeps glancing at his watch the flight is delayed a bit. When it finally takes off he let's out a sigh of relief. But now he has to wait till it lands. If it was up to him he would make it go faster.

In his head the flight probably took the whole day but as soon as he makes it to Durban he rushes out of the airport like someone who has just been shot out of a cannon. He finds his brother waiting for him outside.

"Why do you look like you're running away from something?" Bongani asks when he sees his brother.

"Let's just go." Scelo says and gets in the car. Bongani shakes his head and follows suit. They drive out of the airport with Scelo nervously tapping his foot on the car floor.

"Okay you're worrying me. Did you do something wrong?" Bongani presses seeing how nervous his brother is.

"No I'll explain everything when we get home."

The drive is relatively silent. Although Bongani poses questions here and there and either gets one word answers or no answers at all. Eventually he gives up and focuses on driving. When they make it home Scelo rushes out of the car before it even completely comes to a stop. He rushes inside and finds his parents in the kitchen. His father is not so happy about being summoned home by his son but his panicked voice earlier made him think something big is going on. He secretly hoped it involves more grandkids for him to spoil.

"We are here your Majesty why did you summon us?" He asks as soon as his son is settled on the high chair. His other son walks in and sits next to his brother.

"Has he told you what's going on?" Bongani asks his parents. They shake their heads their eyes glued to Scelo.

"Why did we leave Ndwendwe?" He finally asks. Silence fills the room as the parents stare at each other not sure of where the question is coming from. "I have these blurry memories of what happened but I cant be too sure. I know I was seven the last time I was there and I remember when we left it wasnt pleasant. I knew something bad had happened and it involved Bab'Dinhizwe and his wife's dead child. So what happened?"

"Where is this coming from?" His mother asks.

"Please just humor me. Tell me what happened." He begs. Desperation taking over. His parents look at each other before telling him the story. By the time they are done he is nodding his head his hands clasped together on top of the counter with his eyes fixated on the streaks of black marble on the countertop.

"Now what?" Bongani asks staring at his brother.

"I think Milani is Bab'Dingizwe's daughter." He finally says.

Silence fills the room. Everyone is starring at Scelo like he has grown horns. None of them are sure how to react to what he just said. It feels weird and it also feels like a prank of some sorts.

"What are you saying?" Bab'Cebekhulu asks loosening the tie around his neck.

"I'm calling the doctor." Bongani says pulling his phone out of his pocket. Before he can dial the doctors number Scelo grabs the phone from him.

"I am not crazy or sick. Last night I got a call from Lulonke for us to meet this morning. We did. He told me that he spoke to Milani's mother well the woman who raised her she told him everything about how Milani came to be in her care." He takes a deep breath and pulls the glass of water his mother was drinking and takes a sip before he goes on. "When he mentioned Milani being born eNdwedwe during a strike at the hospital it triggered some memories that I must have clearly shoved to the back of my mind. I was seven the last time we were there. And I remember mum and Bab'Dingizwe's wife being pregnant at the same time. Mum gave birth first and a couple of weeks later Bab'Dingizwe's wife was rushed to the hospital. She didnt come back with a baby instead there was a funeral a week later I think. I'm not sure how long it took after that before we left."

"A month." Mam'Cebekhulu says. "But that still doesnt explain how Milani is Dingizwe's daughter when we buried her."

"You buried the wrong child I think. I wont be fully sure until a DNA test is done but I am ninety percent positive Milani is our sister. If Bab'Dingizwe's wife gave birth at the hospital in the midst of the strike then she is definitely Milani's mother. The information I got from Lulonke is that there were only two patients in the maternity ward that night. All we have to do is find out who those patients were." Scelo says a tad bit more optimistic and hopeful than he was when he got here. The more he talks about this the more sense it makes to him.

"Okay and how are you planning on doing that because I doubt the hospital has a proper filing system especially one that goes as far back as 23 years ago?" Bab'Cebekhulu says his suit jacket being plunged over the high chair followed swiftly by his tie and his shirt buttons being loosened.

"That's what I need to figure out. But I was thinking of going the old fashioned route and actually going to the hospital to check their records."

"You'll be lucky if they have records going as far back as five years ago. But goodluck. I am going back to work." Bongani says getting off the chair.

"I was actually hoping you would come with me." Scelo pleads.

"Uh no. Dingizwe and his wretched wife do not deserve our help."

"Bongani they are family. Plus you care about Milani dont you want her to find some peace in her life?" Mam'Cebekhulu asks her son. Bongani sighs and sits back down.

"There is no need for emotional blackmail mother." He says gently hitting his forehead on the counter.

"Its late for you to leave now so maybe you can wait till morning and then go there." Their mother suggests. Scelo shakes his head.

"No we are going now. Hopefully we will find a tired nurse who will just show us to the records room."

"You do know I have kids I need to pick up from school right?" Bongani says bringing his head back up to look at his brother.

"You also have a nanny a driver and their mother call one of them. Let's go before it gets too late."

They say goodbye to their parents and drive out with Bongani complaining. He was a little older when everything happened and he got to see first hand the rift forming between his parents and his uncle. He was there too when the decision was made for his parents to leave home and find another place to live. He watched his mother go from being happy about her daughters birth to downright being borderline depressed. His father saw it too and that's why he made the decision to take his family away.

The drive to Ndwedwe is not as long just a little over an hour and they make it to their hometown. And thanks to a bit of technology finding the hospital is an easy task. It's late in the afternoon when they arrive. People are slowly trickling out patients who've been standing in line from the crack of dawn are finally making their way home. The brothers drive in and park right in the front of the building. They sit in the car for a moment one brother wondering how he can do this and the other really not wanting to be here.

"Let's get this over and done with." Bongani says getting out of the car. Scelo follows behind him as they make their way to reception.

"Bring your A game." Bongani whispers to his brother seeing the wide smile on the receptionists face. Her eyes keep darting from Scelo to Bongani her aching muscles completely forgotten.

"Sawubona sisi." Scelo says his smile mirroring hers. She bats her eyelids flashing the green eyeshadow she meticulously put on this morning.

"Yebo bhuti how can I help you?" She asks puffing up her chest mentally beating herself up for not wearing her push up bra like she always does.

"Firstly we would like to apologise for showing up so late I'm sure you're tired." Bongani chimes in his pearly whites on full display. The receptionist is not sure who to focus on. As much as she can see the resemblance between them they are vastly different people. "What's your name?"

"Busi." She answers her cheeks slowly turning red. Bongani leans on the counter taking her hand and planting a kiss on the top of her hand.

"It's a pleasure to meet you Busi. So I know it's late and you're definitely tired but we need your help. We are looking for some records. Our aunt gave birth here about 23 years ago and her child died so now we need to find out how the child died. We were hoping you could help us." Bongani says his smile on full display.

"23 years ago? That's a long time to be looking for records. And besides you need proper documentation to get to those files and maybe a court order. I'm not sure yet. I will ask someone and then get back to you." Busi says.

"Eish you need proper documentation to get to those files and maybe a court order. I'm not sure yet. I will ask someone and then get back to you." Busi says.

"Eish problem is this is urgent. We really need those files as soon as possible. Is it possible to send us to the person in charge of the records and then we will take it from there." Bongani pleads. It's a futile exercise though because Busi doesn't want to budge.

Scelo leans on the counter pulling out a small brown envelope from his pocket placing it on the counter immediately drawing Busi's attention again.

"Sis wam I know it's late and the person who can help us is likely gone by now. So maybe you can just point us to the records room we will find what we are looking for." Busi sighs looking around to make sure no one is around. Patients have dwindled down and nurses and doctors are preparing to

knock off. She walks around the counter looks up and down the passage before holding out her hand. Scelo places the envelope in her hand and she quickly shoves it into her pocket.

"Follow me." She leads them down the passage turning corners until she stops in front of a door written records on the door. She scans the passage again before opening the door. "I'll be back in an hour. If anyone catches you I don't know you and you don't know me. I don't know if you will find records from 23 years ago but knock yourselves out." They quickly rush into the room before Busi closes the door and locks it.

"What if she doesn't come back?" Bongani asks looking around the room. It's not as bad as they expected files seem to be kept rather neat and in order.

"Then we will be stuck here the whole night. We didn't even take her number." Scelo replies already rummaging through the files. "We have an hour to do this let's get to it."

MILANI

This attention would be nice if it was positive. But no my face is splashed all over the internet with everyone calling me a prostitute. There are online articles social media posts and I even saw a link to a YouTube video talking about this. If it was just me it wouldn't mean much but Lulongke's name is on there and this might not bode well for his career.

I see a Twitter post from some gossip blogger at least that's what she calls herself saying she might just drop a list of my clients if her post gets to 100 thousand likes and retweets. Lu tried to shield me from this whole mess but he can't protect me from everything. I scroll through Twitter reading every post I find with my name on it. Each one more vile and hateful than the other.

"The love of money will send a lot of our sisters to hell." One comment reads on Jade Mini's post.

"Can't turn a whore into a wife." Another says.

"Poor guy being dragged through the mud because some slay queen couldn't keep her legs closed."

"Its true real women ended with our mothers."

"I know this girl she was a regular at clubs and she would never leave alone. Different men every night."

Lu grabs my phone from my hands and switches it off.

"Its enough now. I told you not to read these stupid posts." He says placing a plate of food on the table. I don't know if I can stomach anything right now my stomach is still in knots. I'm not sure what I was expecting when Lu pulled me out of work this afternoon but this wasn't it. Whoever gave Jade Mini all this information clearly has my file. And the worse part is that I can't even sue for defamation because everything they are saying is true.

"Baby you need to eat." Lu says. He sits on the couch pulling my legs over his lap and gently massaging my thigh.

"I'm not hungry." My voice is back to being calm. I think I've run out of tears. I've cried so much I can feel a headache coming on. Its not the story that hurts its mine I've lived it and I know it. It's the insults. The fact that some people who dont know me from a bar of soap feel like they can lay judgement on me. And the fact that all this will be on the internet forever. Everytime someone brings up my name or Lulonke's these stories will come up. I shudder to think the kind of impact this will have on Lulonke's career. Things like these are always the first to come up when you Google anything.

"Please eat. Just a couple of spoonfuls so you have something in your stomach." He begs. I nod my head he picks up the plate and feeds me the rice and beef stew. After the third spoon I can feel my stomach threatening to emit every grain of rice inside me. I shake my head when he tries to feed me again. He places the plate back on the table. I struggle to chew and swallow the food in my mouth. He hands me a bottle of water I force myself to swallow before taking a sip.

"I'm sorry about this." He looks up from massaging my feet and stares at me.

"About what? This is not your fault. In actual fact I will get to the bottom of this. Dont worry?" He assures me.

"How? You cant go after every stranger on the internet because they insulted me."

"I can but I want to get to the bottom of it. Find the person feeding this Jade Mini person all these information." He says his grip tightening on my foot making me flinch. "Sorry." I get the idea he already knows who is behind this. At the back of my head my subconscious tells me his mother and sister are the masterminds behind all this. Their hatred for me really runs deep.

His phone rings. Atleast one of us is still connected to the world. He answers before handing the phone to me.

"Its Sne." He says answering my unasked question.

"Hey."

"Hey listen I just got a call from mum. We have been summoned to KZN. She sent me our flight tickets." She tells me. I'm not sure about going there right now but I have to atleast explain myself in person to them. They are the closest thing I have to parents and I hate how this might taint how they see me. But I'll have to face them at the end of the day.

"Okay. What time are we leaving?"

"Noon. Are you on loudspeaker?" She asks. I know she's about to say something inappropriate but because I love her I will support whateve she says. That's what a ride or die is for.

"No."

"Cool you'll give me yes or no answers only okay?"

"Okay."

"Right. Lulonke is right next to you?"

"Yes."

"Okay do you have an idea who is behind this whole mess?"

"Yes."

"Does her name start with Nka and ends with Nyezi?"

"Most likely?"

"Cool here's the plan when we are in KZN we have to find a way to get to her. I'm sure I can find my dads gun wendy a drive by and if we get caught i will plead temporary insanity due to pregnancy and hormones. That should get me off scot free. You on the other hand will deny everything to the last end. Clear?" I'm trying my best to hide my laugh. Sne is as crazy as they come even though I know she won't go through with this plan of hers but it's good to know she has my back.

"Clear as day."

"Perfect. I will see you tomorrow. I love you okay?"

"I love you too." I hang up the call my soul somehow lighter. Even with a million people judging me I know a couple of people who are still in my corner and I will always be grateful for them.

I take my feet off Lulongke's lap and replace them with my head. He holds on to my shoulder gently massaging me.

"So you are going to KZN?" He asks.

"Yeah."

"That's good. I should book my own flight. Maybe if I'm lucky we will be on the same flight." He says giving me his perfect smile. How he came out of that vile woman is beyond me. "You know I love you right?" He adds.

"I know. I love you too."

72♥

Whoever said scandals die down as quickly as they started clearly lied or they didn't have social media. I've had eyes on me since we left Joburg. The whispers and constant pointing and there is always that one person who sneaks in a picture or two. You'd swear I'm some type of celebrity. I try to ignore them but it's hard to. I'm still trending in the top ten on Twitter trends although now I think people are using my name to gain traction for their business. Either way no one has forgotten yesterday's news.

The three of us walk through the airport yes Lu got a seat on our flight. I'm not sure what he plans on doing in Durban but he insisted on coming along. We drag our luggage to the parking where we find Mam'Cebekhulu already waiting. In front of her is Bab'Cebekhulu's driver in a different car. She squints her eyes staring at Sne. I can feel her getting uncomfortable next to me. The free flowing dress she's wearing with a large puffer jacket is not helping matters. All it does is draw attention to her.

"Hi ma." Sne says her luggage is standing in front of her like a barrier to protect herself from her mother.

"Hello ma." I greet and give her a hug. It's awkward on my part anyways. She directs Lu and Sne to the other car and she orders me to get in the car with her. The tension in the car is thick and rather

uncomfortable. She doesn't say anything more than asking how I'm doing. I can feel my heart threatening to jump out of my mouth. I might think I'm some bad ass bitch who can do whatever she wants but right now I feel like a teenager caught doing something I wasn't supposed to do. Which technically I was but that's not the point.

We drive into Gateway and she leads me straight to La Parada. It's one of her favourite places to be. We find a table and sit down. She orders a bottle of red wine for her and orange juice for me. I guess she wants me sober for this interrogation. I keep fidgeting with my hands as the nerves fully consume me.

"Are you hungry?" She asks perusing through the menu. I look at the unopened menu on front of me and shake my head. I don't think I can stomach any food right now. The waiter brings our drinks and then takes our orders. I say ours because she just ordered me a double cheese burger with potato wedges and a salad on the side. She orders a small pizza for herself. As soon as the waiter disappears she takes a sip of her wine. I can feel her gaze on me.

"So all the things on social media are they true?" She asks covering my hands with hers. The warmth of her touch brings a bit of comfort to me. I nod my head and hear her sigh. I don't have the guts to look at her in the eyes. I'm not ready to see the shame and pity in them. "When did it start?"

I sigh and finally muster up enough courage to look up at her. There's no judgement shame or pity in her eyes. Instead worry fills her beautiful face. "First year second semester I think." I reply honestly. "Why? I know you needed to take care of your siblings but why not ask us for help? You know we could have done everything to help you." She says worry now fully replaced with hurt. Her voice is breaking and I can see her eyes getting teary.

"Because it wasn't your responsibilities ma. It was mine."

"It wasn't your responsibility either. You were a child too." She says squeezing my hands.

"I know. But we don't choose how our lives pan out. I know all that I did might seem like something horrible but I didn't see it that way. I still don't. Yes there were many ways to make money without losing myself but I had a goal in mind and that was to finish my studies so my siblings can see that we could rewrite our story. I didn't want to be a statistic. It was one thing to preach to them about the importance of education but it was another to show them. To walk the path so they know it's possible. What I did afforded me the opportunity to do that without worrying about them having food to eat or clothes on their backs. Yes how I went about it was not right but at the time it was my best

option." I sigh turning around to hold her hands. "You had zero obligation towards me and you still dont but I am grateful for all you've done for me. No words can ever articulate just how grateful I am thanks to you my siblings got to get a glimpse of the life we were planning and in some way live it. So please dont judge me for this."

"I would never judge you for anything. In a way I understand but I am hurt that maybe we didnt foster a safe enough environment for you to turn to us for help." Tears run down her face and she gently dabs them away with the napkin.

"But you did help me. Everytime you took the kids for the holidays or bought them clothes. It meant a lot to me. You helped me us and expected nothing in return. You were a stranger who became more of a mother to us than our own mother. Trust me this had nothing to do with you and everything to do with me and my fears and insecurities."

The waiter places our food in front of us and my appetite returns full force. As nervous as I was about this conversation I'm glad it did not go the way I thought it would.

"How did it get out?" She asks picking up a piece of her pizza.

"I dont know but I think it was Lulonke's mother or sister. They seem determined to get me out of his life come hell or high waters." She stops chewing and puts the piece back on the plate.

"How does he feel about this whole thing."

"He has always known about everything and he has never judged me for it. So he is cool." She nods her head and goes back to eating.

Our late lunch goes better than I thought. By the time we leave the restaurant we are laughing and joking like we didnt just have the most intense conversation of our lives.

LULONKE

The driver leaves me at the gate of my apartment complex. I quickly rush in ti leave my luggage then grab my car keys and head back out with one destination in mind. Home.

As if the heavens heard me when I drive in I find Nkazimulo and Nkanyezi's cars here. I see Nandi's minicooper parked at the far end of the yard next to it is Thabile's maroon range rover. Perfect

everyone is here. I park my car behind Nkanyezi's and quietly walk in. I can hear voices coming from the lounge. Its like they summoned a meeting and didnt bother to call me.

"All I'm saying is this is the last straw there is no way Lu will let his reputation be dragged to the mud with this girls." I hear mum say. I decide to stay back and listen in on what's happening before I barge in and they decide to deny everything.

"So you admit you put the story out there?" Nkazimulo asks. He sounds more pissed than the others.

"Of course." Mum proudly boasts. "I'm not going to let my son be humiliated by that girl. If Lu knows what's good for him he will distance himself from that where and find himself a good girl to settle down with." She adds.

"Exactly." Nkanyezi chimes in.

"Exactly woknuka." Nkazimulo bellows and silence fills the room. "Do you know that most of our corporate clients are already jittery about Lulonke leaving and now you've gone and dragged the company's name through the mud." He adds. "I've spent the past couple of days putting out fires that you two started. What's going to happen if the firm collapses? All this because of a girl you don't even know."

"I know I'm not supposed to say this to my elders but both of you are stupid." Nandi says and I hear gasps. One thing about my sister she doeant mince her words. She says everything as is.

"Nand!" Mum says I can imagine her clutching her imaginary pearls if she's not wearing them.

"Nandi?" I hear Nkanyezi trying to be tough but this is Nandi we are talking about not even Jesus can get her to not say her piece.

"No sis the two of you think what you did is supposed to drive Lu away from Milani but knowing him you just sealed their fate. He will probably drive to home affairs tomorrow and marry her just to spite you. Although it will most likely be because he loves her spitting you will just be the cherry on top of the cake."

"I will not allow that." Mum says I can sense the panic in her voice. I take a deep breath before making my presence felt.

"Unfortunately it's not up to you mum." I say walking into the lounge. All eyes turn to look at me different emotions on everyone. I'm not sure which one is worse the smug look on Nkanyezi's face or the pity on Nandi's.

"Lulonke!"

"No ma I dont know what you thought you were doing putting Milani and my business out there but if you think that's going to make me leave her then you clearly don't know me. I love Milani and I will marry her. With or without your blessing she will be my wife."

"Bro you need to think about this." Nkazimulo adds. And here I was thinking he had more sense than these two.

"I have thought about it. I will protect Milani and if that means protecting her from my own family then so be it. I apologize if my happiness makes you feel some type of way so here is what I will do. I will stay out of your space and you stay out of mine because Milani is not going anywhere." Nkanyezi stands up folding her arms on her chest ready to spit some shit.

"What kind of muti did this girl give you? Its like your brain stops working when it comes to her. You've already lost your job and your shares because of her your reputation is in tatters and you still want to stick up for her. What the heck is wrong with you?" She yells.

"Nothing is wrong with me sis wam. But something is definitely wrong with you. Have you forgotten that you have your own dirty little secrets that you'd rather have stay buried. Like your son does your husband know he is not his? No? Of course not. And you're here judging Milani as if you're perfect. People in glass houses should not be throwing stones. So here is what's going to happen the two of you will stay out of my life." I move my finger between my sister and my mother.

"Dont forget that's your mother you're talking to." Nkazimulo reminds me.

"Oh I haven't forgotten. I also haven't forgotten that even within these walls there are skeletons that we'd all rather keep buried. So

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the next time you decide to come for Milani I might just dig up all those skeletons and I'd hate to see the real damage that that might cause."

MILANI

The drive to Tongaat isn't as uncomfortable as I thought it would be. Talking to Mam'Cebekhulu seems to have helped. Right now we are back to being our usual loud selves blasting Beyonce and singing along. This would be ten times better with Sne. I'm sure by now she's dying of nerves.

Mam'Cebekhulu might not have said it at the airport but I'm quite sure she has an idea about Sne's pregnancy. I wish she'd listened to me when I told her to tell them.

We pulled up to the house and I help take the groceries into the house. The moment I walk in silence engulfs the room. Even though I am in the kitchen I can see Scelo Bongani Bab'Cebekhulu and Lulonke in the lounge. I thought he was going to see his parents what the hell is he doing here? They keep giving me weird looks. Mam'Cebekhulu walks in and heads straight to the lounge. Somehow they all exchange these weird looks I dont understand between them its like they are communicating with their eyes and I guess I am not allowed to hear. What could Lulonke possibly have to do with whatever is going on here?

"Lani please get Sne. We need to talk." Mam'Cebekhulu says. I head upstairs and find Sne in the bedroom with the puffer jacket still on. She jumps when I walk in I guess she thought it was someone else.

"You know at some point that jacket will be too big to hide the stomach." I stand by the door making sure no one followed me. She heaves out a sigh and opens the jacket fanning herself. I dont know why she is punishing herself. It's way too hot for that jacket to be on anyone's body.

"I know. I think they know though. Did you see how mum was looking at me at the airport?" She asks sticking her head out of the window for some fresh air.

"I did. And they want you downstairs. They sent me to come get you." She quickly pulls her head back into the room. I can see the fear in her eyes. My poor friend.

"What do they want?" She asks with her voice cracking like she could cry at any moment. I push myself off the wall and walk towards her pulling her into a hug.

"Sne you need to stop stressing yourself. Tell them the truth your parents are understanding I'm sure they will be hurt but they are your parents and they love you. They will accept this baby and probably love it more than you." She smiles.

"You think?"

"I know so. They love you. So come on I will hold your hand and I won't let go no matter what."

I pull her down to the lounge and we take a seat on a two seater couch. Sne places a cushion on her lap trying to conceal her pregnancy. I see transparent files on the table. Inside there are papers that have either been photocopied or printed and they look like hospital files. I try to read everyone's

faces but I come up blank. Now I'm starting to think this is not about Sne's pregnancy. Lulonke wouldn't be here for that.

Silence. Heavy silence filled with tension. No one is saying anything and I'm afraid to say something either. Sne is shaking next to me I wish they could get her out of her misery so we can move on.

Aunt Nomvula's sudden appearance expels the tension for a good few seconds. She greets us all and takes a seat. This is heavy. Secelo clicks his laptop a couple of times and before we know it Phiwo's loud voice makes her presence known.

"Now that we are all here we can start." Mam'Cebekhulu says.

"Who is dying?" Phiwo asks and then bursts into laughter. Her laughter dies down when she realises no one else is laughing with her. "Okay what's going on?" She asks the question we all have.

Bab'Cebekhulu clears his throat and sits back on the sofa with his wife's hand in his.

"25 years ago I decided to quit my job as a teacher and start my business. I took all my savings and invested them in the business. There were ups and downs although the downs were more than the ups but we carried on. The second year of business things were pretty bad. Your mum had quit her own job to help me out with running the business. We went from having two incomes to barely scraping through each month. Paying rent became a mission all on its own. Eventually we decided that your mother and the kids would move back home and I would rent a backroom alone. It was cheaper than having a full 3 bedroom apartment. I would go home every weekend. My brother Dingizwe and his wife Thembsile lived at home with our mother." He sighs and takes a sip from a glass of water. I'm not sure where this is going but I like listening to stories of people who've overcome enough obstacles to get to where they are.

One weekend I went home and your mother told me she was pregnant. Even with no stable finances she was happy. It also helped that Thembi was also pregnant and they were due around the same time. Thembi and my brother were going to have their first child so they were excited. Everyone started calling the unborn children twins. Two weeks before her set due date your mother went into labour and gave birth to our first daughter Snethemba." He says staring lovingly at his daughter.

"She was a perfect chubby baby and everyone loved her. Two weeks later Thembi went into labour too. When she did unfortunately there was a strike at the hospital but they admitted her even though most patients had been moved to other hospitals. She gave birth to a girl too. Unfortunately the baby

did not make it." The sadness in his voice is clear. I guess I would be sad too the death of a child in my opinion is always worse than that of an adult.

"And that's when trouble started. Thembi insisted her child was alive when she went to sleep and yet no one could tell her how the baby died. She was devastated. The very next day I got a contract with the department of health to provide hospitals in the province with stationary equipment. It was a huge contract and it's the one that opened doors for us. We didn't share the news with anyone else it just felt inappropriate to be celebrating when there was a death in the family. After my brother buried his child he decided to go and consult. They told him the baby was not dead and that her spirit was still among the living. The healer told him that he suspects the child had been offered as a sacrifice and her soul was being used to work for someone. When he came back he found me telling our mother about the contract. I didn't expect her to jump for joy but a congratulations would have been nice. Instead he accused me of killing his daughter to strengthen my business. Why else would I get a huge contract a day after his daughter's death." He takes another sip of his water. I can feel the pain in his voice as he tells his story. Now it makes sense why he doesn't get along with his brother.

It didn't take long before he started telling everyone and anyone who cared to listen about his theory and everyone believed him including our mother. One time she sat me down and begged me to free my brother she told me to reverse whatever I had done. No matter how many times I told her I had nothing to do with his daughter's death she didn't believe me. My own mother thought I was capable of using an innocent child to enrich myself. After all the hard work we'd put in it was all reduced to witchcraft." He chuckles shaking his head.

"When she was three months old I packed up my family again and left home. For good." I'm still not sure how this affects us but all of us are listening attentively you'd think we are going to be tested on this information.

"So that explains the rift between you two." Bongani says. And for some reason my mind refuses to believe that what Dingizwe accused them of could be true. It just seems like such a far fetched story. I mean babies die some are born dead and others don't make it past the first few hours after birth. It shouldn't be normal but it happens.

"A couple of weeks back I spoke to your mother." Lulonke says drawing our attention to him. "She told me how she got you." He adds. For a split second my heart stops beating and my breath gets stuck in my head. I've been debating with myself on whether finding my real family would be worth it

or not. The sensible side of me is always ready to remind me that in order to know who I truly am I need to find where I come from. And the egotistical side of me thinks it's a waste of time. If they have lived twenty three years without me what's a lifetime. But now hearing that there could be hope for me to find out who I am feels strangely weird and scary.

"She told me that she swapped you with another child in the hospital. Apparently her child was born with the umbilical cord around her neck. So instead of alerting the nurses she swapped the child with another one." Lu continues.

"Okay but how do these two stories correspond?" Phiwo asks.

"According to your mother she gave birth at Ndwedwe hospital the same hospital where Thembi gave birth at. On the same night as her." Scelo speaks for the first time since we came in. He opens the two files and places their contents on the table. "These are the medical records from that night. If Grace's story is true it means Milani is a Cebekhulu."

I feel my lungs deflate and my heart drop to my stomach. My head refuses to register anything that's being said right now. Everyone's eyes are set on me expecting some sort of reaction. I don't seem to have a reaction to give. I am numb. Although I can see everyone here I can hear them speaking but it feels like all the information they are trying to get across only makes it as far as my ears. I need to sleep maybe when I wake up in the morning this whole thing will be nothing but a dream. It has to be one.

73♥

Shock! No that's too much of an understatement. Fear! Most definitely. Baffled! Definitely. The past few hours I have been trying to figure out every emotion that's been going through my head but failing. Just when I've got a grasp on whatever I'm feeling something else pops up. The one thing that's been constant though is fear.

You'd think finding out the people I've looked at as an embodiment of all I've ever wished for in a family are actually my biological family would send me on a tailspin of happiness but no it hasn't. In actual fact now I'm more afraid than anything else. The Cebekhulu's are like a perfect family in my eyes. A present mother and father two sons and two daughters. Bab'Cebekhulu is the type of man who walks into a room and commands respect. Even his brother although I met him that one time he didn't seem like the type of person to be disrespected. And now here is me his potential daughter

with all the baggage I come with. I'm pretty sure if he prays his prayers did not include finding out he has a daughter who slept with different men for money.

I've never felt more inadequate in my entire life. I've learnt to fight for myself and know my worth but right now I feel like my worth is swimming in the gutter. It's almost three in the morning I sit out in the balcony watching as wave after wave kisses the shore. The chilly wind beating upon my face if it wasn't for the throw I have over me I'm sure I'd be shivering by now. I should be back inside but my body doesn't allow me to. I am too nimble to move.

The glass door slides open and the light from the lounge filters out to the balcony. I look up and find Auntie Nomvula staring at me her sweet smile almost as bright as the stars.

"Can't sleep?" She asks taking a seat next to me.

"Yeah."

"But it's cold out here. Come inside." She says rubbing her hands together and blowing hot air on them. She's been here less than a minute and she's already cold. Weak.

We get up and go back inside.

"I'll make us some hot chocolate." She says heading to the kitchen. I lose the throw and take a seat on the high chair as she boils the water. She gets the cups and all she'll need out of the cupboard and places everything on the counter. She mixes everything and puts the sugar and hot chocolate powder back in the cupboard. I feel her staring at me as we wait for the water to boil. I'm not sure if she's seen any of the posts on social media yet but knowing her she probably has.

"How are you feeling?" She asks as the silence gets loud and uncomfortable.

"I don't know." I really don't. Of all the feelings jumbled up in my head and soul I can't seem to pinpoint exactly what it is I am feeling. The water boils and she fills both cups before throwing in some marshmallows on top then handing me a cup. She takes her own cup and sits next to me. The silence fills the room again.

"I understand this is a lot to take in. Personally though Kim glad you're my niece everything makes sense now. You looking like Sne having the same body and sometimes the same mannerisms. It all makes sense now." I'm not sure how to respond to that. Maybe me even meeting Sne was because of some cosmic joke the universe decided to play on me.

"Or maybe it was God nedlozi leading you back home." She says and I realise I said everything out loud. Another thing I need to fix I need to keep my thoughts in my mind.

"Why? I mean I know I've wanted to know who i am since my mother told me she wasnt my mother but right now it seems my life is just one huge joke." Why couldn't all of this happen before I went and ruined my life. What's going to happen when my parents fail to accept me because I have too many broken pieces to piece together? My name is on every blog site as the prostitute who is dating a lawyer. Whether I like it or not that's going to be a stain on my life forever. There is not enough love in the world that can make all of that go away. It was a choice I made and now its coming back to haunt me in the worst way possible.

"You know when your mother came back from the hospital with a dead baby and breasts full of milk she was heartbroken. For almost a week she would pump her breasts. I dont know what seeing the milk did for her but she refused to stop until she was forced to. And once the realisation set in that her baby was gone she was inconsolable. All Dingizwe wanted to do was take the pain from her as much as it was his loss too he could never understand how it feels to carry a child for nine months only to bury them. I guess that's why I understand his anger. Although misdirected I understood." She sighs wiping a bone tear that just ran down her cheek before turning to look at me cupping my face in her hands. "You have absolutely no idea the joy this will bring them. And there is nothing that's going to stand in the way of you being with your family." She assures me.

"What if I am not what they signed up for? I have way too much baggage and I dont think anyone needs that in their lives." She gently takes hold of my hand and squeezing it a bit.

"Milani we all have baggage. And anyone who feels the need to judge you for yours means they don't belong in your life. All I know is that my brother will be happy to have his daughter back home. And that is all that matters."

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I dont know why I agreed to do this. Especially now. The DNA tests came back yesterday and they confirmed what everyone else suspected. I am definitely a Cebekhulu. It still feels like an out of body

experience. My head knows it's true I saw the papers but my heart is not coming to the party. And now we are driving to Ndwedwe in a two car convoy. Mam'Cebekhulu and Bab'Cebekhulu are in a car with Aunt Nomvula and Phiwo and I am in a car with Sne Bongani and Scelo. I had to make Phiwo promise not to say anything to Hlumile she deserves to hear all this from me. I dont know how she's going to take all this. Grace didnt fuck up my life but my siblings too.

You'd think the drive would be longer from Tongaat to Ndwedwe but its barely an hour. Well a little over an hour to the Cebekhulu home. Sne squeezes my hand as Bongani announces that we are five minutes away. I close my eyes and say a prayer hoping and praying that whatever comes next is not too bad. But then again where I am concerned God is good at blue ticking me.

We pull up to a rather modern home. I dont know what I was expecting but this is not it. There's a large house in the centre of the home with maroon tiles. Two modern looking rondavels stand on either side of the house and on the far side peeks out what looks like another rondavel except this one has a thatched roof. Bongani parks right outside the gate while his father parks across the road. Sne and I stay in the car as Scelo and Bongani get out and walk across to their father.

"I cant believe I've never actually been here." Sne says looking out the window. "To think we've been literally an hour away and I've never set foot here. Yho adults and their secrets." I turn to the other side Bab'Cebekhulu is out of the car staring at a house across the streets. I'm not sure whose house it is but whoever owns it needs to do some landscaping because the overgrown grass could be hiding a snake.

I turn to Sne and follow her gaze. Two women just walked out of the main house one looks older and I'm guessing she must be Bab'Cebekhulu's mother. The woman next to her is older too just not as old as her. Two kids are playing in front of one of the rondavels. This could have been home. My home. I wonder how I would have turned out if I had grown up here. With a mother and a father

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just not as old as her. Two kids are playing in front of one of the rondavels. This could have been home. My home. I wonder how I would have turned out if I had grown up here. With a mother and a father an extended family that doesn't have vulture tendencies and maybe siblings I wouldn't have to take care off. I know my life would have been different but would I have been the person that I am today? Or would i be a respected daughter of someone?

A knock on the window grabs my attention. Scelo opens the door and sticks his head in the car. "We need to go in. Are you ready?" He asks looking at me. I'm not sure if I'm ready but I have no choice but to go in and face whatever is there. I nod my head and he helps me out of the car. Bab'Cebekhulu leads the way with aunt Nomvula by his side. Having her here might just be what we need. In spite of everything I doubt he has forgiven his brother for all the allegations he made against him.

As soon as we walk through the gate the other woman walks back into the house with a phone in her ear. Probably calling her husband. A little voice in my head tells me she might be my biological mother but I dare not get my hopes up. Nomvula gets to the verandah first and greets the old lady. It's their mother. She casts her eyes on her long lost son tears glistening in her eyes. I'm not sure if it's genuine happiness she's trying to portray or it's guilt for allowing her children to be torn apart baseless rumours.

"Phikela nguwe lo? (Is this you?)" She asks looking at her son. All she gets in return is an ice cold stare. There is a lot of bad blood here and I don't think this one meeting is going to solve it. But hey we can try.

"Let's go inside ma." Aunt Nomvula says helping her mother up. It's clear she's not okay. The chemotherapy is clearly taking its toll on her. Aunt Nomvula holds her arm and leads her inside. We follow behind slowly since walking is a struggle for her. The woman who was with her earlier appears from somewhere in the house and helps Nomvula. They sit her on the one sitter couch then throw a blanket over her. Bab'Cebekhulu and Mam'Cebekhulu sit together on another couch with Bongani and Scelo on another leaving us with no place to sit.

A girl in a school uniform and a backpack grabs the chairs from the dining table and hands them to us. It's obvious she is someone's daughter. I can see some of Sne's features on her. But isn't it too early for her to be here. She should be in school. The other woman also grabs a chair and places it next to the old woman. She keeps stealing glances at me. This is just weird and awkward at this point.

"Uhm MaSotobe have you called my brother?" Aunt Nomvula asks the woman. She nods her head. I guess no one else is willing to speak. I hope they won't be expecting imvulamlo before they say anything. "Okay I guess we will wait for him then." She adds tapping her manicured fingers on her

lap. She seems rather nervous not that I blame her. I know I am too. She turns to the girl in school uniform who is sitting at the dining table. "Nonkanyiso can you make us something to drink sisi." The girl nods her head and gets up heading to the kitchen. Is anyone willing to say a word around here?

The inside of the house is quite impressive. There are large ceramic tiles on the floor high ceilings with recess lighting the dining area sits under a tray ceiling with a huge chandelier in the middle. The kitchen is a little visible from here with large white cabinets and what looks like black counter tops. The backsplash has touches of gray and light pops of blue. The island is huge with seating on the three sides of it. The huge flat screen tv is built into the wall even the cables are not visible. Whoever did this clearly knew what they were doing.

We hear a car pull up outside. Within seconds of the engine dying we hear footsteps coming inside. It looks like it's more than one person. I look up to see Dingizwe it's hard to miss him because he looks just like his brother. A younger version of him stands next to him they are both dressed in overalls and work boots that look like they were dancing in mud. His eyes immediately shoot to his brother his jaws clenching at the sight of him. Yeah these two hate each other that is clear.

"What is going on here?" Dingizwe asks his eyes not leaving his brother. Bab'Cebekhulu lifts his head up for the first time and stares back at his brother as if he is challenging him in some way. I pray nothing bad happens while we are here.

"This is still my home." Bab'Cebekhulu replies not feeling any intimidation whatsoever. Dingizwe chuckles and walks around to stand between his mother and wife. These are my parents. I have their blood running through my veins and they don't even know it.

"What are you doing here Phikela?" The question comes with a whole lot of anger attached to it. Over 20 years later and he actually still believes what the healer said. This is the kind of feuds you hear of on Uthando Noxolo. You never imagine it could happen to you.

"Can we please all just sit down so we can discuss this like adults. Please." Nomvula pleads. Their mother has her eyes cast down on the floor. I know she is sick and all but her voice is needed right now more than ever. Sitting quietly and allowing this to go on cannot be the legacy she wants to leave behind.

"Why did you bring him here?" Dingizwe questions now staring at his sister.

"Whether you like it or not this is still his home. This is his father's house just as much as it is yours. And he has every right to be here. Just sit down so we can talk properly." Nomvula fires back. I see their mother wipe some tears. I guess Dingizwe sees it too he sighs and grabs a chair and sits next to his wife. Nonkanyiso places a tray full of tea cups on the table before returning with another tray with two teapots milk sugar and some homemade biscuits.

"Okay ma I'll introduce the kids because you know your son and his wife. You remember Bongani and Scelo?" She looks up a smile tugging at her lips.

"I remember them. They've grown. How are you?" Scelo and Bongani smile back mumbling a greeting. I guess this is awkward for everyone not just me.

"This is Snethemba she was a baby the last time you saw her. And that is Phiwokuhle. The last born." Nomvula adds her smile as wide and beautiful as always. If there is one thing I can commend her on it's not choosing sides all those years ago. And right now it's clear she loves her nieces and nephews equally.

"I didnt know you had another child." Gogo says a hint of pain in her voice as she looks at Bab'Cebekhulu.

"I didnt think you'd care." He replies. Sadness and pain wash over his mother's face.

"I'm surprised you didnt use any of your children to add on to your riches." Dingizwe says.

"Almost 24 years later and you still believe that bullshit?" Bab'Cebekhulu questions a smile playing on his lips. Which seems to anger his brother even more.

"Explain to me....."

"I'm not explaining shit to you. If you had been smart enough to seek justice for your child you would have figured out that your child didnt die that night. In fact she is sitting right here." He blurs out he motions to me with his hand and the room goes quiet. I then remember I wasnt introduced earlier.

"Phikela what are you talking about?" Their mother asks. Everyone is starring at me like I'm on some window display. My heart is racing. Bab'Cebekhulu goes on to explain everything to them. The baby swapping and the ripple effect that that one action caused. By the time he is done MaSotobe has tears running down her face.

"So it seems you've been angry at the wrong person." Nomvula reiterates. The silence takes over again. And everyone's eyes are glued on me. Gogo holds out her hands to me. I get up and walk up to her. I kneel in front of her as she takes my hands. Her hands are warm wrinkled but they somehow feel like home. My home. This is home.

Alondwe Khwezilokusa Cebekhulu. That should have been my name. The one that was meant to serve as a daily prayer upon my life. These names were meant to be a manifestation upon my life. My identity. Instead it was all stolen from me. Grace didn't just strip me of my identity even before I knew it she made my parents grieve for me while I was alive forced a rift between brothers that could have been easily avoided. 23 years. 23 birthdays. Christmases and celebrations all of it was taken from me.

I stand over the tiny grave with a cross shaped tombstone bearing my name and date of birth. And date of death. There's an engraving of a baby's footsteps on it. As tiny as it is it's been properly taken care of. The marble tombstone looks new.

"We put up the tombstone three years ago on the day you were born. It was supposed to be a tribute for your 21st birthday. I figured since I couldn't have a proper 21st birthday done then this would be the next best thing. I didn't want anyone to forget you." My father says coming up behind me. He stands next to me and we stare at the small grave. My grave. It's weird even saying that.

"It's a beautiful tombstone." I say the only words that come to mind. How often is it that a person stands over what is supposed to be their grave? This whole weekend I've had to pinch myself a few times just to remind myself that this is not a movie. It's not a book or some out of body experience. This is my life. A fucked up life but it's mine nonetheless.

We stand there in silence. It's awkward more than anything. I'm still trying to wrap my mind around the fact that this man is my father. From all intents and purposes he seems like a great father and a husband. It turns out the replica he came in with is his son Mpendulo. I have a big brother. It's quite weird but nice. And Nonkanyiso is my little sister. Apparently there would be six of us if it wasn't for the 3 miscarriages my mother had after me. See why I detest Grace her selfish decisions impacted lives while she carried on birthing children for a man who ran out at the first sign of an obstacle.

"Stand back." My father says. I comply and take a couple of steps back. Before I can figure out what is happening he lifts up a huge sledgehammer and bangs it on the tombstone. I take more steps back as he goes hard marble pieces fly in every direction. Common sense says I should stop him

but it's clear he is taking his anger out on the tombstone. I'm pretty sure if he could that sledgehammer would be bashing Grace's head instead. Finding out that she's already in a mental institution and will probably be there for the rest of her life didn't bring him any sort of consolation. He wants justice. I'm not sure he will get it. But if destroying the tombstone makes him feel better then so be it.

When he is done the marble pieces are scattered all over the place even on top of other people's graves. It's quite weird having a cemetery just a few feet away from the home. For me it feels way too close but they think it's not that close. Just the idea itself is unsettling. What if I wake up one day and there's an old man standing over the bed. It might be my great grandfather but still creepy.

I see my father wipe the sweat from his forehead with one hand while leaning on the sledgehammer with the other.

"Feeling better?" I ask. He turns around shaking his head with a huge smile on his face.

"A little. We need to figure out a way to get this child back to its family." He says looking down at the destroyed grave.

"You're not planning on doing that now are you?" He laughs. He has a beautiful smile and teeth. If there is one thing I will notice it's teeth.

"No not today. I have to speak to my lawyer and figure out how to go about that."

"Maybe you can ask Bab'Phikela to help you. He knows people." He sighs and takes a seat on top of another grave. I'm not sure how I am related to the person but he is a Cebekhulu so maybe he doesn't mind the added weight of a grown man on top of the soil and marble tombstone.

"I don't know if he will help me. There is a lot of fixing I need to do before I can ask anything of him. I accused him of killing my child as a sacrifice trust me I don't think he will be open to doing anything for me. Not that I blame him. What I did is unforgivable." I say a silent prayer asking the powers that be to not strike me with lightning before I take a seat on top of the grave he is also sitting on.

"He is a good person he will help you. Yes you still need to apologise but he won't turn his back on you. You're still his brother. He is angry yes but he still cares. If he didn't he wouldn't have brought me back here. He would have kept the news of me being your daughter to himself and carried on with life. But he is here. 23 years later he came home to bring back your child. If that's not an extension of an olive branch I don't know what is." He stares at me a smile tugging at his lips.

"You're smart." He says matter of factly. He takes my hand with the fresh isphandla on it. This shit stinks by the way. Am I even allowed to spray it with perfume just to make it bearable? "I cant believe you're alive. And you're home. Right where you belong." He takes a breath and his eyes glued on the house just a stones throw away. "Every year on your birthday I would come here beg for you to fight whoever is responsible for your death. I actually wanted to do some rituals on the corpse before it was buried by my mother convinced me not to. I guess she was afraid it might affect her son. But nothing ever happened. Even with all that I kept hoping and praying that one day the truth will come out. In essence I guess it did come out. Just not the way I expected it to." He says.

I may be paranoid right now but is it weird thinking maybe Grace's illness wasn't just some natural thing but rather her child fighting back. She did desert the child with another family burial rights were done and if the child buried here is a Mbokazi and Cebekhulu rituals were done maybe things backfired. And maybe she deserves worse than what she is going through right now.

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We are leaving. I need to go back to work in a couple of days. My parents want me to stay longer but I've already taken enough liberties with Dave I am sure his patience is running thin. Plus the renovations at Tshego's is almost complete her new kitchen looks amazing. After the charges were dropped against her she decided to redo the house completely. I guess that's her way of celebrating being free.

MaSotobe walks into the room as I am packing the last of my things. As usual Sne is in lala land. No matter how good she thinks she is hiding this pregnancy it's only a matter of time before everyone finds out. Plus she's gaining a bit of weight and her bump is getting bigger each day.

"You're ready to go." MaSotobe says as she lowers herself on the bed. I close the luggage and put it on the floor.

"Yeah it's time I go back to work. I've taken too many leave days." She nods her hand and takes my hand placing it on her lap.

"I wish you could stay a little longer. I've missed out on so much of your life." I feel the pain in her voice.

"I'll be back. I promise. Plus its official I am your daughter so there's no getting rid of me now." She laughs her eyes glowing. I've figured out that the only thing I got from her was the eyes. Everything else oSotobe were clearly fast asleep.

"If I had my way I would not let you out of my sight. You know the day the nurses woke me up and told me my child was dead I thought it was a dream. A bad one. I kept opening and closing my eyes hoping that when I wake up you'll be there just sleeping." She tells me as a lone tear runs down her face. She quickly wipes it away as if there is some shame in her crying. "The woman who took you

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just sleeping." She tells me as a lone tear runs down her face. She quickly wipes it away as if there is some shame in her crying. "The woman who took you I remember her. She was so kind to me afterwards. Comforting me till your father came. She kept saying how this was God's will and all those soothing words. Meanwhile she knew the truth. She watched me mourn for my child while she held that child in her arms. I've always thought of her as some angel God sent to make sure the pain was somehow bearable. And that I wasnt alone. And the whole time she was just a demon dead set on watching me suffer."

I wipe the tears freely running down her face.

"This feels like a dream too." She adds.

"Well it's not a dream. It's real. I'm sorry you went through all that."

"Its not your fault. In fact I should have tried harder to find the truth." She says.

"We cant change the past the only thing we can do is move forward. If it were up to me she would be in jail right now but her mental state is so far gone the police and her doctors dont think she can stand trial." She shakes her head chuckling a bit.

"So she'll get away with it?"

"Unfortunately. And speaking of Grace she has a daughter who is a few years younger than me. She's my sister. I might hate Grace but Hlumile is my sister. I practically raised her. I know you might have reservations about her being Grace's daughter so I wont force her down your throats but she's my sister and I am not going to turn my back on her. Not now not ever." I tell her. Yes I am happy to be home but that doesnt mean I am going to toss my sister to the side.

Hlumile has been my sister my whole life. Her and I are a package deal. Anyone who wants me in their lives will just have to accept that she is part of the deal.

"Milani she's a child and as far as I am concerned she is just as much a victim in all this as you are. So no one will be judging her or treating her some kind of way. Plus I can see she is important to you. So she is also welcome here." I breathe out a sigh of relief. At least this is one thing that's sorted.

"So how long is she planning on hiding her pregnancy." She asks pointing at Sne with her head.

"I don't know."

"For as long as I can." Sne says jumping out of the bed. "You know once my parents find out I will be a dead woman walking." She adds throwing on her puffer jacket.

"That jacket is already a dead giveaway. Do you know how hot it is outside?" MaSotobe asks her.

"I'll take my chances. My mum will kill me and let me not get started on my dad. He might just disown me." Sne is being a bit dramatic but I understand her fear. As much as a baby is a blessing most parents have a problem with their children having children out of wedlock. And if you ask me it's just ridiculous there are single mothers within marriages so who cares how a child comes about.

"I'm sure they won't. You're almost done with your studies so you should be able to take care of yourself and your child. And the baby's father is in the picture right?" Sne sighs and takes a seat on the lone chair in the room.

"He actually wants to marry me." She whispers but her words are crystal clear. My jaw is on the floor. Both from surprise and ecstasy. I know Kumkani loves her he has made that pretty clear but marriage now that's something.

"But that's great. I know you two love each other." I say getting off the bed and wrapping my arms around her. She doesn't seem happy about this.

"Yeah but if he wants to marry me because of the child then what's the point? I want to marry for love not because I am pregnant. That's just too much of a burden to put on a child." She argues. Well she might be right but I doubt that is why he wants to marry her. I've had a front row seat to their relationship from the beginning and I can safely say I've never seen Sne this happy with anyone. No suspicions no lack of trust no constantly questioning her worth and he spoils her rotten. They are perfect together.

"Snethemba if a man wants to marry you chances are very high that he actually wants to marry you. Men rarely marry women simply because they are pregnant unless someone is holding a gun to their head. So maybe instead of looking for excuses sit down with him and figure out why he wants to

marry you and maybe you will realise it's not because of the baby." MaSotobe tells her. I nod my head in agreement. "Plus your parents are not going to disown you. They might be upset but they love you way too much to do that. So tell them. Now before things get out of hand." She adds just as Scelo knocks on the door.

"Can we please hurry up we will miss our flight." He shouts through the door. Mam'Cebekhulu and Bab'Cebekhulu left a couple of days ago after my mini welcoming ceremony Bongani and Phiwo left with them. Bongani claimed he had to go back to work and Phiwo had to go back to school. Scelo decided to stay behind to play bodyguard with us. I think more than anything he still doesn't trust his uncle very much and he hasn't let go of everything. It will take a while for this family to heal.

MaSotobe helps us with the luggage. We pack everything in the boot before making our way to the main house. Gogo has been in her bedroom since yesterday after she had her chemotherapy session. Today she looks a bit better than yesterday. She is even sitting up on the bed with aunt Nomvula next to her.

"You're leaving already?" She asks a wide smile engulfing her clearly exhausted face. For someone who seems nice and sweet I wonder what role she played in the rift between her sons because everyone seems to somehow skim through that part.

"Yes it's time." Scelo answers. She holds out both her hands to Sne and I and we take them. She places both our hands in her one hand then holds out her other hand to Scelo. He reluctantly takes it and she kisses the back of his hand.

"I never imagined that I would Phikela back home let alone his children. But clearly God has seen me worthy of this moment. So please do me a favour whatever happened in the past let's leave it there. I know there is a lot we need to fix and we will. I have spoken to your fathers and we will set a date soon and we will all gather here to make peace. We will slaughter a cow and make amends so that we can move on with nothing holding us back. And when I die i will die in peace knowing my family is where it's supposed to be. And maybe even my ancestors will welcome me with open arms." She says. See this is why i wonder what role she played in all this because why wouldn't hed ancestors welcome her unless she fixes this mess? Anyways I digress.

"You wont die just yet. You still have 23 years to make up for." Sne tells her and she laughs. We give her hugs making sure she is comfortable before we leave. When we walk out we find my dad and

Mpendulo waiting outside. They walk us to the car and we say our goodbyes. My dad hugs me a little longer. By the time we drive out we are all a little emotional. I guess they were right when they said it's always dark before morning comes I see it now my little light at the end of the tunnel.

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Is it just me or the sun is shining brighter these days and the birds seem to be in a happy? It's me? No? Okay. I am going back to work today and I am excited. Nothing is going to bring my mood down in anyway shape or form. I just wont allow it.

The alarm goes off and Lu reaches over and switches it off before patting the side of the bed trying to wake me up.

"Baby wake up you'll be late." He mumbles. I watch him as he Pat's the empty bed a few times before realising I am not on the bed. I've been up for almost half an hour now dressed and pretty much ready to go. His eyes open slightly and he looks around. I get on the bed and give him a kiss on the cheek.

"You're up already." He says wiping sleep off his eyes. He is cute when he wakes up. His eyes are always slightly red and puffy when he wakes up.

"Yes I've been up for a while. You should go back to sleep." He stretches his arms over his head and yawns.

"What time is it?" I glance at my watch. It's too early. How in the heck did I wake up this early?

"Its 5:45." His brows immediately shoot up in surprise.

"And you're up already? Should I be worried?" He asks with a little smile on his face.

"Of course not. I'm just as surprised as you are. Maybe it's because I am happy."

"Of course you are. So how are you feeling? I know you said last night this whole thing feels like a dream you will wake up from." He reminds me.

It does feel like a dream one I hope I never wake up from. But it is slowly seeping into my brain that it's real and I'm loving every moment of it.

"It feels good. And I have you to thank for it." I lean down and kiss him again this time on the lips. His hands wrap around my waist as the kiss intensifies. His tongue invades my mouth and the tingle take over. He quickly pulls away and stares at me. I can feel his eyes on me even with my own eyes closed.

"You'll be late for work." He reminds me.

"I am just trying to show you how thankful I am." My voice comes out squeaky and weird. I'm definitely horny now. He laughs.

"We both know what's going to happen if this goes on. You will be sleepy and then you'll want to sleep and then you will be late for work. It's your first day back remember." I sigh and stand up fixing my dress.

"You should keep that same energy when you're horny." He bursts into laughter. I go into the bathroom and quickly do my makeup. Thanks to YouTube I have mastered the natural minimalist look. Now all I need to do is learn how to cut crease and get my glam on. By the time I walk out Lu is not in the bedroom. I put on my sneakers and my fedora hat then grab my backpack and head downstairs. The smell of freshly cooked soft porridge greets me as I descend the stairs.

Lu is hovering over the stove with just sweatpants on. He closes the pot to simmer and then turns around to look at me.

"You look cute." I twirl and his smile widens.

"Thank you. So what will you be doing after dropping me off?" He grabs two bowls from the cupboard and places them on the counter.

"I am not dropping you off actually. I have a few zoom meetings with some law firms. So you'll have to drive yourself."

"Nope. I'd rather take a cab." I'm not about to try God and drive in a car worth almost a million. How am I going to pay it back if anything happens?

"Why not? Didn't you say you will have to go from the office to Tshego's and then back to the office? That's a lot of money to spend on a cab." He says handing me a bowl of porridge.

"I think it will be a lot more if I crash the car."

"I have insurance. And besides I don't think I will be going anywhere today. So take the car."

Well if he insists who am I to say no.

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Pulling up to work is both exciting and nerve wrecking. I haven't been here since my name was splashed all over social media. I dont know how everyone will react. Plus Sizakele and Sebastian are still in Cape Town so this will be navigating a landmine all on my own. And one thing I know for sure is that Mapaseka will have something to say.

I pull up to an empty parking space. God never listens to my prayers because Mapaseka is here with one of her mean girl friends. It's too early for this honestly. I park the car gather my things and get out.

"So which one of your clients got you this beast? You know you need to hook me up with one of them. Clearly its beneficial to sell your vagina for a few cents." She says leaning on someone's car rubbing on her bump like it's some gold medal.

"Its too early for this Maps. I have work to catch up on." I try to walk away from her but her words bring me to a complete halt.

"You know I've always known you getting a job here was irregular to say the least. But now it all makes sense. The job with no interview the rules being bent anyhow and anytime to accommodate you. You must be good for Dave to risk his family business for you." I could walk away now you know keep it nice and classy but that would be a betrayal to the petty bitch inside me.

I turn around slowly as if I'm performing for an audience. I take the couple of steps to close the gap between us.

"Mapaseka I could tell you I never slept with Dave but its obvious you wont believe me so I wont even bother. I have a past it's not pretty. I am human after all. But do remember this for every finger you point at me three are pointing right back at you. And if I were you right now the only thing I would be worried about is finding a baby daddy for the little bundle of joy you're carrying. We both know pawning it off to Dave is low even for you." I walk away leaving her with her mouth on the floor. I'm not one to be played with.

I leave my bags at my desk grab my phone and hurry up to Dave's office. I greet his PA and make my way into his office. For once he is not a chimney with smoke coming out of him at every turn. Instead he has a cup of coffee in his hand and he has his eyes glued on his laptop.

"Hey." He looks up and smiles. Okay that's a good sign. Maybe I wont lose my job.

"Hey welcome back. Have a seat." I sit down on the guest chair.

"Listen I want to apologise for the negativity those posts brought to the company. I didnt know all that would come out. Especially like that."

"Milani I want to apologise for the negativity those posts brought to the company. I didnt know all that would come out. Especially like that."

"Milani relax you didnt do anything wrong. You know what they say there is no such thing as bad publicity. We've actually had a bit more traffic to the website made a few sales and a few design inquiries. So we are good." That's a relief.

"That's great. I was nervous actually thinking you'd possibly fire me." He laughs. He is definitely in a good mood. "So I take it you haven't told Maps about the test results?" He shakes his head smiling like the cat that got the cream.

"Nope. I'm actually enjoying her little tantrums each time I dont do what she wants. You know last night she called me at midnight telling me about her cravings. That girl has no idea the storm that's coming her way." He says. He seems to be enjoying this more than he should.

"How did you get her to agree to the DNA test anyway?"

"It was easy actually. I convinced her that we have to test the child to make sure he doesnt have down syndrome since my sister has it. She agreed and the rest is history." I'd hate to be Maps when she finds out the truth.

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If I'd known how tiring this day would be I would not have worn this dress. But then again it helped with the fresh air. By the time I get home my feet are hot as hell. I know they say we have to suffer for beauty but these sneakers they were definitely not made for walking. I find Lu

laying on the couch with his one arm over his eyes. His shirt buttons are open and his tie is sitting on the coffee table. I take my shoes off and tip toe to the couch. His breathing is steady. He is definitely sleeping. I lean down and gently kiss his lips. He stirs and his eyes shoot open. They are bloodshot red and that scares me. Sure his eyes are a little red whenever he wakes up but this is a bit extreme.

"You're back."

"Yeah. Why do you look like you have the world on your shoulders?" He gives me a faint smile. My heart breaks a little. Even though he tries to hide it I know being without a job is weighing heavy on him.

"Argh it's nothing. How was work?"

"Work is work. Come on let's go take a bath I'll tell you all about it." I need to find a way to get whatever is bothering him out. I hand him my phone. "Order food I'll get the bath ready." I don't give him time to say no because I know he will.

I rush upstairs and turn the water on. I get some candles and light them I pour some lavender foam bath in and add one of my bath bombs. I change into a silk bath robe while waiting for the water to fill the bath. I head downstairs and get us a bottle of wine and a couple of glasses then make my way back upstairs. Fifteen minutes later he shows up with a box of pizza. We get in the tub with my back to him I lay my head on his shoulder. We sit there quietly for a while just munching on the pizza. He eats one pizza and even that is hard for him to finish. He puts the unfinished pizza back in the box and pushes it away.

"So will you tell me what's eating you up inside. And please don't tell me it's nothing. I can clearly see something is going on." He sighs and kisses the top of my head. He was definitely about to lie and say it's nothing.

"My cows are back home with Mkhulu. He told me today that they fetched the cows yesterday. Of course my father was against it but there was nothing else he could do." And the good news keep coming. Slindile is officially out of our lives. But I know that's not why he is so down.

"That's great. But I'm certain cows are not the reason you're feeling the way you do right now."

"My father blacklisted me. No law firm wants to touch me. Even the ones who were headhunting me before I quit it's like there's some silent threat that they fear. One of the firms I spoke to today pretty much told me they would love to hire me but my dad said no so they can't." He says his voice is filled with pain and I can tell he is trying to hold back his tears.

It might be wrong to say this but I hate his father. Well most of his family. But his father just took the first spot. I thought I hated Nkanyezi and her mother but this man instead of coming after me since I'm the one he has a problem with he goes after his own son. And the worse part is that he is attacking his career. A career Lu has worked sp hard to build.

I hold on to the arm draped around my shoulders and kiss it.

"I'm sorry. I know this is all my fault."

"Dont say that. It's never been your fault. So stop trying to blame yourself." I definitely dont believe that. I turn around and get on my knees.

"Why dont you start your own law firm." He frowns as if what I just said is a far fetched dream.

"Hear me out your father might be able to intimidate other law firms but he clearly cant intimidate you. You have clients who have literally left his law firm because you're no longer there. Capitalize on that. Start your own law firm and approach those clients. We can do the research and figure out what is required and I'm sure most of the requirements you already have since you were a partner at Mbatha and sons." With every word spewing out of my mouth I can see him visibly relax. I'm not sure yet if he thinks this is a bad idea or he thinks I am a genius. I'm hoping its the latter.

"Babe starting a law firm is not that easy."

"Yeah but when have you ever shied away from a challenge?" He shakes his head. "Shandu think about it. Think about our children." That gets his attention. I dont want to pile it on thick but I need him go believe in himself as much as I do. And if that means using nonexistent children to get the point across then so be it. "Its obvious even if we get married and have kids your father will most likely never accept them. So we have to build our own legacy. From scratch. I know it will be hard trust me I know but our children will thank us one day for fighting for them." His smile widens. I might not be ready for children but that doesnt mean they cant serve a purpose now even if they are still locked away in my fallopian tubes.

"Okay I will think about it." Not a win yet but its something. I turn around and lay back on his chest. "And stop using my children to get me to do things." He adds. Oh well.

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"We just lost another client." Nkazimulo says throwing a file on his father's desk. Mr Mbatha looks at him for a second before turning back to his laptop. Things haven't been the same since Lulonke left. He is stressed this is not how things were supposed to happen. All he wanted was his son back home doing what he is supposed to do. But now things have backfired. Badly.

Just last week his father sent a delegation to Slindile's family to get back the cows Lulonke paid as lobola. He was against the idea but his father never listens to him. His wife and daughter exposing Milani didn't help matters. In the past two weeks alone they have lost four clients two of which brought in a bulk of revenue to the firm. If things go on like this they will be forced to retrench some workers.

"We will be fine." He says trying to convince himself. Nkazimulo chuckles and sits down loosening his tie.

"Do you really believe that or you're just trying to convince yourself? Because things are bad. And if we carry on like this it will be hard to bounce back." He says. His father sighs and sits back on the chair. He is a proud man. Admitting he is wrong is not something that comes easy to him. But he knows he made a mistake. One a simple phone call would fix but his pride always gets in the way.

"Baba at some point you will have to realise that Lulonke is good at what he does. Our clients know him and they trust him. You blacklisting him won't make him change his mind. In fact all it will do is push him further away. He needs to be here that was your dream for you to run this business with your sons by your side. Bukhosi is dead Lulonke is growing more distant with each day. By the time

you wake up it will be too late." Nkazimulo says. In spite of their differences he loves his brother. Although it was hard for him he is slowly accepting that Milani chose Lulonke and not him. But his family is falling apart and as the oldest son he wants to fix it. It would be easier with Bukhosi here but he isn't so now the burdenays on him.

He drives home and finds everyone's car parked in the yard. He summoned everyone here including Mkhulu. At least he was in Durban for his check ups otherwise this meeting would not be happening today. Walking into the house he is welcomed with an aroma of spices and meat. Nandi is in the kitchen hovering the stove with Thabile next to her.

He greets placing his briefcase on the table. "Where is everyone?" He asks there is no sound coming from the lounge.

"Mkhulu and baba are in the study mum and Nkanyezi are upstairs. The kids are in their room playing." Nandi replies. He nods his head and makes his way upstairs. His parents bedroom door is slightly open. He can hear his mother laughing with his sister. He stops for a moment to listen to their conversation but it gets quiet. Awkwardly quiet. He is about to walk away when his mother speaks.

"Do you think Lulonke will come to this meeting?" She asks. There is sadness in her voice. Instead of feeling bad for her he smiles maybe now she will realise how childish and stupid their actions were.

"I doubt it." Nkanyezi replies. They are quiet for a moment again before they resume their conversation.

"Maybe I should call him." His mother suggests.

"Hopefully he answers your calls. Mina I'm blocked he even blocked my email." His mother sighs.

"Maybe we went too far exposing that girl did nothing but push him straight to her arms. I dont know what kind of powerful muti she fed him but it's working. The sad part is that it is isolating him from his family. The people who love him." She says. Nkazimulo shakes his head and walks away. This is another thing that needs to be addressed in the meeting their failure to take accountability.

He changes to a simple pair of Jean's with a golf shirt and sneakers. Lately he has been spending more time at home instead of Lulonke's apartment. It feels weird with him not being there so it's easier to just come home instead. His phone pings on top of the bed. He picks it up and finds a

message from his brother. He wants to know how busy he is so he can call. He decides to call him instead. He picks up the phone pretty quickly.

"Shandu."

"Bafo it's been a while. Unjani? (How are you?)" He sits on the bed playing with his watch on one hand.

"I'm good. I actually need your help."

"Anything. Tell me what you need." He says eagerly. Right now he would do just about anything to bring his brother home even if it means walking on the moon.

"I want to sell my apartment. I know you've been staying there that's why I thought I should give you a heads up before I make things official." This is the proverbial nail on the coffin he was hoping would never come. It's not just about the apartment this is a sign that he is not coming back here. And that feels like a knife through his heart.

"So you're really not coming back here?" His heart is breaking. Yes he has questionable morals and shady ethics but this is his brother the only one he has left. And the thought of them being apart feels like dejavu. Even though this time it's not of his doing but he can sense the distance getting wider and wider with each day that passes without him in the fold.

"No. If I'm going to have a peaceful life with Milani I cant bring her around your parents or your sister. I dont want to live my life bickering with my family over my wife." The wife word throws him off. Yes Lulonke and Milani love each other and they are serious about their relationship but he didn't think it was heading to the husband and wife level.

"Are you planning on marrying her anytime soon?" He asks.

"Hopefully. I just need to figure some things out."

"Is that why you fetched the cows from Slindile's family? Are you planning on paying lobola soon?"

This is raising his heart rate more than it should. He was hoping things would be fixed before all this happens.

"No. I would have though but Milani doesnt want second hand cows." They laugh. Only Milani would see repossessed cows as second hand.

"I guess I understand. But why sell the apartment? Do you need money?"

"No I'm good." He sounds more optimistic than the last time they spoke but it's clear he won't tell him what's going on other than what he deems necessary to share. They speak for a while before they say their goodbyes. He makes his way downstairs and finds everyone in the lounge. He greets his grandfather first asking about his health before he moves to the important matters.

"So why were we summoned here?" Nkanyezi asks looking bored.

"We need to speak about the business. It's not doing well. Today we lost another client. All of them have cited the same problems they want Lulonke back." He tells them. His father won't even look at him his eyes are cast down on the floor. As much as he needs to respect his father's position he can't sit back and watch things fall apart. This business is just as much their legacy as it is their father's.

"Lulonke wasn't fired he left." Nkanyezi argues. She has shares in the business even though they are little she still feels entitled to having an opinion.

"He was pushed out and you know it. Hell for all we know you and your mother orchestrated the whole thing just because you don't like Milani." Nkazimulo fires back. His mum gasps holding on to her chest.

"So now I am not your mother Nkazimulo? Hmmm. This girl is not in our lives yet she's also turned you against me." She says tearing up.

"You give her way too much credit." Nandi says. "Milani did not do anything to any of you."

"Uh have you forgotten about her prostitution?" Nkanyezi asks.

"Whatever that was it had nothing to do with you. And the sad part is that you pick and choose which part of her life you're going to judge her for. In that very file you were quick to throw around about her there was information on how everything she did was to raise her siblings." Nandi says. She's a debater through and through

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there was information on how everything she did was to raise her siblings." Nandi says. She's a debater through and through she will argue with you until you concede. So Nkanyezi being older than her means nothing if she has nothing to respect.

"Whatever her reasons were there are better choices she could have taken." Nkanyezi fires. She is a loud debater. She's the one who will proclaim oksalayo even with all facts presented to her.

"For you Nkanyezi there were better choices for you because you have two parents who would move heaven and earth for you. Right now you're speaking from a place of privilege no one wakes up and decides to sell their bodies. There is always a reason. And you know Milani's reasons a child should not be raising other children but she did. Maybe what she did was morally wrong to you but for her it meant her siblings went to bed with a full stomach and that's all that matters." Nandi says.

"Oh so she's your hero now?" Their mother asks.

"No she's no saint. No one is. Not a single person in this room is a saint. So pointing fingers at Milani is redundant because you all have your own things you'd like to stay buried." Nandi says.

Mkhulu clears his throat and all eyes turn to him.

"I don't involve myself much in women's business but here is my opinion. Like MaShandu has said no one here is a saint. You're all busy pointing fingers at MaMntungwa what you're failing to realise is that the harder you push the further Lulonke goes. He loves that girl and he will do anything to protect her and if that means cutting you off that's exactly what he will do. He is already doing it. None of you know what's happening in his life right now. He is happy even with the hardships you keep throwing his way. He is selling his house he is going to take that money and start his own law firm." Mr Mbatha's eyes shoot up for the first time glaring at his father.

"He is doing what? Does he think starting a law firm is child's play?" Mr Mbatha asks. His fury is taking over. Mkhulu laughs.

"Lulonke is not a child. He knows exactly what he is doing. And besides you taught him everything he knows. What did you think throwing him out to the wolves would do?" Nandi laughs.

"He is leading the pack now." She says lifting her coffee mug with wine up in the air.

"Here's what's going to happen now. Wena Nkanyezi and your mother you will gather your cents and buy a cow to apologise to MaMntugwa." Mkhulu orders.

"A whole cow Mkhulu do you know how expensive a cow is?" Nkanyezi asks.

"You should have thought of that before you went and tarnished the poor girl's name all over the place. Yes she has her faults but you had no right to do what you did. It was never your place."

Nkanyezi mumbles something but she knows there is no arguing with Mkhulu. He speaks and everyone does whatever he says must be done.

"And wena." He starts pointing at his son. "You will buy a goat and apologize to the ancestors for throwing your son out of his home."

"I did not throw him out."

"Whatever you want to call it. And then you will buy another goat and apologise to him. If you fail to do this you will regret it. This little wealth that makes you drunk with power will fall apart right in front of you. The choice is yours. Make things right with your son or lose everything." He picks up the lukewarm tea and takes a sip. No one dares argue with him. His word is always final. His warnings are always heeded because they know he has a direct line to the ancestors. So when they say they will take everything they mean just that.

LULONKE

I am in a good mood. I don't know why it took me so long to actually realise I can do this on my own instead of trying to get a job. Thanks to my father forcing me to do a Legal Practice Management course before he could hand me shares in the firm I have one step already done. The past couple of weeks I've had to do the rest. Open bank accounts get the needed certificates and just make sure every step that needs to be taken is done. Right now the only thing left is submitting the name for the law firm as well as a letter head. I'm hoping everything will be done and approved soon. For now we wait.

Milani will be home soon. I decided to cook today I'm in a good mood and that always translates to good food. By the time she walks through the door the table is set and ready for her. She walks in her eyebrows raised and a smile on her face.

"Okay you're in a good mood. What happened?" She asks seeing the decked out table. She is observant alright.

"Nothing I just felt like cooking you a nice home cooked meal. You deserve it." She doesn't believe me. Her cocked eyebrow tells me as much. "Okay sit down I have some news." I pull the chair out for her to sit.

"Did we win the Powerball?" I know she's joking but it does feel like I hit the jackpot.

"Unless you consider yourself a Powerball then yes I definitely won." She blushes. The best sight a man can ever see.

"Okay besides me what's with the good mood? What happened?" I get up and dish up for us.

"Maybe we should eat first." She pouts. She is so cute when she's sulking. "Okay I will tell you." Her smile reappears just as quickly as it disappeared a minute ago. "So I had a zoom meeting earlier with a couple of former clients. They want me to consult for them. Actually they wanted to hire me as an in house legal adviser but I told them that I was starting my own law firm so they said cool then I can consult for them until my firm is up and running and then they will sign on as my clients." If it wasn't for her jaw her lips would be on the floor.

"Just like that?" I nod my head and she squeals. She gets off the chair and walks around to sit on my lap. "Shandu that's great news. I'm so proud of you." She adds wrapping her arms around my shoulder giving me a hug. I pull her a little tighter to me. I love this girl. From the moment I laid eyes on her behind the receptionist desk I knew there was something special about her. Her support her faith in me feels undeserved but I know my ancestors would not have brought her into my life if she wasn't meant to be my light.

"I'm proud of you." She repeats and her words cut straight into my soul. She pulls her head away cupping my face between her hands.

"I wouldn't have done this without you." She smiles.

"You would have. You're way more amazing than you think. Our kids are going to be lucky to have you as a father." Not many things can bring tears to my eyes but hearing her planning our future now that's something I can bank on. I am loved. Heaven really blessed me with this one.

"Let's eat so I can show you just how proud I am of you." She says kissing my lips. I try to deepen the the kiss but she quickly pulls away. "Patience Advocate Mbatha patience." I'm not sure I have that kind of patience but for her I'll wait.

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We've been summoned to Hillcrest next weekend. I don't know why and quite frankly I don't care but I doubt I'll be going there. For all I know they are going to try and kill me since all their scheming and plotting hasn't worked to break Lu and I up. His mother called Lu herself and asked to talk to me. Imagine my shock when she said that. I told Lu to put her on loudspeaker because there was no way I was putting that phone on my ear. I've heard enough stories of people picking up calls and next thing they can't speak or they drop dead. If I was going to die then I was going to die together with her son.

Lucky for me nothin happened. Except her being humble and nice. Which in itself felt weird. It still doesn't sit right with me. Call me crazy or paranoid but that woman is up to something. Maybe she has finally come to her senses pshhhh I'd be so lucky.

"If you dont let me go I am going to miss my flight." I remind this man who refuses to let go of me. I've finally mastered up enough courage to face Hlumile and explain things to her face to face. Although we speak on the phone I've been trying hard to avoid having a deep conversation with her over the phone. This needs us to sit down and talk properly.

"But I'll miss you." Lu mumbles on top of my head. Sometimes I forget he is taller than me. Add me being petite to that and right now I look like his little sister or even worse his daughter. It doesnt help that I'm wearing casual clothes.

"I know and I'll miss you too but I've been gone for longer than two days before and you survived."

"Barely." They were right men do turn into babies when they are in relationships.

"I'll be back before you can even blink. Besides you still need to drive back home and work on the Spindle contracts." I feel his chest rise and fall as he takes a deep breath before letting me go.

"I guess I can keep myself busy with that. But promise you'll call me."

"Of course I will. You'll even be bored of me by the time the weekend ends." He smiles and leans down to kiss me. He cups my face in his hands taking my lips in a possessive way it's like he is telling everyone I'm his. And I love it.

"Okay you need to go before I change my mind and drag you back home." He says passing my luggage to me. I give him one last peck on the cheek before making my way to check in. I turn around and find him watching me. I blow him a kiss and proceed to the check in counter before I change my mind.

The downside of travelling alone is that you never have anyone to talk to and keep your mind off of things. Strangers on a plane aren't always that nice. And the one I was sitting next immediately put her air pods on as soon as she sat down. That's one way of telling the next person to fuck off.

My cab takes me straight to the hotel in Sea Point. I check in and make my way to my room. I text Sebastian and Sizakele and set up a catch up session for tomorrow. For today I need to be with my sister.

I text her and she assures me she's on the way. It feels like a lifetime before she arrives and my nerves are already shot. Telling her I found my family is not that high a hurdle to jump. Its having to explain everything on social that has my stomach in knots. To my siblings I was their hard working big sister who made sure they have everything they need. As far as they were concerned I worked hard for my money being on my feet all day and sometimes nights which is what probably contributed to them being the kind of person Hlumile is.

When I left to study I was afraid she'd see that as freedom and do whatever she wants neglect her studies and possibly get pregnant but she didnt. Instead she did everything right. Now I'm afraid she will never look at me the same way. Losing her respect is not something I am ready to face. It's scary and it would break me.

She texts me telling me she is downstairs. I take one deep breath before making my way down. My legs feel heavy going down the stairs. It's like I have lead weights tied around my ankles. I see her from a distance scrolling through her phone. She hasn't changed one bit except for the blue hair on her head. Other than that she looks the same. She looks up and our eyes meet. Her wide smile assures me that maybe everything is okay. So she's not mad. Green flag.

"Hey you're late." I say giving her a hug. She hugs me back. Another green flag.

"I had an assignment to hand in before coming here. How are you?"

"I'm good. Let's go upstairs." I help her with her bag and we make our way to my room.

"This is nice." She says rushing to the open balcony overlooking the sea. I sit on the bed as she explores the room.

"It is. How is school?" She throws her backpack onto the floor and gets on the bed.

"School is school it's hard but we move." She says nonchalantly. Her idea of hard is getting a few C's instead of B's and A's.

"How are you adjusting thought. Varsity is not like high school. There is a lot that is required of you." She puts her hands on my arm.

"Sis relax. I promise everything is just fine. And I dont think you came all the way here to ask me about school. What's going on?" I should be impressed she's not a beat around the bush type of person. Instead I am more nervous than I was thirty minutes ago. I figure I can ease her into things by talking about Grace and her shenanigans.

"Okay so you remember I told you that mum or Grace told me I wasn't her child?" She nods her head urging me to go on. "Well Peter confirmed it. Turns out I'm not his child either."

"Wait what does that mean? I thought mum meant to say dad cheated and you're his child." I shake my head and see her deflating.

"Nope. It turns out Grace stole me from a hospital when I was a baby." She gasps covering her mouth with her hands. "Her child died at that same hospital and she decided to make the swap and that's how I ended up with her." I wipe the lone tear running down her face. "Don't cry. The story has a happy ending."

"How?"

"Well I found my real family. Well Lu and Scelo did but you know now I know who they are." I tell her. Her eyes bulge out in surprise.

"Who are they? Did you meet them? Are they nice? Are they....."

"One question at a time Hlumile." I interrupt her laughing. I like that she is eager to know everything.

"Yes I've met them and they are nice people. Turns out Sne's dad is my uncle. My biological father is his older brother." I swear I've never seen anyone's jaw fall that fast.

I hold the bottom of her chin bringing it up to close her mouth.

"So this explains a lot. How you and Sne look alike."

"Yeah." She claps her hands once before burying them under her armpits.

"Wow. This is a small world mosi. This whole time your best friend is actually your cousin. Tjo."

"Tell me about it. I'm not sure what kind of magic was at play but it worked." Her excitement slowly disappears and my nerves come right back. "What's wrong?"

"Do you know what this means." She asks. My eyes squint in confusion. I'm not sure what all this means other than what it means. I met my family. "It means I have no one. Literally. Mum is holed up in a mental hospital dad is dad being a leech and wanting to benefit from other people's hardwork my maternal family is full of vultures and so is my paternal family. Having you was the last thing in my life that made sense other than school and now even that is gone." She says tears running down her face.

"Hlumile you have me. You're my sister. DNA is never going to change that. You have me and you will always have me. I am not going anywhere." I pull her in for a hug as my own tears are set free.

"They will hate me." She whispers on my shoulder.

"Who?"

"Your parents. When they find out I am the daughter of the woman who stole you they will hate me and then I won't have you." My heart breaks at her words. I pull her back cupping her face in my hands.

"Listen to me. I don't care what anyone says you're my sister and nothing is going to change that. And I spoke to my mother and told her that you and I are a package deal. Trust me they will not punish you for Grace's sins. Grace is Grace and her sins are hers to carry not yours. No one will separate us. Not now not ever." I assure her.

"You promise?"

"Of course." I hold out my pinky finger and she hooks it with her own. "Pinky promise. It's you and me for life siswami. We have plans remember and we won't stop till all of them are complete. Right." She nods her head and lays her head on my lap.

I brush her hair like I used to do when we were kids. Its moments like this that make me miss Siya and Cebo the most. All the plans we had the dreams we had all cut short by a selfish self centred woman who cares about no one but herself.

"Can I ask you something?" She asks after a long while filled with silence.

"Yeah."

"The things on social media how true are they?" I knew this would come. And right now

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how true are they?" I knew this would come. And right now nothing but honesty will work.

"Its all true. All of it." I expect her to have a few words for me instead she nods her head and falls back into the silence. "You don't seem surprised." Only then does she lift her head to look at me.

"I had my suspicions. I didn't want to believe it but now that I think about it you went from saying you'll send us money when you get paid on Monday to sending us money any day of the week. And how quickly you renovated the house it made me wonder what kind of club or restaurant pays that kind of money."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"Because everything you ever did you did for us. You sacrificed so much of yourself to make sure we have some remnants of a normal life that judging you seemed redundant."

"When did you become so smart?" I ask her. She chuckles and lays her head back on my lap. "You raised me remember. How else was I supposed to turn out?" If i ever needed any validation that my life has purpose this would be it. Knowing that I am responsible for the smart beautiful hardworking young woman laying on me right at this moment. Not even Grace's words can ever penetrate my soul the way these words have.

LULONKE

I swear Milani's absence makes this house feel like an empty abyss. I know she will be back in a couple of days but it's obvious having her around makes sense. I dont know in what way but it does. And now that she knows who she is and where she belongs it's like her light just became ten times brighter. It makes me happy seeing her growth and how she is slowly shedding the burdens that she used to carry.

If it wasnt for her I probably wouldn't have started my own firm. Yes I've thought about it before but I always thought it would be a waste of time. I always allowed my fear to take centre stage but her faith in me propelled me forward so quick I'm amazed at just how far I've come in just a short space of time. I have clients actual living breathing clients who want me to work for them. Yes I've worked with them before but the fact that they left an established long standing firm to give me a chance just feels like a dream. I think Milani is my good luck charm. That's the only way to explain all this. Can a person even be a goodluck charm? Oh well she is mine and I don't care what anyone else says.

The intercom buzzes. I know I am not expecting anyone and my friends would have told me if they were coming so I ignore it. Anyone who wants me will call. It rings again and this time in peak through the window. I see a black SUV parked in front of the gate. I'm curious. I pick up the intercom.

"Yes."

"Lulonke open the gate." My father's commanding voice comes on the line. I open the gate and quickly clean up the table putting the contracts away and making sure nothing in here gives him any

ideas. I wait for him to knock on the door before I open. This is still my house and I call the shots here.

I pull the door open and he walks in. He looks like he has aged ten years since the last time I saw him. I'm yet to decide if that's a good or bad thing. His presence towers over the room. My dad has always had a presence about him that made it easy for people to respect him. Or maybe it was fear.

"Nice place." Why is he acting like he has never been here before?

"Thanks. Can I help you?" He turns around to look at me. Thank God for my height otherwise this would be some shitty intimidation tactic on his part.

"I hear you're working with Spindle." Of course he knows.

"Yes I am."

"So you've resorted to stealing my clients now?" Of course this is not a friendly visit.

"Stealing? Last I checked they left your firm before coming to me. And emphasis on them coming to me not the other way around." I see his jaws clenching. This all explains the extra grey hairs on his head and beard.

"Why are you so stubborn Lulonke? Why cant you just come back home and let us fix this like a family. Not this bullshit you're doing.' He grunts. "This is not how things are supposed to be." He adds as if the realization is only just now dawning on him.

"How was it supposed to be baba? Tell me. How was you trying to control me supposed to work? Was I supposed to leave my girlfriend and go running back to Durban just because threatened me?"

"Yes!" He says with so much conviction in his voice. "That's your home. Your family and your legacy how can you just throw it away for some girl? Do you know how hard I worked to build that business for you and your siblings."

"Is that why Nkazimulo got to be partner before me? Even though he never wanted to be part of the firm somehow it was important for you to give him his share of the business while I slaved away bringing in client after client with nothing to show for it not even a single thank you?" His forehead creases staring at me.

"What are you talking about?" Of course he has forgotten. I will gladly remind him.

"You asked me to study law no you told me to study law and I did. I did my articles with you. I was supposed to make partner as soon as I became an advocate. That didnt happen. Around that time Nkazimulo was being his rebellious self and running all over Joburg doing God alone knows what

even after he became an advocate he still refused to come and work for the firm. You begged and pleaded with him going as far as offering him a partnership overlooking me who worked my ass for you. Even when he was a failure he still for first preference over me. It took Bukhosi dying for you to make me partner."

"That's not true and you know it." He argues. Of course everything has to be his version or nothing else. He pulls out a chair from the dining table and sits down.

"It is true. For as long as I can remember you and mum have treated me like I am some unwanted child you picked up on the side of the road. I've had to jump through fiery hoops just to get a single acknowledgement from either of you. And now we are here for once in your lives you have no control over what I do and that's what grates your titties." He is out of words. That's a first for him.

"You can try and blame Milani for whatever you think her influence is on me but the truth is Milani has loved me without question or conditions. She's been honest with me supportive and always ready to have my back no matter what. I was so close to drowning in depression because I was unemployed and afraid she'd leave me but she quickly pulled me out of that hole. Assured me of her love and her loyalty. Milani has done more for me in the past few months than you have my entire life." The disbelief that washes over him is weirdly funny and sad at the same time.

"What is it that you want me to do? Tell me and I'll do it."

"I want you to love me." I blurt out before my mind can comprehend what I'm saying.

"Lulonke you're my son of course I love you."

"Cha baba I want you to love me as Lulonke not your puppet or an advocate. I want you to love me as your son. Is that too much to ask?" Silence. Not even a grunt to acknowledge he heard anything I just said. Instead he glares at me as if I insulted him. I make my way to the door and open it wide.

"Thank you for coming by but next time please call first for now you can excuse me I have a lot to do." I leave him there and climb the steps. I stand at the top waiting I dont know for what.

I hear his footsteps fade away before the sound of the car fading away turns my knees to jelly and I sit on the cold tiles.

I'm dreading this weekend. If it were up to me I wouldn't be going to Hillcrest but Lu says its serious plus Mkhulu wouldn't just call us there for no reason. Out of respect for the two men I will carry my big head and go there.

Tshego drives up the long driveway. Today I am officially handing over her house. I hope she likes what we did. Thanks to the new changes she wanted done the budget literally tripled and she was more than happy to pay. Which also means my commission goes up. I should actually start living like someone who has money. I dont need to be as frugal as I used to be. Now I can afford to spolt myself and actually enjoy my money and still take care of Hlumile.

"You're early." I say opening the door for her.

"I know I was so excited I couldn't wait." She gives me a hug and looks at the house. We changed the exterior paint too. Now the house looks homely and welcoming and not like another generic mansion in the middle of a huge suburb.

"Okay what do you think about the outside?"

"Its perfect. I like the light grey paint. The white trimmings and the black door just pull everything together." She says. That's one tick for me.

"I'm glad you like it let's go inside." We go inside and I let her in first. Her loud gasp is the first indication I get that I did something right. She turns around with tears in her eyes and wraps her arms around me. "I take it you like it?"

"Its perfect." She says and turns back to the house. "It doesnt feel like my house. This looks like one of those houses you only see on TV." Talk about a high compliment.

"Thank you. I was worried for a second." She says touching anything her hands find from the tables to the chairs before she takes a seat on the new couch.

"This is so comfortable. I cant believe this is my house." She whispers running her hands on the couch. "This is actually mine."

I give her a tour of the house and she is impressed with every room. Her main bedroom looks completely different. And I think it's also the one room that makes her emotional. This is where her husband died. I'm sure the picture of him lying lifeless in a pool of his own blood is one that will never easily leave her mind but this could be a new beginning you know rewriting the story somehow.

"This is different." She says looking around. "You know for the first time since Mazwi died I can picture myself in this room without his picture popping in my head." She runs her hand on the cashmere throw sitting at the foot of the bed.

"That's good. I'm sure he is also watching over you and he is happy." She laughs and sits on the bed.

"Probably not. His style was tacky at best. If he was here he would want some gold accents somewhere and mirrors everywhere." She says wiping a tear running down her face.

"Speaking of Mazwi come with me." I help her up and pull her to the closet. I stand her in the middle of the closet and then pull out a huge photo frame from behind the island. "I know that his family took most of his things from the house. But I found this rugby shirt that was his." I turn the frame around and she gasps covering her mouth with her hands.

"Where did you find that?" She asks crouching down to get a closer look at the photo.

"His brother was selling it on facebook marketplace. I zoomed into it and noticed that the captain had signed it with a message to Mazwi I knew I had to get it."

"He was obsessed with rugby. He tried teaching me but I just couldn't get it. He loved this shirt it hung in his office right behind his desk. I cant believe they sold it. God knows what else they sold." She says running her hand on the glass frame. "You know they took even his underwears and socks. If my father hadn't been here when they arrived I'm sure they would have left the house empty and if they could have they would have taken the house too." This is another reason why I dont trust in laws. Those people can make your life a living hell with their son still alive now imagine what they would do when he is dead.

"I'm sorry." She wipes her tear and stands up.

"It's okay. I still have a few things of his in the Cape Town apartment. But this means a lot. Thank you Milani." She engulfs me in a high again. I can safely say I have another client bagged and happy. The rest of the house tour is actually light and fun.

"I should host a housewarming soon." She says once we are back in the lounge. "And obviously you're invited." Of course I am. Imagine the potential clients who will be there? I'm talking ministers and their wives. Those ones have plenty of our tax money to play with.

I decide to leave once Tshego's parents and kids show up. Of course they are just as impressed by the house. And now reality seeps in. I thought not packing yesterday would make this trip just another nightmare but it's not it's real. I shouldn't have agreed to do this.

I get home and find both our suitcases sitting by the door and Lu on the couch working.

"You packed?" I give him a kiss on the cheek and sit down. He might seem organised but he is just as nervous as I am if not more.

"Yeah and dont worry I packed decent clothes. But since Mkhulu said we will have to drive to Nquthu instead of Hillcrest I packed mostly skirts and dresses." Okay this is definitely serious. I wonder what's going on. Plus I know Lu's father was here when I was in Cape Town and that little reunion did not end well so now I'm super curious to find out what's happening.

"That's fine. What time is our flight?"

"Seven." Perfect. I have time for a small nap and a shower.

"Okay I am going to take a shower then a nap. Wake me up in an hour."

"Sure. How was the house reveal? Was Tshego impressed?" He asks his smile wide. Sometimes I think he has more faith in me than I do.

"She loves the house." He is grinning like a Cheshire cat and clapping his hands.

"Of course she did. Go and rest I'll wake you up when its time to go." I kiss the top of his head then hurry upstairs. It's a little past two and this week alone has been hectic so I need the rest. I quickly jump into the shower at least I dont have to pack anything. I was dreading that part because I wasnt sure what to pack. Now I can blame Lu if he packed anything inappropriate.

I get out of the shower and wrap a towel around me. I hear my phone ringing from the bedroom. I hurry out of the bathroom and pick it up. I find a missed call from my mother. It's still weird saying that without wanting to puke. But then again Grace never called me anyway. Now here I am with a mother who calls me literally every hour. It's cute though and I like it. It's nice to know someone actually gives a fuck about you. I call her back and the phone doesnt even ring twice.

"I thought you were working." She says chuckling.

"No I'm done. How are you?"

"Better now that I'm hearing your voice. Did the woman like the house?" I feel butterflies floating around my tummy. For the first time in my life I get to know and feel what a mothers love feels like. Ige envied Sne for the longest time and now I get to have it. 23 years too late but when it comes to love it's never too late.

"She did. I'll send you the pictures."

"Okay when are you coming home? I miss your face." How random is that.

"You do know we can always video call right and then you'll see me."

"Nope. It's not the same. I want to see you and touch you. I still cant believe you're actually real."

She says lowering her voice like she is talking to herself.

"I am definitely real. Tell you what

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when are you coming home? I miss your face." How random is that.

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"Nope. It's not the same. I want to see you and touch you. I still cant believe you're actually real."

She says lowering her voice like she is talking to herself.

"I am definitely real. Tell you what I will make time maybe next weekend or the one after that and I'll come home." Home! Still boggles my mind.

"Okay I cant wait. Your father is here. Talk to him." She doesnt wait for my reply before I hear shuffling and my father's deep voice coming through.

"Mntungwa."

"Baba."

"Unjani mntanami. (How are you my child.)" I swear this gets me everytime. I feel tears pricking the back of my eyes. I know most people would say it's the bare minimum but I've never really had a present father. Peter was there for the first few years but we weren't as close. He did his duties as a father and that was it. But now now it feels different. Even something as simple as a greeting brings me joy.

"Ngyaphila baba. How are you?"

"Hhay siyancenga ntombi. Your mother tells me you are coming home next week." I just told her this seconds ago how did she tell him so quickly?

"Yes next weekend or the weekend after but I will call to confirm."

"Good. How is your sister?"

"Sne she is fine." Except for pregnancy hormones having a field day with her.

"No I mean the other one the little one. What's her name? Hlumile. That's the one. How is she?" I get nervous each time mum asks about Hlumile but its flat out weird hearing my dad ask about her. I guess a part of me is still scared of her being punished simply because she is Grace's biological daughter because to me she's more than that. She is my sister.

"She's okay just overwhelmed with school."

"Mhmm. You should come with her I'm sure she can use a break." I pull the phone away from my ear and look at it I know I made it pretty clear that I will not tolerate Hlumile being treated any type of way but this is a bit overwhelming. Them accepting of her means the world to me. I take a deep breath and place the phone back on my ear.

"Yeah I will let her know."

"Good. Let me go check on my cows and then get Nonkanyiso from school. Take care of yourself. Do you need anything? Money? I can send you some." I can never say no to money but won't it seem like I am taking advantage of them if I do?

"No I'm okay for now."

"Okay dont be afraid to tell me if you need anything."

"I wont. Thank you." I say my goodbyes and hang up the phone. I get back to lotioning my skin place my phone on the charger and then doze off.

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By the time we get to Durban it's already late. Lu rents a car and we start at his apartment. I know he is selling the place as much as I love it I'm not complaining. This place has too many not so pleasant memories. His parents caught us on this very couch having sex and I discovered Nkazimulo's relation to Lu right here. So no it has to go.

Ge gets what he needs and we start on our journey to eNquthu. It's already late and I'm hungry. We go past a KFC and buy some food before we leave. I open the bag and take out some chips and hand them to him. He places them between his thighs so he can eat properly. I take my own and start munching on them.

"What do you think this whole meeting is about?" I know he already said he is clueless but I figure maybe someone has told him something. I mean he does talk to his sister the sane one not satan junior.

"I dont know. But Nandi said it's not anything bad." Okay that's a good sign. But still something is not right with this whole thing.

By the time we get there it's close to 2 in the morning. He parks the car and he leads me to a rondavel not too far from the gate. It's not too big just a cosy two bedroom place with an open plan lounge and kitchen and a bathroom tucked away at the end of the small passage.

"This is cosy." I say looking around. The place has some female touches to it. I dont like that.

"Thank you."

"So who did your decor." I turn to him with my arms crossed on my chest and he is smiling. In actual fact he looks like he is holding in his laugh. He takes a step and closes the gap between us wrapping his arms around my waist.

"You're cute when you're jealous. But you can relax Nandi did all this. So dont worry no other woman is allowed to do anything here besides you." Yeah but why do I get the feeling Nandi did all this to erase any sign that Slindile was ever here. Why does that even make me sad a bit. Not for her but for me I'll be sleeping in the same bed as her.

"So how much work did Nandi do in here?" I don't want to start a fight but I need to know if I'll be sleeping on that girls sweat and whatever else she left on that bed.

"She did everything. Even the beds are new so you dont have to worry Slindile has never used them." How did he even know I was thinking that? That's just plain weird.

"I didnt say anything about her."

"You didnt have to say anything. The disgust on your face said it all. But dont worry from now on this will be our place. I could get rid of the house and rebuild it from scratch but building is expensive and your husband is pretty broke right now. Well not broke broke but we have to be careful with our money." He says.

"Husband you say. So as my husband would it be disrespectful if we did husband and wife things on the bed that hasn't been used by anyone else except you?" He pulls me up from the ground and I wrap my arms around his neck while my legs wrap around his waist.

"Let's go and see."

This is awkward. Its 5AM and I am still in bed. I've been up for an hour now and I'm not sure what protocols need to be observed. A proper makoti would be up and down the yard right now doing whatever needs to be done but on the other hand I am just a girlfriend here and not a makoti.

Lu is snoring with no care in the world while I am stressing about this. I dont want to give his mother more ammunition against me. I tap him on the shoulder but he doesnt flinch. I tap him again and he groans. I try again and he mumbles something before turning to look at me.

"Sthandwa sam it's too early." He says rubbing sleep off his eyes.

"I know its early. But am I not supposed to go and help prepare for whatever it is we were called here for?" He looks at me with a frown on his face.

"No. Go back to sleep." He tries to turn back and sleep but I stop him. He sighs and looks up at me.

"What exactly is it that you want to do?"

"I dont know what I need to do. I dont want to give your mother any more ammunition to use against me. Maybe I should go and help out." He sits up and leans on the headboard.

"Milani I know I call you my wife but culturally you are not a wife here. No cows have been paid for you and you have not been smeared with bile. You do not have to do anything. You are not here to audition to be my wife. So please. Go back to sleep." That makes sense. I hope he can also articulate that to his mother and sister.

"Okay." He pulls me back to him and we lay back down. I allow myself to close my eyes and sleep a little lighter than I was a moment ago.

I swear I just closed my eyes a second ago. Just one second and someone is already banging on the door. I open my eyes at the same time as Lulonke. We stare at each other for a moment before he gets off the bed. He walks out of the bedroom and I hear the front door opening. I tiptoe to the bedroom door and listen to whoever he is speaking too. I hear mumbling which I assume is a greeting before the voice is loud enough for me to hear.

"Uphi? (Where is she?)" I hear the woman ask. Atleast its not his mother or his sister.

"Who?"

"Hawu umakoti. Where is she we need to start cooking. It's already seven." The woman says. I knew I shouldn't have listened to Lulonke.

"What is she supposed to cook for exactly?" Lu asks her. I wish I was close enough to see her face right now.

"Hhayi bo Lulonke she cant stay cooped up in the house. She has to help out. What kind of makoti will she be if she doesnt do her duties laykhaya?" For some reason this woman's tone has some vile connotations to it. I might be reading too much into it but would I be jumping to conclusions by thinking she already knows things about me beside the social media things. She's probably been told something.

"Aunty Milani is not a wife she is a girlfriend. She will start doing things laykhaya as soon as there are cows in her father's kraal from koShandu. Until then she will not be sweating over an open fire as if she needs to prove herself to anyone. So please I'd like to go back to sleep. I am tired." This is escalating way faster than it should. I quickly put his gown on and make my way out.

Their conversation stops when she sees me. And yes I can definitely say without a doubt that she hates me. She is looking at me as if I smell of poop with her nose turned up.

"I can go help i dont mind. I just need to change first."

"You are not going anywhere." Lu interjects. This is bad really really bad. "Aunty like I've said until I have sent cows to her father she will not be doing anything here." The aunt let's out a deep laugh with a clapping of hands to make her point before she walks out. Lu closes the door behind her.

"Why would you say that Lulonke. Your family will say I am disrespectful."

"If they have a problem they will have to come talk to me. Leta go get dressed so we can go buy food." He walks past me like he didnt just set my life on fire. Whether I like it or not whatever brownie points I might have had they have just turned to dust.

I've been quiet since his aunt left. I'm not sure what to say or how to feel really. On the one hand I am happy he is standing up for me but on the other hand his family is his family and my presence has created enough of a rift between him and them if me helping out can fix that then I would gladly do it. But then again they might say I dont listen to him if I defy him and go help out. So basically there is no winning in this situation.

"Let's go." He says grabbing his car keys from the table. He opens the door and waits for me to walk out. Before I can make my way out he pulls off the doek I'm wearing on my head and he throws it on the couch then he fixes my hair. I guess the dress and jacket I am wearing works so we are good on that one. It's already busy outside. There aren't that many people just a few women sitting at the main house's verandah chopping vegetables. He locks the door behind us and takes my hand

leading me up to the main house. The chit chat dies down the closer we get. It's obvious they were talking about us. Well me to be precise. I keep my head and greet as we make our way into the house.

It's a beautiful house single storey house that seems to go on to the back of the yard. We make our way to the lounge where people are laughing and chatting. And as expected they keep quiet as soon as we walk in. There are eight women in total sitting around the lounge with tea cups in their hands. I see the aunt who came to the room earlier with her lips pressed together. His mother is sitting next to her with her mouth set in a hard line and her eyes shooting daggers at me. Lulonke pulls two chairs from the dining set and hands me one. We sit down and he greets.

"Who is this beautiful girl?" One woman asks. Her smile seems genuine but you never know with people.

"This is my girlfriend Milani Cebekhulu." He tells them. He introduces me to everyone three of them are his aunts his mother and a few neighbours.

"I thought she was a Mbokazi. What changed?" His mother asks.

"A lot." Lu answers.

"So she can't speak for herself?" The aunt from earlier asks.

"She can. You haven't asked her anything." Lulonke fires back. I guess that's the only go ahead this woman needed because as soon as he says that her focus comes back to me.

"So ntombazane

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these stories we hear about you are they true?" She asks. All eyes turn to me.

"Why didn't you ask the people who told you those stories." Lu chips in.

"I thought you said she can speak for herself?" His mum butts in. From the looks of it her and the aunt are a tag team.

"Ask her something sensible and not things you know nothing about." His mother claps her hands once before burying them under her armpits.

"Hhay ngyabonga mine. (Thank you.)" She says.

"Are you sure we should be doing all this instead of getting someone to help him vomit whatever was fed to him?" Another aunt asks. I'm sure she thought she was whispering but her deep voice does

not allow her to go that route. Lu stands up and holds out his hand for me. I stand up and he takes the chairs and puts them back.

"We are going to the shops are you going to need anything?" He asks.

"Bring me isix yesavanna." The nice woman says. And for the first time since we walked in here Lu actually smiles. Not a fake smile but a genuine one. I found out she is one of his aunts and from the looks of it she is the nice one.

"We would ask for somethings but are you sure lentombi yakho will be able to carry anything since you refuse for her to work?" His mother asks. Of course aunt jumaima couldn't wait to spill the tea. I'm sure his mother is the one who sent her to come call me.

"She doesn't have to carry anything. We have a car." Lu says.

"Ask your sister. I'm sure she is outside." His mother replies. Yeah kutense. We walk out and none of his sisters are here. One girl tells us they are at Mkhulu's place. I thought everyone was here. We head to the car and see Nandi walking through the gate. Her reception is way better than the Alaska cold reception I got inside.

"Hey so glad you came." She says giving me a hug before that bumping her brother. "Where are you off to?"

"Town. Mum says I should ask one of you what you will need so we can bring it back."

"I'll find out and send you a text. Bring me something to drink please." She begs she's even pouting her lips like a baby.

"I'm not buying you alcohol Nandi."

"I didnt say alcohol though. I just said something to drink. If it has alcohol even better." Oh she's smart. But Lu is not buying it. She pulls me in for a hug again. "I drink brutal fruit." She whispers to me.

We get in the car and drive up the street. We pull up to another home twice as big as the other one with an even bigger yard. And more people bustling and moving around.

"This is Mkhulu's house." Lu explains. "The other home is my dads. Lets go in."

There is smoke coming from the back of the house there is a huge kraal with just a single cow in it. The people this side seem warmer and nicer. We make our way in and Mkhulu's smile just illuminates the whole room. I kneel down in front of him and shake his hand.

"Unjani makoti." He asks holding my hand. For some reason the word makoti coming out of his mouth sounds sweeter. He really is a nice man.

"Ngyaphila mkhulu."

"My grandson tells me you've been reunited with your people?" His smile refuses to leave his face. This man is way better than his son and daughter in law. I wonder if he raised him or what happened?

"Yes. Thanks to him." I take a seat next to Lu on the couch.

"I told him you were closer than you knew. I'm glad you finally are where you belong. Now we can send the cows to the right people." I chuckle a bit. I'm not sure if I should agree or not. "So when are we sending the cows?" I am not replying to that. I look at the man next to me he is grinning from ear to ear. His father walks in and the smile disappears.

"Shandu." He says and sits down. "Makoti." He seems nice. Way too nice. I cant help feeling like it's a trap of some sorts.

"Yebo baba."

"Lulonke we need to talk before everything starts." He says looking at his son.

"About?"

"We will talk." I guess I'm not supposed to hear what they will be 'talking' about. It doesn't matter though because Lu will tell me. Just like he told me when his father came to the house announced making unfounded accusations.

"Okay. We have to go to town for a bit. We will be back." He announces and stands up.

"Of course dont be late we need to have a meeting before we start." Mkhulu says.

The drive to town is fairly quiet except for the radio. Azana's Your love comes on and he turns the volume up. Usually I'd be singing along to it and dancing but my head is still stuck on what happened with his mum. I know he meant well but I cant help feeling like he just made things worse. If they hated me before now they loathe and despise me. And I dont know if that's the kind of life I want to live for the rest of my life.

He realises I am not singing or dancing so he turns down the volume.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

"You dont look fine." I'm not certain I want a fight but if i don't tell him what I think it'll just keep stewing in my head for days on end.

"You were rude earlier."

"What do you mean?" And now he is playing dumb.

"I mean you were rude to your mother and your aunt. Do you think the things you said are going to make things any easier between me and them? They already hate me and now they have more reason to. I mean what would chopping up a few vegetables change? They would still hate me but at least they would see I am trying. That's all I can do." He pulls up the car on the side of the road and kills the engine. He unbuckles his seatbelt before turning to look at me.

"Milani what change do you think chopping up vegetables was going to make? Honestly tell me because they hate you." Okay I know that but it still hurts a bit. "I know my family Milani once they have made up their minds about you there is no changing that. You could peel carrots and chops onions till you cry blood they will not like you. They can pretend trust me they are good at that but it won't be real. So no i am not going to leave you to endure their abuse because trust me it will come. First it will be them complaining about how badly you chopped the vegetables or how you're dressed trust me there will always be something. Anything for them to tear you apart and leave you feeling like you're nothing." He sighs and takes my hand. "I love you and I know how much this whole thing with my family has affected you. You dont talk about it and you're always worried about me fixing things with them but the truth is they might tolerate our relationship but they will never fully embrace it. And for as long as I have breath in me I will protect you from them. I promised you that and I promise you even now no one in my family will treat you like shit just because they think they can. And I dont know why we are here to begin with what if they poison you? How am I going to explain that to your family?"

"Okay that's a bit extreme. I'm sure it wouldn't get that far." He snorts and buckles up his seatbelt. Isn't this the part where he is supposed to tell me that 'yeah maybe not that extreme.' He starts the car and turns up the volume. What does he know that I don't? Could they be capable of killing someone simply because they dont like them?

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The tension in this room can be felt by everyone in it. I still dont know why we are here though especially me since it looks like everyone here is a Mbatha family member. We are in one huge rondavel with the men on one side and the women on the other side. Lulonke has his eyes glued on me. The only time he looks away is when someone wants to talk to him. All I have to do is make one

tiny movement and his eyes run back to me. It makes me wonder what exactly is he afraid of. Is his family that bad that he needs to be so overprotective?

Mkhulu walks in with another older man behind him. He takes his place as the head of the home right between the men and women. The man he is with sits down next to him. I would say the talking completely stops but truth be told it stopped the moment Lu and I walked in ten minutes ago. That was also when the tension started.

"Thank you all for coming at such short notice." He starts. I want to look at him as he speaks but I'm afraid that might be seen as me being disrespectful so I keep my head down.

"Before we start baba I thought this was a family meeting?" One aunt says her eyes turned to me. Her I can look at. I am a big believer in giving people respect and then letting them decide to either keep it or let it go and her she let go of hers together with all the women who gossip about me with Lulonke's mother and sister. Only the man have been welcoming since I got here.

"This is a family meeting Nokubonga and I would really appreciate you not interrupting me. I called this meeting not you." Mkhulu tells her. I'm tempted to stick my tongue out at her but respect. Not for her for Mkhulu. "Now as I was about to say the past few months a lot has happened within this family. Things I never thought I'd live to see. But here we are." He starts by addressing one aunt whose son was arrested for beating up someone. He tells her he is not happy about how they took care of the matter bribing the police and even bribing the victim himself. According to him he should have taken responsibility for his actions since he is a man who beats up people. But of course he concedes by saying the child is not a Mbatha since his mother is married so he will let that go.

From the looks of it it seems everyone has problems. Even the aunt who tried waking me up early in the morning. Her husband has complained to Mkhulu that she is making life miserable for the second wife. Mkhulu tells her that her husband said if she fails to ship up she will be sent packing. That shuts her up pretty quickly.

"Now Dumsani." He turns to look at Mr Mbatha who has his eyes glued on the MaXhosa socks on his feet. I didn't even know his name until now. "You're the only son from this house. That means carrying the Mbatha name forward is your responsibility. For the longest time I've never had to remind you of that in fact I was proud of you because thanks to you our name is known all over the country. Until recently."

Honestly it is quite something seeing Mr Mbatha so humble. The man walks into a courtroom and commands respect. He walks into a boardroom and commands respect. But here here he is a child. A respectful one at that. I guess that's one of the blessings of having your father live a long life.

"Your family is falling apart right in front of you and you're doing nothing about it. Instead you keep quiet while your wife and daughter drag your name through the mud." I steal a glance at Mkhulu and notice he is getting angrier.

"Mkhulu..." Nkanyezi starts but is quickly shut down.

"Shut up wena. I'm coming to you." Mkhulu says so calmly and yet his voice commands so much authority. I look across at Lulonke and he has his hoodie zipped up all the way to cover his mouth. He is laughing. Him laughing makes me want to laugh to but again respect.

"How do you allow your name to be dragged through the mud like this? Mhmmmm. Does your wife keep your balls in your purse? Tell me. Did she marry you or did you marry her?" I dont think I'll ever be able to see Mr Mbatha the same way again. And maybe the aunt was right I shouldn't be here for this. "First Nkazimulo sleeps with his brothers fiancée behind his back and instead of addressing the matter you shove it under the rug and expect Lulonke to move on like he wasn't stabbed in the back by his own blood. Even after that you failed to sit them down and make sure they fix their relationship. It took Bukhosi dying for them to 'fix things'. And just when I think maybe I can now go and join my wife you start again. What did Milani do to warrant the kind of treatment you have given her?" Silence. Except for my heart beating so quick I feel like it's missing a beat.

"Can I speak." Mrs Mbatha says. Her husband is quick to raise his head for the first time sending daggers to her that she completely ignores. Ignoring every warning sent her way she goes on to tell them everything about me. Including the fact that she found me and Lulonke having sex on the couch. In his apartment. "I dont want a girl ongenasmilo as a daughter in law. (A loose girl.)" She says. As hurt as I am right now I wont let her get to me. Everything she said might be right but I'm not about to defend myself when it's clear she has already judged me and nothing is going to change.

"Before I address everything else....." Lu starts but is rudely interrupted.

"Isn't she supposed to be the one doing the addressing?" One aunt asks.

"No. She is here because of me so if anyone is going to address anything that has to do with her it's me. Firstly all these things you say she did that makes her so bad were you there when she was doing it?" This is about to go left.

"It was all over the internet." His mother shoots back.

"Because you put it there. For all I know you fabricated the whole thing to make her look bad."

"Are you calling me a liar Lulonke?"

"I dont know mama are you?"

"Huh ngyalingwa. (I'm being tested.)" His mum replies clapping her hands.

"Lulonke you know it's true. Even Nkazimulo knows it because she slept with him too." Gasps and clapping of hands fill the room. I've never wished for the earth to swallow me whole as much as I do now. Right now I'd give anything to not be here.

"That's not true." Nkazimulo chimes in. "I never slept with Milani." I look at him and he seems dead serious.

"Bhuti there is no need to defend her. I still have the pdf file you gave me." Nkanyezi says looking at her twin. Nkazimulo doesnt flinch

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"Bhuti there is no need to defend her. I still have the pdf file you gave me." Nkanyezi says looking at her twin. Nkazimulo doesnt flinch instead he shakes his head.

"I dont know what you're talking about." What the fuck is happening right now?

Nkanyezi pulls out her phone telling everyone she has the file on it. She searches for about five minutes with nothing to show. I can sense the panic as she tries to assure everyone she has the file. Nkazimulo doesnt seem fazed one bit.

"So you have nothing to show?" Mkhulu asks.

"It was here. I swear it was. I dont know what happened." She is so close to tears it's almost sad to watch. Her mother is not even saying a damn thing.

"So there is nothing. Thought as much. Anyways as for us having sex on MY couch in MY apartment that's nothing to be ashamed of. We were in my house and just because you walked in unannounced doesn't mean we disrespected you in anyway shape or form. If this was your house I'd understand but my house I can do whatever you want. And you make it seem like she was raping me when I was just as much of a willing participant as she was. So if you are going to judge her on that then judge me too." I've never loved someone as much as I love this man right now. Would it be wrong for me to pay lobola instead and get him pregnant right now?

"Now that we have that out of the way Milani is not going anywhere." Mkhulu says. For the first time I look up at him and he smiles. "So as a form of apology Makoti and Nkanyezi have both bought a cow to apologise to Milani for disrespecting her and dragging her name through the mud." Amen. Wonders shall never cease. A whole cow for little old me? "And we have slaughtered a goat just to bring the family back together again." He says turning to Lulonke. "I know you spoke with your father and things are fine between you now."

"Yebo Mkhulu."

"Good. I don't want to die and leave you scattered all over the place. I want my family to be united even after I'm gone. In order for all of you to remain as united as we are we need to respect each other and that also means not judging others for whatever mistakes they might have made. No one in this room is perfect. But as a family we are supposed to love each other through the good and the bad. So please let's hold hands." We all link hands and bow our heads. Mkhulu starts praying. When he is done it feels like maybe he has a direct line to God because personally I feel lighter. "Now let's go and burn impepho." He says getting up. He walks out of the rondavel and we follow him.

Nandi and I are the last to walk out. The man make their way to the other rondavel where all the traditional stuff is done.

"Let's go and eat." Nandi says dragging me to the main house. Mkhulu has way too many little houses in the yard and one three bedroom main house. We get to the kitchen and Nandi dishes up for us. We take the food and sit outside in the verandah.

"So how are you feeling?" She asks.

"I dont know. Better I guess."

"I know my brother loves you. Lulonke doesn't go to battle for anyone unless he really cares about them. And you you mean the world to him." She says.

"He means the world to me too."

Lu comes around the corner calling me. I follow him to the kraal where Mkhulu shows me the apology cow. Nkanyezi and her mother apologise for their weird behaviour. Honestly I don't think they mean half the things coming out of their mouths but for the sake of peace I accept their apology. We will never be the best of friends but we can be civil and respectful to each other. We watch as the cow is slaughtered. Turns out there is another cow that was slaughtered which everyone is eating right now. This one everyone who is here will get a piece to take home.

As soon as the cow is dead we walk back to the house. Lu stays behind. I take slow steps behind Nkanyezi and her mother. I feel a presence behind me and I turn to find Mkhulu smiling down at me. "How are you feeling?" He asks.

"Better. There was no need for the cow but I appreciate it."

"It was the right thing to do." He stops walking and I stop too. "Milani you see that boy?" He asks pointing at Lulonke. "He is a boy to me but a man to you. He is one of the kindest people I know. Sometimes people take advantage of his kindness and for the most part he lets them. But since you've been in his life he has changed. Not for the worst but for better. You're the part of his life he didn't even know he needed. I know you love him but what I'm going to ask of you is simple protect his heart. He would bring the stars down to earth and let you walk on them if you asked him to. You might not see it now but one day you will you've given him so much strength and faith in himself that even he now sees his own strength. Sometimes that's all a man needs a woman to make him see the light." He taps me a couple of times on the shoulder and then walks away.

By the time we leave my feet hurt like hell. I decided to help out and clean up after everyone had eaten. Lu and I walk back to his house. I should have told him to bring the car. When we get to the house he boils some water and fills a wash basin. He orders me to sit on the couch so he can soak my feet.

"Your feet look like you were running a marathon in the Bush barefoot." He says taking off my sandals.

"And you smell like cow dung so we are even." He laughs and gently massages my feet.

"How are you feeling though. Seriously?"

"I'm okay. I'm just surprised Nkazimulo denied everything. How did you convince him to do that?" I doubt he just woke up and decided to protect me.

"I didn't. Mkhulu did."

"Mkhulu knows about my past?" He chuckles and wipes my one foot before moving to the other.

"Mkhulu knows everything. But he is also the kind of person who sees beyond what is presented to him. If he was the judgemental type none of his daughters would be married." My phone rings interrupting my chain of thought. Scelo's number pops up and I notice it's a conference call with Sne.

"Hello."

"Hey." Sne replies but she sounds down and my heart quickly starts racing. I hope nothing happened with the baby.

"Can the two of you explain to me why I pay for a flat for you and yet you dont live in it? Why am I wasting my money?" Scelo asks. I keep quiet hoping Sne will reply but she doesnt. "Am i talking to myself?" Scelo asks again.

"Uhm we live there." I lie. I went to visit Lulonke and now I have my own space in his closet with toiletries and my own gate remote to boot.

"Yeah bhuti we live here." Sne adds.

"Here where because I am at your apartment and neither of you are here. In fact even the electricity is at 2 if you were here you would have noticed and bought more." He shouts. Okay he has a point.

"Anyways you can lie to me if you want but your parents are here." Hold up.

"Whose parents?" Sne asks I'm sure her heart is racing as much as mine is.

"Both your parents I dont know what you're going to tell them because they've been trying to call you. They wanted you to come to my place for dinner. And now they are on their way here to your flat. I dont know what magic you're going to pull to be here in the next twenty minutes. Goodbye." He says and hangs up leaving Sne and I breathing on the phone.

"We are screwed arent we?" Sne asks.

"I'm in KZN." I remind her and she bursts out laughing.

"Of course. Do you think you'll make it back to Gauteng in ten minutes?" She asks still laughing. I'm selling a best friend/sister/cousin. She comes with a baby in her belly.

Where is David Blaine when you need him?

I stopped being answerable to anyone the moment my mother retreated into her dark place and never left. I became the parent I was the one asking Hlumile or Siya or Cebo where they have been. I was the one who worried about their safety anytime they were not in my sight. I was the one who became a parent. I never thought I'd see the day that would change.

Who would have thought that at my ripe old age of twenty three almost twenty four I would be scared as hell of my parents. I didn't sleep last night. I couldn't even answer my phone when they called. And the crazy part about it is that all the lies I could have come up flew out the window. Not even the work excuse popped in my head. I was so focused on disappointing my parents that nothing else mattered.

Lu has been trying to calm me down since we landed at the airport but it's not helping. We are driving to Scelo's place since that's where the parents spent the night. By the time we pull up we find Sne and Kumkani parked outside a little further away from the gate. Lu parks behind them and I quickly get out of the car and make my way to Sne. She struggles to get out of the car with her big tummy but she makes it. We hug each other. I can feel her heart beating fast. No matter what happens today will be the day they see her baby bump. Hiding it now would be like hiding an elephant inside an empty house.

"Hey have you gone inside yet?" I ask looking at the house. It's hard to see clearly from here but I can see a couple of cars on the driveway.

"No. I was waiting for you." She replies.

"Why didn't you come yesterday? It would have made things easier." For me more than her honestly.

"Ha nope. If we are going to be shouted at then we will face them together. Besides it will be easier dealing with this with you there." She says pointing to her stomach. Kumkani and Lulonke make their way to us. They seem to think this is funny.

"You have to go in at some point." Kumkani tells us. Personally I don't need a reminder but he is right. Like it or not we still have to go inside.

"There's no point in delaying the inevitable." I say taking a deep breath. I don't even know why I'm scared. I am an adult a working independent adult at that. I shouldn't be so scared. We say our goodbyes and watch the two drive away before we make our way in.

By the time we get to the door Scelo is already waiting for us. He shakes his head and goes back inside the house. We look at each other and gently squeeze each others hand as a form of assurance before we make our way inside. We gently knock on the open door before making our way in.

The moment we become visible to them the talking stops and all eyes turn to us. I grip Sne's hand as tightly as I can seeing her father's glare move to her bulging tummy. Her mother sighs and sits back on the couch.

"So it's true." She says. I cant fully tell how she is feeling. One moment its disappointment and the next its pain. Her father on the other hand he is angry. "When were you planning on telling us about this?" She asks.

"I'm sorry." Sne whispers.

"I didnt ask for an apology. I asked a question." She fires back so loud I feel Sne flinch. I held on a little tighter to her hand. "And you didnt think to say anything?" She adds turning to me.

"It wasnt my place." I say honestly. I could have told them but it really wasnt my news to break. She shakes her head realise the truth in my words.

"How far along are you?"

"Almost six months." Sne replies her eyes glued to the floor. She lifts her eyes up a little to steal a glance at her dad. The look he gives her sends her eyes right back to the floor.

"We have to go." Scelo says coming into the room. He has changed into formal pants and a shirt. The parents get up and gather their things. Mum wraps her arms around the both of us her head resting between us.

"Everything will be okay." She whispers. She let's go and my dad follows suit.

"We will discuss your little disappearing act when we come back." He says with a little chuckle in his voice. At least not everyone is angry so that's something.

"The meat is in the sink make sure it's ready by the time we come back." Mam'Cebekhulu says before walking out.

As soon as the door closes we let out the breath we've been holding in.

"It wasnt as bad I expected." I say plopping myself down on the couch. Sne chuckles lowering herself onto the other couch.

"He hates me." She says her eyes stuck on the wall. "He really does."

"He doesn't hate you. He is disappointed yes but he can never hate you."

"He didn't even say a word to me. Not even shouting like that would have been better." She says so close to tears. I get off my couch and perch myself on the armrest of the couch she is sitting on wrapping my arm around her shoulders.

"Sne stop overthinking it. He will come around. I promise you. Your dad loves you way too much to stay mad at you. Now come on wipe your tears so we can make them food. We need to make sure it's amazing enough to make them forgive us. And that means you'll do the most of the cooking because my skills are way too basic." I say and she laughs. Even with tears in her eyes she laughs. That's a win for me.

I get up and pull her up with me and we make our way to the kitchen. There's chicken in the sink. Easy like Sunday morning.

"Do you think he will forgive me?" She asks peeling potatoes.

"Of course he will. And then he will spoil his granddaughter you'll be begging him to stop. Although deep down you won't want him to because that's how he shows his love for her. And then she'll always tell Khulu each time you discipline her or deny her anything and he will shout at you because how dare you upset his princess."

"How long have you been thinking about that?" She asks and we burst out laughing.

"Hey I have an active imagination."

"Clearly. What I would do for a glass of wine right now?" She says sinking into the high chair. A little though crosses my mind I don't remember the last time I had alcohol in me. I don't think I've even been craving it or dying for it. Even now

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I don't remember the last time I had alcohol in me. I don't think I've even been craving it or dying for it. Even now with bottles and bottles in Scelo's cellar nothing seems to draw me to it. Either this is a miracle or I really was using alcohol as a coping mechanism.

"Are you okay?" Sne asks since I'm silent and lost in my own world.

"Yeah im fine. I just realised I haven't had a drop of alcohol in so long." She smiles at me.

"And how does that make you feel?"

"I dont know. Weird. I used to drink any chance I got and now I dont even think about taking a bottle when I go to the shops or a order a glass at a restaurant."

"We call that growth. Besides with everything in your life finally looking up there is no need for you to use alcohol to make yourself feel something." She is right. Maybe even quitting alcohol also made things better.

I cant tell you the exact moment I let go of it though. After my intervention I did drink a few times. As to what happened after that that made me turn my back on alcohol I dont know. I'd like to drink again but not to cover up anything but just for fun and the experience. Right now though I think I'm okay without it.

A couple of hours later we are done. The table is set and the food is ready. We settle in front of the tv and wait for them to come back. We dont even know where they went. Sne dozes off right in the middle of the movie. It doesnt take long before I follow suit. I barely had sleep last night so I'm not surprised and I dont fight it.

The loud banging of a car door jolts us out of our sleep. And then the shouting follows. For a moment we cant make out who is talking until they get closer to the door. It's my father and he sounds angry.

"You need to calm down you know your blood pressure shoots up when you're upset." My mum says.

"How can I calm down when that good for nothing man expects me to compensate him for raising my child. A child that was stolen from us. Is he mad?" He says before the door is flung open. I guess they went to see Paul.

"He is not getting shit. He wasnt even present for the better part of her life." Bab'Cebekhulu adds sounding almost as angry as my dad. Sne and I stare at each other before we turn to them again.

"We've tried to do things in a civil manner and that has failed. Now the police and the lawyers can take over." Scelo says.

"I dont even know why those cops suggested we do this ourselves before they can step in." Mum says.

"Maybe they were hoping we would resolve this as a family. I mean the main perpetrator is in a mental asylum so even with a case opened there is little they can do." Scelo tells them. I know

eavesdropping is rude but they found us here it doesn't count. "I will call the officer and update him on what happened." He adds.

"Good. Because I am not letting that man make a quick buck out of my pain." My dad says.

They make their way to the lounge and stop when they see us sitting there.

"How long have you been sitting there?" Mam'Cebekhulu asks.

"Long enough to know I could have told you going there would have been a waste of time."

"Well we wanted to talk to you about that yesterday but you were nowhere to be found." Mum says.

"Okay touche." They laugh and sit down. I feel Sne stiffen next to me.

"We will warm up the food." I say and get up with Sne behind me. "You need to lighten up." I say to her when we get to the kitchen.

"I can't."

"You can. It's done now. They know. There is nothing much they can do. They can't send the baby back so they have no choice but to accept it." She sighs and sits on the high chair.

"I guess." I don't even know why she is stressing because her baby daddy is present and committed to her. Heck the man wants to marry her. That would be my leading point honestly because some parents value marriage. You could be nineteen and popping out babies every year as long as you're married they will be fine.

We get the food to the table and call them over. They take their seats and dig in. It's quite nice to see my dad and Bab'Cebekhulu chatting. It's crazy how they haven't spoken in so long but now they are talking as if there's never been any type of rift between them. I guess blood is thicker than water.

"So your boyfriend sent a letter." Mam'Cebekhulu says looking at Sne. She stops chewing her food and looks at her mother. "They are coming in a month to discuss lobola and damages." She adds.

"I didn't know he sent it." Sne admits.

"So you knew he was planning on it?" Her dad asks.

"Yes but I thought it would happen later."

"This man how well do you know him?" Her mum questions. "How long have you been together?"

"It's been a while." She says dodging the question. She's not about to tell them they've been together for less than a year and that they met at a club right after she dumped her cheating boyfriend. I swear this story is one for the books.

"Are you sure you want to marry him though?" My father asks. "And this is not about you being pregnant. Because if you're getting married for the sake of the child then you'll be putting a heavy burden on the child."

"I do want to marry him. He treats me right and as scared as we both were when we found out I was pregnant the way he stepped up and made sure i was okay and assured me he'd be there for me meant a lot. I was expecting him to run the other way but he is here so maybe that means something." She says a little more relaxed than she was when we sat down.

She is right. Although I dont know the inner workings of their relationship what I have seen has made me happy. And from someone who has never liked any of her boyfriends Kumkani has shown that he is willing to love her the way she deserves to be loved. And it's hard to miss the glow and the light that keeps shining around her.

"Does that mean we can welcome his delegation and accept their cows?" Her fathers asks staring right at her.

"Yebo baba." The mums start ululating forgetting that the negotiations will be a month away not now. The one thing that makes me happy though is the smile on her face. Even though her father is trying to hide it he has a small smile on his face. Its official I guess Thungisani.

82♥

LULONKE

Whoever said running a business is easy needs a huge slap across the face because its anything but that. Wait no one said it was easy and that alone should have been the indication I needed that this is not a good idea. My firm cant be officially open till I find an office space. Now I could be humble about it and find a small office somewhere but truth be told it might be harder to get clients simply based on my location. People are judgemental like that.

This is the third office I am viewing this week. It's not too big and it's not too small either. But it's expensive as fuck. My budget would carry me for six months at most and that's excluding any running costs. And there is furniture that still needs to be bought. This is going to be hard.

"So what do you think?" The agent asks staring at me with hopeful eyes. I'm sure she is tired of me and she just wants me to choose a place and stick with it. I must say this is the best place so far. It's in Waterfall in an office park with plenty of space and security. The best part though it's just a ten minute drive to the house.

"I'll take it." I tell her. She almost jumps for joy. It's almost month end I'm sure the commission will be a nice one.

"Perfect. I will get the paperwork ready." She says typing on her phone. I need to bring Milani here maybe she might give me advice on how to make this place look like a proper office. And I will need to find second hand office furniture for now. I swear starting from the bottom is not as nice as Drake makes it seem because what if I dont get to the top?

My phone rings just as I walk out of the office. My brothers name pops up on the screen. Since the whole ceremony that happened at home I'd say we seem to be on the right path. Even my dad has called to check in on me without saying anything nasty about Milani. He even asks how she is. It will take some getting used to but I am glad they are trying because she is not going anywhere. I still don't trust them fully but they are trying and that's something. Me I will believe in love more than my own family. That's just how it is.

"Bafo."

"Hey how did it go with the viewing?"

"Great. I took the place. Its the best one I've seen and it's in a prime location. Its perfect." I tell him a little more excited than I was a moment ago. This is my future and my children's future. But if they decide they'd rather be some skrrr skrrr niggers then I will be fine with that. Eventually.

"That's great. And cost wise how is it looking?" And my mood dwindles down again.

"Its a bit on the pricey side but I can pay for the first six months upfront. In terms of furnishing I'll have to settle for some second hand stuff for now."

"I have a suggestion. How about I cover the rent for you and you can take care of everything else." He suggests.

I stand frozen in the same place for a moment. Nkazimulo is actually willing to help me? This is a real life miracle.

"Why?" Not that I'm being ungrateful for the help but if this help will come biting in a few years then I definitely do not want it.

"Just because. Besides your birthday is in a few weeks consider it an early birthday present." I'll take that.

"Okay."

"Okay?" He asks in disbelief.

"Yes I said okay." I'll take all the help I can get right now.

"Wow shocking. I thought you'd fight me until i have no choice but to go behind your back." He confesses.

"Nope no fighting. Thank you for the help." He sighs.

"You know I wish I would have been a little more supportive when you were here. But it makes me happy seeing you spread your wings and become your own person outside the family. I'm proud of you." He tells me. His words get me a bit emotional because inspite of everything we are brothers and we shouldn't let other people's issues get between us. Even if those issues come from our own parents. But we are still alive and there is nothing stopping us from fixing things while we have time on this earth.

"Thank you. That means a lot to me." I hear him sniff a bit. Wait is he crying?

"Are you crying?" I ask I want to laugh but this is a serious moment and I have to be serious.

"I am not crying." He says. He is lying. "Anyways forward me the payment details and I will take care of everything. Bye." He hangs up the phone and I burst out laughing. Who knew

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big and strong Nkazimulo can shed a tear. Well atleast its tears of joy so I'll forgive that.

I request a cab and head home since Milani has the car. A proper boyfriend would have got her her own car by now but I'm a broke boyfriend so for now we will have to share. I just pray that one day I can give her all that her heart desires. She deserves all that and more. For now thought she will have to make do with a home cooked meal when she gets back.

MILANI

She is staring at me as if this is the first time she has laid eyes on me. I don't even think she has blinked more than four times since I sat here and that was ten minutes ago. I'm not as afraid as I thought I would be of her. The last time I was here I left with bruises because of her. I guess the guards and nurses all around make the situation a lot more bearable.

"Do you want us to light the candle for you?" Hlumile asks next to me. She is more nervous than I am. She hasn't been to see her since she left for varsity. Sometimes I wonder if somewhere deep in her brain there is some sane part of her that understands where we are. And how we got here.

She turns to Hlumile and smiles. She recognizes her. And she looks happy to see her. Must be nice.

"Yes please." She says clapping her hands and looking at the cake in front of her. Funny enough I bought the cake but she doesn't care. Hlumile uses the lighter and the flame makes her laugh. She lights the candle while her mother claps her hands like an excited toddler. We softly sing happy birthday and the grin never leaves her face.

"Make a wish." Hlumile tells her. She closes her eyes and mumbles some words before opening them again and blowing the candle. She claps for herself when the fire goes off.

"What did you wish for?" Hlumile asks taking out paper plates and a plastic knife from the bag we brought.

"I can't tell you that or else it won't come true." She says. Hlumile cuts the cake and hands us each a piece. She opens the juice and pours into plastic cups.

"This is nice who baked?" She asks shoving a piece of cake into her mouth.

"Lani bought it for you." Hlumile replies. I don't even bother being part of this conversation because it's clear she has no words for me. Even the mention of my name seems to turn the cake sour in her mouth.

"Thank you." She says looking at me. Well that's a change.

We spend the day with her she shows Hlumile around the hospital and she even shows her the vegetable garden they are working on. I trail behind them like a guard. I think accepting that she is not my mother has been easier than I expected it to be. For a while I wondered why it was so easy

for me to do that and I realised she wasn't much of a mother to me anyway if she had been the kind of mother she was the first ten years of my life then maybe things would have been different.

We make our way back to our table. The cake is gone. We look around for a guard maybe they saw what happened to the rest of it until we see another patient sitting a few tables away with her hand in the cake eating it like it was specially delivered for her. Grace marches over there disregarding our pleas to let it go. She grabs the cake and slaps the patient so hard she falls on the floor.

"THIS IS MY CAKE. MINE." She shouts loud enough for the entire hospital to hear her. The guards and some nurses appear from everywhere as she marches back to our table. "Sit down. Let's finish my cake." She says with a wide grin on her face. Wasn't she a raging bulldog just a moment ago?

We sit down and she divides the remaining cake in three. The other patient finally gets up from the ground as the shock of what just happened wears off. And she is unforgiving too. She marches towards us ready for a fight. Luckily a couple of the guards get to her before she gets to us. "Uzonya wena." The patient shouts as she is dragged away. Grace just sticks her tongue out and adds a middle finger to boot. This is clearly prison for mentally unstable people because there is no way.

"Eat." She orders shoving the two plates of cake in front of us. Even how she cut it or should I say tore it is weird. There is a knife in front of her but she decided not to use it. I am not eating that. I don't know where that woman's hands were before she stuck them in the cake.

"We should get going." I say.

"Before we go I will go get her gifts from the car." Hlumile says running off. I'm sure she is also running away from the cake.

The silence after is rather awkward. For a moment. I pull out my ID from my sling bag and push it towards her. She picks it up and looks at it. Her eyes get watery for a moment then she places it back on the table.

"I decided to change my name. Legally." I tell her. She nods her head.

"So I never meant anything to you?" She asks looking at me. Her eyes are bloodshot red all of a sudden.

"What do you mean?" I need her to atleast clarify because I have no idea what that's supposed to me.

"I raised you and loved you. But the moment things go bad you turn your back on me. On our family?" She says tears running down her face. Who is this woman? Isn't she the same person who said she hated me because her stupid man failed to marry her because of me? Did I hallucinate all of that?

"Are you serious?"

"Yes I am serious. I am your mother. I might have no brought you to the world but I loved you and raised you." She says sobbing as if I just stabbed her in the heart.

"Yes you raised me and loved me until you decided to tap out when I was ten leaving me to raise myself and your children. Have you forgotten that?" She chuckles between sobs.

"I was sick. I am sick." She hisses.

"Yes and you had plenty of moments where you were lucid enough to get help. You didn't think about sending us back to your family you have sisters or even contact social workers to help us. Or even sent us to an orphanage. Anything to make our lives bearable." I promised myself I wouldn't get angry today or allow her to rule me up clearly that has gone out the window.

"You could have done that yourself." She says wiping away the tears.

"I was a child. I was ten years old. What did I know."

"Mxm. But you knew enough to open your legs for men for money." She fires back her hands now crossed on her chest. That statement alone is like dagger through my heart. "You think I dont know? People around here talk. And to think my children were fed with prostitute money." I am out of words. I have sworn so many times to never come back here but my heart always betrays me because deep down I still care about her. She was my mother no matter how short lived that was but still she was my mother. If I ever needed the straw that broke the camels back this is it. This is where I finally allow myself to let go because no matter what I try there will never be a thank you or an I'm sorry.

I pick my ID up and put it back in my bag then I stand up. Without even a simple goodbye I walk away. I meet Hlumile just as I get inside.

"I'll wait for you in the car." I tell her and quickly walk past her. By the time I get to the car my eyes are blurry I open the car door and get inside allowing the tears to freely fall. I pull my ID out and look at it. This is the death of Milani Mbokazi and the birth of Alondwe Khwezilokusa Cebekhulu.

ALONDWE/MILANI

We are driving to KZN for the lobola negotiations. We should have taken a flight but Sne's doctor advised her not to so now we are driving. Lucky for us Scelo volunteered to drive us. Sizakele Sebastian and Hlumile will come down tomorrow since the negotiations will be happening on Saturday. Sne should have been home a week ago but here she is driving home literally two days before the negotiations. Everything will be done eNdwendwe since that's the main family home.

No one knows yet about my name change except Sne Lu Hlumile and Grace. Everyone else is okay with it except for her. Somehow she has managed to get my number and she keeps calling me every chance she gets telling me how I betrayed her. According to her I should be grateful that she stole me gave me a name that's not mine and then proceeded to abandon me to raise her children. As far as she is concerned I should worship the ground she walks on.

Ever since Lu got his office space he has also been in a different place mentally. It's quite something seeing him happy especially in the mornings. For a while he was down and as much as he tried to hide it I could see that he wasn't okay. But now he is slowly getting back to his old self. Seeing him happy makes me happy and you know what they say happy spouse happy life. I think.

"I want to pee." Sne says for the hundredth time since we left Joburg. We had a pit stop literally thirty minutes ago. Scelo stares at her through the rearview mirror. I'm pretty sure he is regretting driving us. "Don't look at me like that. The baby is using my bladder as a pillow." She adds. Scelo pulls up on the side of the road. Yeah he is definitely exhausted. He can't even wait for us to get to a garage.

"You have five minutes." He says turning to look at her. Sne looks out the window and gasps. "Can't we get to a garage at least?" She asks. I wouldn't go out there either. The grass is too congested and there could be snakes in there.

"The next garage is probably an hour away." Scelo tells her. She stares out at the window for a moment contemplating her choices.

"No I'll wait." She says.

"Are you sure? I don't want you peeing in my car."

"Atleast you can get it cleaned. If I get bitten by a snake I'll die. So what's more important? Me or the car?" I forgot how these two can be at each others throats every chance they get. Eight years between them and you would swear they are the same age. As much as Sne respects him she also doesnt mind fighting with him.

"Mxm. If you pee in my car you will walk all the way home." Scelo says and starts the car.

My phone rings from my hand bag. I pull it out and see an unknown number. I look at it as it rings I'm pretty sure this is one of Grace's stunts. I wonder how she can even get a phone in that place.

"Aren't you going to answer that?" Scelo asks.

"No. I dont know the number." He nods his head and focuses on driving. The phone rings again. I sigh and pick it up.

"Hello."

"Milani it's your aunt Nomalanga." She says and keeps quiet. I dont know if this is the part where I am supposed to jump for joy just because she called. "Are you there?" I roll my eyes.

"I'm here. What can I do for you?"

"Your mother called me. She told me that you changed your name. Why would you do that?" She asks. It's weird how my mother I mean Grace suddenly remembers peoples names and numbers she even remembers things that happened a long time ago. Clearly the medication is working. All she had to do was take it all these years and she would have been a sane functioning member of society.

"I did. Is that a problem?"

"Milani you cannot just wake up and change your name. It doesn't work like that." I wonder how it works.

"Did she tell you why I did that? Or you're just going off of her anger and pretense."

"Okay tell me what she was supposed to tell me because I don't understand why you would change your name when you know very well that your father never paid damages for you." She says.

"When you get the time or your sister calls you again ask her what she did that led to this. Ask her to tell you the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Until then I have things to do. Goodbye." I hang up the phone and throw it on my lap.

"Everything okay?" Scelo asks.

"Nothing the block button can't fix."

By the time we get to Ndwendwe everyone is here. Aren't these supposed to be negotiations? Why are there so many people?

"Wow." I exclaim as we drive in.

"Why are there so many people here?" Sne asks glaring at everyone. I hope she is not getting cold feet.

"They are here for you." Scelo says. "You also need to remember that we haven't been here in years so its expected that the rest of the extended family will want to be here too." Well he has a point there but couldn't they wait for the actual wedding?

I get out of the car first and help Sne out of the back seat and the ululating begins. She is pulled to the house by women we've never seen before. I stay back and let them take over. To almost a year ago we were arguing about her stupid ex boyfriend and now we are here she is getting married and has a baby on the way. Things really can change in the blink of an eye. And I'll say this is one change I am happy about.

By the time I get to the house with the bags she has been sat in the lounge and the women are fluffing over her. I make my way to the bedroom to put the bags. I find Nonkanyiso laying on the bed.

"Hey!" She doesn't reply. I place the bags down and get closer to her. I notice she has headphones on. I tap her on the shoulder and she quickly turns to look at me.

"Do you mind?" She asks. Okay what did I do to her?

"I was just saying hi."

"Well hi!" She snaps and goes back to her phone. Okay.

I tuck my tail between my legs and walk out. I dont even know what I did to her. I bump into Mpendulo. He smiles and gives me a hug. Atleast one sibling is happy to see me.

"You're okay?" He asks me.

"I'm fine. Is Nonkanyiso okay I tried to greet her and she snapped at me."

"Don't worry about her she is a teenager with teenage problems. Dont mind her. Mum and dad are outside." He says changing the subject. I head outside and find the parents chatting to some family members. I make my way to them and greet. Well the parents are happy to see me so that's something.

"When did you arrive?" Mum asks wrapping her arm around my waist and pulling me close to her.

"Less than ten minutes ago." I say. She introduces me to the people she is with but she doesn't tell them how we are related.

"Is she also Phikela's daughter?" One woman asks.

"Of course." Another replies. "You can see she looks like the bride." I look at my mother hoping she will correct them but she doesn't.

"Ladies let me go greet the bride. We will talk." She says and pulls me away from the crowd

"Why didn't you tell them I am your daughter?" I ask her as soon as we are away from them. Maybe I am being paranoid and insecure but it hurts a bit.

"I will. This week is about Sne

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let me go greet the bride. We will talk." She says and pulls me away from the crowd

"Why didn't you tell them I am your daughter?" I ask her as soon as we are away from them. Maybe I am being paranoid and insecure but it hurts a bit.

"I will. This week is about Sne I don't have the energy to explain to people. They will find out when we have your homecoming ceremony." She says. I know it makes sense what she is saying but it still hurts a bit.

The kitchen is not as busy as you would expect judging by the people outside. I decide to get myself a snack. I open the cupboard and take out some chips and a dip. I take them out and fill a small bowl with the chips and another small bowl with the dip. I make my way to the bedroom and find it empty. Thank God. I make myself comfortable on the bed. I know I should help out with cooking or whatever but I am tired. The drive was too long.

The door opens and Sne sneaks in like she is running away from someone. She gently closes the door behind her and heaves out a very deep breath.

"And now?" She saddles to the bed and sits down.

"I don't know half the people out there but they have been giving me marriage advice." She says rolling her eyes.

"Maybe you will need it." I tease. She gives me a deadly side eye.

"Maybe. But I don't know how their marriages are going and for all I know their advice could backfire. I mean in this day and age what woman tells another woman that when she's angry at the husband he anger should end at the waist. From the waist down it's party time anytime as long as the man is

in the mood. It's the 21st century we have monopoly on our bodies." The feminist in her says. Yes she has a point though.

She sticks her hand in the bowl of chips just as the door opens and Nonkanyiso walks in carrying the rest of the chips. She looks at me and the bowl on my lap and I see smoke come out of her ears.

"Who the fuck told you you can have my chips?" She asks walking in and crossing her arms on her chest. Sne and I look at each other both gobsmacked both by her attitude and the disrespect.

"I didnt know they were yours." I say sticking another one in my mouth.

"Who did you think they were for? And who raised you that you dont know not to take things that dont belong to you?" She is now shouting. It's safe to say this one has issues with me.

"Geez relax we will buy you more chips. It's not like they were discontinued or something." Sne tells her.

"I wasnt talking to you preggly. I was talking to this one." And now she doesnt know my name.

"Serious you need to relax. I'm sorry about you chips."

"I don't need your sorry I need my chips." She yells in my face. I feel her spit on my face. Now I'm angry. She stands back rocking her neck side to side like a stupid black mamba stuck in the 2000s.

I pick the bowl and empty the contents all over her face. I hear Sne gasp next to me.

"What the fuck did you just do?" Nonkanyiso asks her jaw on the floor.

"You said you wanted your chips. Now you have them." If there is one thing I refuse to tolerate its disrespect. Sister or not I dont care.

"I swear to God you will regret this." She says. She goes to the door and stops when my mother walks in.

"What's going on here?" She asks seeing the mess on the floor. And my dear sister decides to put on an oscar winning act and breaks down crying and throws herself at my mum. Yes she is mine I'll refer to her as ours the day this one starts acting right. She mumbles something and mum looks at me.

"What happened?" Nonkanyiso lifts her head up and looks at mum.

"I just told you what happened." She argues.

"I know. Now I'm asking your sister what happened."

"Ma nothing happened. All Milani did was take chips from the cupboard she didnt know she wasn't allowed to." Sne answers for me.

"I'll go and replace the chips." I say. I can always ask to borrow Scelo's car. Town is not too far from here.

"There is no need for that." Mum says.

"Yes there is." Nonkanyiso argues. I get off the bed and grab my handbag.

"Milani sit down. Its fine. It's not like the chips had a name or something." Mum says.

"Honestly it's fine. I'll get the chips." I walk out looking for Scelo. I see Mpendulo going out the gate. Maybe he can help me.

I rush to the gate and see him getting in a car. I quicken my steps and make it to him just before he drives off. He rolls down the window when he sees me.

"Hey what's wrong?"

"Are you going to town or will you go past there? I need something."

"Let's go." I get in the car and we drive off. I know I probably over reacted earlier but Nonkanyiso's behaviour was uncalled for. First she ignores me when I greet her and now she throws a tantrum because of food. The last time I was here I was told this is my home too and I can do and eat whatever I want. I make sure to respect people's privacy and not force myself into things I have nothing to do with. But this is food. Chips for that matter its not like I took her leftovers or something that belongs to her.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Mpendulo asks. "You've been silent since we left home. What happened?" I tell him what happened.

"I don't want to step on anyone's toes." I say.

"I dont know what is wrong with her I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I'll just buy the chips and get out of her way." He turns the indicator on and parka the car on the side of the road kills the engine and turns to look at me.

"Milani..." He starts. As much as I've decided to put that name aside I figured maybe my welcoming ceremony will be a great place to announce that. "This is your home too. Nonkanyiso will come around. She has been the only girl in the house for so long so maybe she feels threatened by your presence. And to add to that there's Sne and Phiwo too so now she feels like she has to share the attention with everyone."

"Bhuti you dont need to explain anything. I know she doesnt like me and it's fine. Trust me I've dealt with worse. I'll be fine. I just need to replace her chips and get out of her way."

"You're not replacing anything. I'm pretty sure there are more chips in the cupboard she should eat those. For now let's go braai some meat and eat." He says and starts the car.

"Where were you going initially?"

"I was going to see some friends but now i am going to spend some time with my sister." He says. Well how can I say no to that.

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My day went from happy exciting and fun to shitty and back to happy and exciting again. Spending the rest of the day with Mpendulo was something. Although I did almost get beaten up by one of his girlfriends because she thought i am his girlfriend. The drama. Anyways that was sorted pretty quickly and the girl apologised and she ended up staying for a while until my dear brother reminded her this was a brother sister date. And then she was back to giving me deadly side eyes. Maybe I am the problem I seem to attract drama everywhere I go.

I pull up to the house since Mpendulo was too tipsy to drive. But even then he was able to give me proper directions since I'm not familiar with the road. The two times I've been here I was a passenger not a driver. I kill the engine and we sit in the car I'm dreading going in. From the looks of it most of the people who were here earlier have gone home. Now I'll have to go in and face Nonkanyiso. I dont know why she hates me. I like having another sister but clearly the feeling is not mutual.

"You know its weird having you here." He says. I turn to look at him and find him starring at me with a smile on his face. "Not in a bad way though." When has weird ever been good?

"Why is that?"

"Because when mum was pregnant with you her and I were close. I was always close to dad when I was a kid but when she fell pregnant with you we became super close. It was weird I never left her side. And the fact that she was pregnant at the same time as Scelo's mother it was exciting. We were finally going to be big brothers. Even though he tried to hide it he hated being referred to as ubhut'omncane kaBongani. He wanted to be ubhut omdala. And when the time came we were happy. After Sne was born I would go to their house to practice how to take care of a baby. I was going to be the best big brother ever." He says then stops for a moment. Even though the car is dark

the lights from outside the house radiating of his eyes show how teary they are. He blinks a lot probably trying to make sure they dont fall. He turns his head and faces the front.

"And then mum went to the hospital. I couldn't sleep that night. I beg my dad not to let me go to school. I wanted to be home when you arrived. Instead mum came back with no baby. I asked where you were and everyone dismissed me because I was a child. A few days later a small white coffin was brought home. I was nine years old and I knew what a coffin meant. I was there when Mkhulu was brought home. Although I was peeping through the window but still I saw his coffin. And seeing yours well the one they brought home it felt like someone had taken a piece of my heart." A lone tear runs down the side of my face. If I'm not careful I will be a sobbing mess by the time we leave this car. I take a few deep breaths.

"Things were never the same after that. Mum was always sad. Dad was angry. Bab'Phikela and his family left. It was just crazy. I never thought they would ever be in the same room again let alone the same yard." He sighs and turns again to look at me. He takes my hand and lightly rubs his thumb over it. "But now you're here. Your 'death' broke this family and now your return has also restored it. I know Nonkanyiso might be a drama queen right now but she wasnt there to see the aftermath of your 'death'. Those of us who were there young or old your presence feels like a huge void has been filled in our souls." He says wiping the tears running down my face with his free hand. "You are home now siswam. Dont let anyone not even your little sister make you feel like you dont belong here. If you have to slap her a couple of times so she gets it then do it." He adds making me laugh.

"Thank you. In my head I know this is where I belong but it will take time to get used to it." I get my purse and pull out my ID and hand it to him. He turns the light on and gasps when he sees my new names. Only two people know about this well three when you count Grace. Only Sne and Lu knew about my plans to change my name.

"You changed your name?" He says.

"Yes. I haven't told our parents though. I was going to tell them after the lobola negotiations but mum says there will be a welcoming ceremony for me so I figured I would tell them then." He looks up at me his smile filled face glowing. He pulls me to him and gives me a hug almost squeezing the life out of me.

I feel something warm hit my back. Is he crying? Another drip hits me and that all the confirmation I need. He pulls back and sighs.

"I never thought I'd see this name anywhere else other than a tombstone."

"Do you think I was a bit forward with it? I mean they are still trying to sort out everything else with the police." I've been asking myself this question for a while. But this is my name. Whether I change it now or a year from now it will still be the same thing. Right?

"No. This is who you are. It's only right that you carry the name you were given by your parents." He chuckles. "You know Mkhulu was the one who named you and Snethemba?"

"I thought he died before we were born?"

"He did. But after I was born he wanted a granddaughter. He didn't care where it came from but he wanted one. For some reason he wasn't as traditional and patriarchal as most men his age were or are. He didn't care much about the sex of a baby as long as it was a healthy baby. But after three boys he was tired of the testosterone that would bring so he said he wanted a granddaughter next. He told my dad and Bab'Phikela that the first daughter would be named after gogo hence Sne's second name is Margaret. It was supposed to be her first name but her mum was like no way. It's an old people name so she compromised on it being her second name." He tells me. I love hearing these stories. Especially about Mkhulu since I'll never meet him.

"You know she hates that name!" I say and he laugh.

"I would too. But maybe once she knows where it come from then she might see it differently." Maybe.

"So how did my name come about?"

"Apparently Mkhulu said the second daughter would be Khwezilokusa because it would mean she would be bringing more light to this home. And he was right because all the kids who came after were girls. So there is light." He narrates. Whatever questions or doubts I had about changing my name fly out the window. This is who I am. Maybe Mkhulu was the one who led Sne and I to meet that day. This is too much for it to be considered a coincidence. There has to be some divine intervention involved.

And hour after pulling up to the house we finally make it through the front door. Most of the house is dark except the lounge.

"I think we should call the police now." I hear mum say. I look at Mpendulo and he is trying to hide a laugh. Yeah I am glad I don't drink anymore. I take a deep breath and mentally give myself a pep talk before walking to the lounge. There is a bit of silence before I feel mum engulf me in a hug. She holds me at arms length and looks at me before hugging me again.

"Dont ever scare me like that." She whispers before letting go of me.

"I'm sorry. I just needed some air."

"Where were you?" My dad asks.

"We went to the Shisanyama." Mpendulo tells them. I see Bab'Phikela looking at me. I know what he is thinking.

"I didn't drink." I say answering his unasked question. I see his shoulders slump in relief.

"Are you hungry? I'll get you something to eat." Mum asks.

"No we already ate. Thank you."

"Nana sit down." Mam'Cebekhulu says. I take a seat as Mpendulo disappears to the kitchen. "What happened earlier?" Oh God. We are going back there. I tell them what happened.

"I know my reaction was unnecessary and I'm sorry."

"Its understandable." My dad says. "This is your home and that means you eat whatever you want. Unless someone puts a name on what's theirs. But in this house we share. So there is no need to apologise. Go to sleep. We will talk about this properly in the morning."

I leave them in the lounge and head to the kitchen. I find Mpendulo with two plates of food I front of him.

"You said you're not hungry." He reminds me.

"I know. I came to say goodnight." He gives me a thumbs up and I leave him alone. I'm not even going to bother taking a shower. It's late already.

Atleast miss drama queen is not sleeping in this room. She is busy tossing and turning trying to find a comfortable sleeping position. I change into my pyjamas and get in the bed. She tosses her arm and leg over me.

"Comfortable?" I ask when she stops moving.

"Very. Where have you been?"

"Mpendulo took me to eshisanyama. We had fun. What happened with miss drama?"

"Argh that one likes attention. Your mum gave her another packet of chips and your dad almost beat the shit out of her." It should be funny but I dont want anyone getting in trouble because of me.

"I'll talk to her tomorrow. Sleep."

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Nonkanyiso hasn't said a word to me but the deadly side eyes she is giving me are enough to make everyone see that something is not right. Thank God my friends are here Hlumile and Phiwo are keeping Sne company in the bedroom. I have no idea why she even has to be quarantined in the bedroom. And those two are complaining none stop about it.

"I still cant get over the fact that you and Sne are actually cousins sisters basically." Sizakele says. We are in the kitchen chopping up vegetables and making sure tomorrow's menu is up to standard. Sebastian is handling all the cooking much to everyone's dismay. He says he doesn't want to be embarrassed tomorrow. I dont know how this became about him but he is doing a good job no doubt.

"I always know there was something off about this whole friendship." Sebastian chimes in. "I mean what are the odds of two best friends looking like sisters?"

"You guys meeting was definitely some cosmic magic." Siza adds.

"How is everyone treating you though. I know Sne's side has always been welcoming but what about everyone else?" Sebastian asks.

"They've been really nice honestly. Well most of them. My little sister doesnt seem to like me though." I dont know why that hurts but it does.

"She will come around. Once she gets to know you and how amazing you are she will be glad to have you as a sister." I doubt that but holding on to hope never hurt nobody. Maybe I should also try a little harder to make her realise I am not here to replace her in anyway.

Sne comes to the kitchen and plops herself down on a chair. I swear ever since her tummy became less of a secret it's like it has grown twice its size. It's like it is making up for all the times it was hidden.

"If your mum finds you here you're dead." I tell her. She rolls her eyes and taps her phone. "What's wrong? Are you expecting a call?"

"More like an email. Kumkani is supposed to send me the signed prenuptial agreement." Oh yeah. There is that.

"I cant believe you actually asked him for a prenu." Sebastian says.

"I had to. I am going to be a hot shot lawyer with millions to my name. I need to know the man loves me for me and not my potential millions." She says. We all stare at her for a while before we burst out laughing. "Laugh all you want but I am protecting myself." She argues.

"I know that and I understand it but what if you don't make the millions you speak off and then one day you divorce and he walks away with everything?" Sizakele asks her. I saw that prenup even if she never makes a cent ain't no way she is walking away with nothing should this marriage fail.

"Trust me that prenup has some water tight clauses. For starters for every baby I pop out I get a million plus a push gift. I'm not tearing my vagina for nothing. And there is a cheating clause in there. Should he cheat I get another couple of millions and half his wealth." I see Sebastian's jaw reach the floor.

"You're not serious?" He exclaims.

"As a heart attack. And if he doesnt send it before the negotiations tomorrow there wont be negotiations."

"And how did he agree to that?" Siza asks.

"I can be persuasive when I want to be." Sne brags grabbing a carrot and munching on it. "Besides I have a good lawyer." She adds and winks at me. I also don't know how she convinced Lulonke to draw up the prenup and add all these clauses. But he was more than happy to do it and he said it's a good thing.

Speaking of my boyfriend I only called him once today and now I need to call him again. I make my way to the bedroom dialling his number. The phone rings just once and he picks up.

"Muntu wam." He says sounding happy. Instead of answering him I peep through the bedroom door and see Nonkanyiso going through my bag and she pulls out my purse. I walk in and close the door behind me making her jump. "Baby."

"Shandu I will call you back just now." I hang up the phone and look at my sister. She has a hundred rand note that she just pulled out of my wallet.

"So you're a thief now? Or maybe you've always been one I just didnt notice before." She tries to crumble the note in her hand and hide it. "Its a little too late for that. I've already seen the money you stole."

"I dont know what you're talking about." She must think I'm stupid. I dial Mpendulo's number. He picks up pretty quickly.

"Sis wam."

"Please come to the bedroom Sne and I are using. I need your help with something." I say not taking my eyes off of the little thief.

"Now?"

"Yes please its urgent."

"Okay. I'm coming." Before I hang up I take a picture of the thief with my money and my wallet in her hand before she starts her drama.

"Who did you call? Did you call dad?" Maybe I should have since she seems more scared of him. I ignore her question. She puts the wallet back but not the money. There is a light knock on the door. I open and step aside as Mpendulo walks in.

"What's going on?" He asks his eyes darting from me to Nonkanyiso.

"Tell him." I urge her.

"I didn't do anything." She says crossing her arms on her chest.

"I walked in here and found her going through my purse. Right now she has a hundred rand note in her hand that she took from my wallet." Mpendulo looks at her raging mad. She sees it too and she steps back.

"Since when are you a thief Nonkanyiso?" He asks so calmly it's hard to believe the anger raging in his eyes and the words coming from his mouth are from the same person.

"I didnt steal anything. I was just borrowing it." She says.

"Borrowing it? Yet you didnt ask from her? How is that borrowing?" He questions hos voice getting louder as he steps closer to her. I see the fear in her eyes. Now I feel bad. Maybe I shouldn't have called him.

"I'll put it back." She offers and shoves the money in my purse.

"You think that's going to make things better? I'm still going to tell dad. Maybe you will explain it better to him." He says and walks out.

"Happy now!" She says trying to push past me. I close the door and stand between her and the door.

"Move!" She hisses.

"Why do you hate me so much?" She scowls for a second before she laughs.

"Seriously? Hate is too strong an emotion for me to attach it to a whore who sleeps with men for money." She says. It doesnt sting as she probably intended for it to. I mean I made peace with that part of my life a long time ago.

"Okay then why are you stealing from a whore?"

"Just move."

"Nonkanyiso I hate to break this to you but I'm not going anywhere. You can hate me if you want and it makes you feel better but the truth is you're my sister. I'm not here to replace you I know you might feel threatened by my presence but i promise you i am not in a competition with you." I assure her. She slow claps a couple of times then stares at me.

"You couldn't compete with me even if you wanted to. You're a whore I am not. That alone should tell you what you need to know." She says before pushing me aside and walking out. I dont even know why I bother with her. This weekend is going to be a long one.

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It's been three hours since Kumkani's family got here. They have been out in the sun for that long too and no one in this family seems determined to let them in. Not even the bride. Everyone is moving around the house and yard like there arent six men at the gate losing their voices.

"I really hope they dont do this to Lu the day he decides to come and pay lobola or so help me God there will be hell to pay." I say. I'm looking out the kitchen window and the poor men are sweating. "If he knows what's good for him he will wait however long we want him to wait." My dad says walking into the kitchen. "How far along are you with the food? We are hungry." He cant be serious. They had breakfast an hour ago. How are they hungry again?

I look at Sne and she shrugs her shoulders.

"Almost." Sizakele says.

"I can't wait. It smells amazing in here." He sniffs the air and walks out.

"Are we seriously going to sit here and let the poor men burn out there?" I ask. I dont even know why I am concerning myself with this. These people are not here for me.

"It is what it is." Sne says and we laugh. Aunt Nomvula walks into the kitchen looking like the actual bride. She looks cute though.

"Okay girls you can go to the bedroom. They are coming in." She tells us. We hurry to the bedroom and leave her with Sebastian. Nonkanyiso is here. If it were up to me we would play far from each other till I leave. But this is her home bumping into her is part of the deal. All I can do is ignore her and focus on me.

"Did you get your prenup?" Siza asks Sne. Last night she was stressed about it.

"I did. I found the email this morning. Signed and sealed." Kumkani is clearly a gone boy because half those clauses are ridiculous. But this is Sne we are talking about and drama queen should have been her middle name.

We help Sne get in her dress. I doubt there will be any issues with the negotiations. Hopefully. Her dress is a simple red sishweshwe A-line dress that hugs her baby bump perfectly. We put a doek on her head and another one over her shoulders. She is not as nervous as I expected her to be.

"I cant believe you're actually getting married." Phiwo says looking at her.

"Oh siswam just because I'm getting married doesnt mean anything will change." Sne replies holding her hand.

"Of course things will change I will finally get your room. I was thinking of changing it into a studio for my content creation." She says. The shock on Sne's face is enough to make us laugh.

"You're not getting my room." Sne tells her.

"Of course I am. By the end of business today you will be someone's wife which means your place is now in your husbands house. I'm getting that room." She pulls out her phone and shows us the plans she has for the room. They are beautiful that's for sure.

"How long have you been planning this?" I ask her.

"From the moment I found out she was pregnant." She says pointing at Sne with her head. All Sne can do is roll her eyes.

Aunt Nomvula walks in with Mam'Cebekhulu behind her.

"Okay girls they want to see their bride." She says excitement written all over her face. I look at Mam'Cebekhulu and she is a bit emotional.

"Arent we supposed to all go out so they can pick their bride?" Hlumile asks.

"Not this time. Sne is pregnant it will be easy to tell her apart so there is no need for the games. Let's go nana." Aunt Nomvula says holding out her hand to Sne. She takes it and they walk out.

Watching my best friend turned sister take a step into a different life for herself makes me emotional too. We were kids when we met barely out of our teens with big dreams motivated by different things but we made it work. Had each others backs no matter what showed up for each other cried and laughed together. We basically entered our adulthood together holding each other's hands and now

she is taking a new step with the man she loves. As much as I will always be there for her this is a journey I can't take with her. This is hers and hers alone.

"Are you crying?" Siza asks wrapping her arms around my shoulders. I wipe my face and sure enough there are tears running down my face. "Oh babe she is just getting married. Not going to Mars." She adds.

"I know. It's just hard to believe she is so grown. She was a baby just a few years ago. And now she is about to become someone's wife and mother."

"And that makes you sad?" Sizakele asks.

"No. It's just a reminder that we are getting old." We burst out laughing.

The ululating starts and that's the confirmation we need that its done. I must say I've never been to any lobola negotiations before but these ones seem to have been a tad bit more civil than normal. From what I heard it usually takes a lot of arguing and back and forth.

We join the celebration in the lounge. We walk in just as Kumkani is let in. Trust Sne to not keep her head down like a proper newlywed makoti. They lock eyes with Kumkani and I swear the rest of us disappear and it's just them in the room. Even when he is shown where to sit he doesn't lose sight of her. Her mum whispers something to her and she gets up and makes her way to the kitchen. We bring the food in and set everything up on the console table then dish up for them. Sne plates up for Kumkani with Sebastian next to her telling her how to plate the food. "Presentation is important." He keeps saying.

She tries to get on her knees to serve him but the man is quick to put a stop to that. Plus she is pregnant it would take her a whole ten minutes to get up. Once everyone has a plate we disappear to the kitchen and dish up for ourselves. There will be a small celebration outside as soon as everyone is done inside. A small stretch tent was pitched last night and the decor was done this morning. Since most of the traditional wedding stuff will be done after the baby is born Kumkani and Sne decided to have a small wedding ceremony right here. Just for them to sign and get that out of the way. Kumkani wants his child to carry his surname as soon as she is born.

"We should go get ready." Siza says as soon as we are done eating. We make our way to the bedroom and help Sne change into a red ball gown with a beaded bodice and a large Zulu hat. Siza

does her makeup while we change into our own dresses. Just simple red mermaid dresses. Hlumile Phiwo Siza and I are the bridesmaids. Sne stands in front of the huge mirror looking at herself. I can almost see the tears ready to make their presence known. I stand next to her and take her hand in mine.

She is sweating. Her palms are already wet. And here I was thinking she would get through this without breaking a sweat.

"Nervous?" I ask looking at her through the mirror.

"A bit. Do you think I am doing the right thing?" She asks. It's a little too late to be asking that to be honest. But I understand her cold feet.

"Honestly I think you are doing the wrong thing. You do know we wont be able to party like we used to right?" She cracks a smile. Not the laugh I wanted but atleast she sees the humor in my answer.

"Look you are one of the most decisive people I know. Sometimes you question things but most of the time you are certain of whatever you need to do. And right now right at this moment I am certain this is the right thing for you because if it wasnt we wouldn't even be here. I know Kumkani loves you. Yes he is the rebound you were supposed to hit and run but you just hit it and then planted your feet on the ground and refused to move." She laughs.

"To think all this started because of that cheating scumbag." She says wiping the snort from her nose.

"Right. Remember what you said when we first met you said maybe God has a bigger plan for putting us in each other's paths. And you were right look where we are now. And I think it's the same with Kumkani. Amidst the chaos and all of Bongani's shenanigans god planted this man in your life because he knew you wouldn't be able to see the green flags so he had to make sure. And that's why I say this is the right thing. For you. If it wasn't your soul would know."

She sighs and places her hand on her tummy. The baby is kicking. I put my hand there and its obvious we have a future soccer star on our hands.

"Even she agrees." I say and Sne laughs. She takes a couple of deep breaths wipes her tears and then turns to Siza who fixes the smudges on her eyes.

"Okay let's get me married." She shouts. We walk out of the house with Sne on her fathers arms. He is smiling today a wide happy smile. To think just a few weeks ago he was angry and now his smile goes all the way to his ears.

I see him as everyone stands up to welcome the bride. My man. He has on his full traditional regalia looking like a proper Zulu man. I swear that animal skin is an aphrodisiac all on it's own. Even Nkazimulo next to him in a similar regalia doesn't hold a candle to Lulonke. Okay they both look good but my eyes are focused on the one who makes my panties wet. He looks happy and content. I hope I am also a reason for that.

The signing ceremony doesn't take long. Their rings are blessed and slipped into their fingers. They sign the registry and it's done.

"Ladies and gentlemen I present to you Mr and Mrs Ndamase." The pastor says and the ululating starts. Everyone is already sitting at a table so there is no need for people to go out except for us. We make our way out of the tent to take pictures. I stand back as the couple takes pictures. This is turning into a full on wedding.

I feel his cologne before I see him and that alone brings a smile to my face. I'm tempted to turn around but I decide not to.

"Sawubona ntokazi." He says so close to my ear I swear those words just sped down to my core and opened taps that should not be opened at this time. I try to play it cool as I turn around to face him.

"Hi!" Why is my voice so high pitched and weird? I think he notices too because he smiles.

"You look beautiful." He says eyeing me from head to toe.

"You dont look too bad yourself. That attire looks like it was made for you. But why did you have to wear it here for everyone to see. Now all these people are gawking at you like they are ready to devour you"

"And you're jealous?" This one is not taking me seriously. Does he not see all these women staring at him? I roll my eyes and he laughs. "Listen it doesn't matter who is looking at me all that matters is I am yours and no one else." He pulls me close to him ignoring all the eyes staring at us. "So how long before you allow me to send my cows too?"

"As soon as your law firm is up and running."

"It is though."

"I mean properly Sthandwa sam. We need to make sure it is stable and has enough clients to sustain it long term and not just on a month to month basis." He sighs.

"I hate it when you make sense." He says burying his head on my shoulders.

Someone clears their throat. I look up and see my father. Lu takes a step back.

"Are you okay?" My dad asks me.

"I'm fine."

"Okay. So you were not about to faint?" Huh. "Why else would he be holding you unless you are about to faint." Of course.

"Baba this is Lulonke Mbatha. Lulonke this is my father." They shake hands and I hear Lu groan next to me. My dad is literally squeezing his fingers.

"Nice to meet you sir." He says even though he seems to be in pain. I would butt in but this is between men.

"I'll go dish up some food for you." I leave them there sizing each other up. Well my dad is sizing up my boyfriend. If he wants to pay lobola one day he might as well get used to the man.

I stand by the window in the kitchen and watch them. I need to make sure my dad doesn't kill my boyfriend. But it looks like they are okay. Lu looks nervous but he is holding his own.

"You need to be closer if you're going to play referee." Sne says behind me. I turn and my friend looks like she can fall asleep right here right now.

"Oh no I'm not going out there. They can sort themselves out. How are you feeling Mrs Ndamase?" A smile forms on her face and she looks at her ring. It's a simple gold band with small diamonds around it.

"It feels great. I know there is a lot to be done but I like it."

I grab a bottle of juice in the fridge and pour two glasses. I hand one to her and lift the other one.

"To the future may it glow as brightly as you do." We clink our glasses and drink.

86♥

They say time waits for no man. This year has shown me exactly that. It has been one problem after the next. Just when I think I am getting a moment to breath something else pops up. But this year has also taught me just how much I can handle. I thought my childhood made me strong but this year solidified that.

It's been three months since Sne got married. As crazy as she is and as crazy as her demands are she is happy. And Kumkani has been going through the most feeding her cravings. But they love each other and that's all that matters. And she is ready to pop any day now. She is a week past her due date but she doesn't seem to be bothered. I would be freaking out by now. Who wants to carry a child for almost ten months?

I am officially a vat n sit hun. I wasn't about to stay in a flat by myself since Sne moved out. Hlumile alternates between both houses and Tongaat. Although school is dealing with her she still has her head above water and I'm proud of her. In a couple of months she will be done with her first year. Once she gets over this year I hope the following years will be easy to get through.

I am at Sne and Kumkani's place getting their nursery ready. Kumkani tried to do it himself bless his heart but it looked more like a cramped room with no sense of direction. First time father syndrome. He literally bought a whole bunch of things I doubt the baby will use and too many clothes. They are cute though but babies tend to outgrow everything in 2 business days.

"I brought you lunch." Sne shouts on the other side of the door. She has been trying to get a peak the whole time I've been here. She has been relentless in her pursuit even though she fails everytime.

"You know if you keep going like this you might end up giving birth on the stairs." I yell back.

"And it will all be your fault since you won't let me get a look. Just a small small peak and I promise I won't tell Kumkani. Please." She begs. In a couple of minutes she will cue the tears. Unfortunately for her I have grown immune to her tears.

"It's not happening Sne. Go back to bed and rest." And then the tears start.

"Why do you hate me? All I want to do is get a peak at my daughter's room that's all I need. Is that asking for too much?" She begs sobbing. You'd think someone just hurt her. It's just a room.

"I am almost done. You will see it soon."

"Ooh I have to go Kumkani is back." She yells. I hear her footsteps as she waddles away. I open the door slightly and watch her try to run to her room but instead she is walking like a penguin hurrying to get in the water. She's so cute.

My phone rings on the changing table. I close the door and lock it before answering my phone.

"Hey how is your trip?" Lu went to Cape Town yesterday with one of his two clients. Its been difficult getting more clients and some days I can see how frustrated he gets. It takes some doing trying to convince him that everything will work out. As long as he is not giving up though.

"Its good." He sounds excited. "So good in fact I have just signed two more clients." I scream and quickly slap my hand on my mouth. This is not my house i need to remember that.

"Really? How? I thought you were there for just the client."

"So did i. But it turns out Davis wanted to introduce me to some of his associates. Two of them hired me on the spot and then other one is still deciding. And make it even better they are international business people with businesses all over the world. You know what that means right?" The excitement in his voice makes the butterflies in my tummy dance like it's the 31st of December.

"What does it mean?"

"We will be getting paid in dollars baby. Dollars!" He breathes in and out a couple of times. "I cant believe this is happening."

"I can. You work hard. You deserve this." I assure him. Even though he is silent I can feel him smiling. I dont know what his father thought he was doing cutting him out of the family business because the only thing he has done is show him just how capable he is.

"You know I wouldn't have done this without you. I'm pretty sure I'd still be sending out CV's and knocking on people's doors."

"I think you would have done it either way. You're a brilliant lawyer Shandu dont ever forget that." I tell him.

"How can I when I have you to remind me. Anyways I am flying back to Joburg tonight. We will celebrate properly when I arrive."

"Of course. I will make sure to dress for the occasion." He chuckles.

"Looking forward to it. Ngiyak'thanda uyezwa?"

"Nami ngyakthanda Shandu." He hangs up the phone leaving me with a huge grin on my face.

I look at the time. It's a little past two. I can still get home and get a home cooked meal ready for tonight. The nursery is almost done. Plus Sebastian and Sizakele will be here to help me finish it tomorrow so I might as well leave some work to be done. I gather my things and get out making sure to lock the door and throw the key in my bag. These two arent allowed to see the nursery before it's completely done.

I make my way to the bedroom and knock.

"Come in." She shouts. I push the door open making sure not to step inside. Call me crazy but I am old school and I believe in respecting people's private spaces. Especially a married couples bedroom.

"I'm on my way. I will be back tomorrow." I say from the door. Good thing I can still see her from here.

"I'm too tired to come there and give you a hug so you will have to come inside." She says. That's her simple way of trying to get me inside. Nope. Not gonna happen.

"That's okay I'll give you a bluetooth hug. I love you." She rolls her eyes and gets off the bed. It takes her a minute to get both feet on the ground. Every day I get a reason not to get pregnant. This is just torture. She makes her way to me her dead stare a silent warning for me not to laugh. Pregnancy will humble you. Her nose is twice its size her cheeks look like she has stored food in there for a rainy day and her entire face is round not to mention her neck it's like it was spray painted a different colour to her face. And then there are women who do this five six ten times. Yeah I dont see myself doing that.

"Let me walk you out." She says as soon as she gets to me. Her idea of walking me out means getting me to the top of the stairs

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especially if Kumkani is here. She is technically speaking barred from going downstairs. Doctors orders. And Kumkani's.

"Tell me something who is coming up to help you when the baby arrives?" I ask. Both my mum and her mum are more than happy to help but apparently so is her mother in law. She seems like a nice woman I haven't met her yet but Sne says she is pretty chilled. I'm not one to judge other peoples mothers but my boyfriends mother showed me flames so it's hard for me to trust anyone. But if Sne says she is cool then I have to trust her.

"I asked mum to come. Mamazala will be here too but it will be more comfortable with my mum here as well. It beats going to emakhaya for three months." Oh yeah there was also that suggestion. Kumkani threw that one out the window as quickly as it was suggested. He said his child will be raised by him from birth. Mummy's can help but he wants to be here too. Thank god for that because I get to see my God daughter grow up right in front of me.

"I'm happy you will have help. I will try to come as much as I can too but you know me and taking days off work. I've literally used up all of my leave days." She is laughing.

"I did tell you that you take way too many days off work. You're just lucky that next Friday is a holiday so Lu's birthday trip will not be affected." She says.

"I know. Hopefully nothing comes up. He deserves a break."

"Of course. Even though he forgot your birthday. I still don't understand why you're not reminding him."

"Because he works hard and he doesn't need any distractions. Next year we will celebrate my birthday properly. This year has been taxing honestly. We couldn't even have a proper bash for you." She sighs and rubs her tummy.

"You're right. We will try again next year."

"Exactly. Let me go my man is coming back and I need him to come back to a grand welcome. I'll see you tomorrow." I give her a hug before making my way downstairs. Kumkani is nowhere in sight probably in the study or the backyard. Oh well I'll see him tomorrow too.

I make sure to stop by the shops on my way home and get everything I will need. I'm not the best cook in the world but I can make a decent meal and that is all that matters. I decide on a simple chicken curry with rice and vegetables. It's also Lu's favourite so that's a win.

My phone rings just as I switch off the stove. I am done and ready to shower and put on something lacy or silky. It will depend on the mood.

"Hello."

"Hi it's Sizwe from security. There is a woman here who says she is here to see you. She says she is your mother." He says. My mother would have told me she was coming. This is definitely not her.

"I don't think that's my mother. She would have called me first." I reply.

"Let me talk to her." The woman says in the background. I don't care who says what I know that voice. It's Grace. What the hell is she doing here and how does she even know where I stay? I hear shuffling before her voice gets louder. "Milani it's your mother tell them to let me in." She orders. I could say no but she might just cause a scene that will embarrass me and draw unnecessary attention to me. All I have to do is find out what she wants and then send her packing.

"Give the guard the phone." There's shuffling again before his deep voice comes on.

"You can let her in."

"Of course." He says just as Grace screams I told you so.

As soon as they hang up I dial Dr Nkomo's number. I know I am not her next of kin anymore but a little heads up would have been nice if she was being discharged. The phone rings a couple of times before she picks up.

"Dr Nkomo."

"Hi its Alo..... I mean Milani Mbokazi." Getting my name right will take some getting used to. It's hard to explain to people and until Peter and his people fetch their child from eNdwedwe I just have to play both sides of the coin and be Milani when I need to be.

"Hi. How are you?" She asks.

"Not good. What's happening with Grace? Why weren't we alerted that she was being discharged?" I need answers. Someone like her deserves to live in that place for the rest of her life. That should be her personal hell.

"Uhm... your mother wasnt discharged. She ran away about a three weeks ago." She cannot be serious right now.

"She escaped?"

"Yes. I thought the officer in charge would have alerted you. I'm sorry. Have you heard from her?"

"Of course I have. She is at my gate right now." I cant believe this is happening. I shouldn't have let her in.

"Okay do not panic. Let me tell the detective. Please send me your address and make sure you keep her there for as long as possible until the cops arrive." She barks before hanging up the phone.

Her screaming at the security is the first thing I hear. I peek through the window and see she is in a golf cart. The distance from the main gate to here is not that long I guess she is getting the VIP treatment. I open the door and she walks in eyes wide open and her jaw on the ground.

"This is a nice house. Who did you have to sleep with to get a house like this?" She asks looking around and touching everything. I wont even dignify her question with an answer.

"What are you doing here Grace?" She turns and looks at me.

"I wante to see my child. Is that a crime?" People with short term memory.

"You do remember I am not your child right? You said that yourself." She glares at me before her lips break out into a smile. A scary one with stained teeth and all. She cups my face in her hands.

"You will always be my child. I saved you from that monster and that's why you're mine." She says. I move her hands from my face and that seems to upset her.

"My mother is not a monster." I'm trying so hard to be respectful right now but she is not making it easy.

"Of course I am not a monster." Clearly what I said went over her head. I wonder when are these cops coming.

"Why did you leave the hospital they were trying to help you." Maybe kindness will make things easier. She smiles and heads to the kitchen. She is opening pots and drawers like she owns the place. She pulls out the grapes and eats them.

"That place is not for people like me. It's for crazy people." And of course she has forgotten that she is crazy too. I look at my watch it's like the seconds are on a go slow today. Nothing seems fast enough.

"Well they are on their way here to get you. You can't be out there without the doctor saying you are fine." Her face goes from chilled to cold in seconds.

"You called them?" She asks. I nod my head and that seems to make her even more angry. She stands up and walks around the counter till she is standing right in front of me.

"You ungrateful child." She says poking my chest. "I come to see you because I miss you and you decide to send me back to that hell hole. I am your mother and you're busy treating me like am trash." She is shouting. I hope we are far enough from the neighbours that they don't hear us.

My phone rings from the counter and she grabs it first. She sees who is calling. She turns the phone to me and Dr Nkomo's name is flashing on the screen. Before I can even grab the phone it's already flying across the room. A scream escapes my lips as it hits the wall and shatters.

"You will not send me back there. You will not." She chants as she paces up and down.

I'm not sure how to react. I'm still staring at my broken phone. My feet seem to be glued to the same spot. Grace keeps repeating that she is not going back there. When I finally get my eyes back to her I feel all the anger in me rise to the surface.

"You are going back there. Because you're crazy." I shout. She stops and looks at me anger flashing in her eyes. I feel something sting on my right shoulder. I look at the spot and she stabbed me. She pulls the knife out and blood gushes out.

Everything around me seems to be happening in slow motion and on fast forward all at the same time. How did she even get the knife. I slap my hand over the wound just as she aims the knife at me again. It hits my arm.

"Please stop." I beg as stars start to circle around my eyes. This cannot be happening. I feel my knees get weaker as she shoves the knife into my abdomen. There is so much blood. I go down on my knees and it feels like I am in a pool of my own blood. I try to drag myself to my phone. I pull myself twice before the energy drains from my body. The last thing I hear is her screaming that she is not going back before everything goes completely dark. Lord help me.

87♥

LULONKE

"You do know surprising someone is never a good idea right?" Nkazimulo says as soon as we pull out of the airport. I decided to take an earlier flight so I can get home while the sun is out. There's a lot that I need to tell Milani or rather Khwezi. It will take some time for this change to fully sink in but I love her name Khwezilokusa the morning star. Its perfect for her.

"Someone else maybe not Milani. She loves surprises." I reply. I decided to ask Nkazimulo to pick me up since he is in Joburg. It beats getting an uber. That shit is expensive. And since I left my car with Milani I couldn't ask her to pick me up. That would have ruined the surprise.

"If you say so." Nkazimulo doesnt have a romantic bone in his body so I dont expect him to understand. "How did your trip go? Made some headway?" He asks.

"Not really. Davis is still on board and his business is doing well so more money for me."

"Still no new clients?"

"Nope. Still working on it. A little patience goes a long way." Call me paranoid but there are certain things about my business I dont need to be sharing with the competition. Yes Nkazimulo has been supportive but at the end of the day he is still working for the competition and if my firm is going to grow I need to keep some cards close to my chest.

"It will work out. Dont worry." He assures me. I know it will. I ask him to drive past the mall first. I get some chocolates and flowers for Milani. I would have used a florist but there is no time for that. I get

excited the closer we get to the house. We make it into the main gate just as an ambulance whizzes past in full speed with its sirens on full blast. I hope whoever is in there makes it out alive.

The closer we get to the house I notice small crowds of people gathered around. I'm not sure what is going on but the street to our house is closed off. There is a police tape on either side of the street which will make it hard for us to use the other street to get in.

"What do you think is going on?" Nkazimulo asks me. I'm not sure either but the closer I look I realise the police are walking in and out of my house. My heart starts racing.

"Park the car." I order. Nkazimulo parks the car on the side of the road and I get out before the engine comes to a stop. My brother follows behind me as I make my way to the cop manning the tape.

"Hi. What's going on?" The man looks at me from head to toe as if I am annoying him. I'm trying so hard to not let my head go haywire. There has to be a plausible reason why cops are marching in and out of my house.

"Who are you?" He asks.

"He is the owner of the house." Nkazimulo tells him. My eyes are glued to the man walking out of the house. I don't even realise that I am walking with Nkazimulo's hand on my elbow. God I hope this is all just a coincidence and not the reason why Milani's phone has been off.

I glance at another ambulance across the road and notice a woman sitting right at the back with her head bowed and a blanket over her shoulders. The closer I look I see who it is. It's Milani's mother well former. A police officer pulls the blanket away from her shoulders and then I see it. The red stain on her white dress. She has cuffs on so maybe she is not hurt. This cannot be happening. How did she even get here?

We make it to the door and another officer tries to block our way. Right now it feels like I am walking on batteries because conversations around me seem to have faded to nothingness. My heart is racing and I can feel my breath slowing down. We walk into the house and the first thing I come across is a huge pool of blood on the floor.

"Who is in charge here?" Nkazimulo's asks. His questions sip slowly into my brain that seems to be on a go slow and refuses to work. A tall man who looks familiar makes his way to us together with

another man. I don't have the time to figure out where I know him from because my attention is pulled by the blood on the floor. Milani is nowhere to be found this cannot be her blood. It can't.

"Hi I am Detective Mbele and this is my colleague Detective Masombuka. I take it you're the owner of the house?" He asks.

"No my brother is. What happened? Whose blood is that?" Nkazimulo is doing all the talking because my tongue seems to be stuck in my throat.

"How do you know an Alondwe Cebekhulu?" The Detective asks.

"Who?"

"Alondwe Cebekhulu?" The man repeats.

"That's my girlfriend." I reply. I'm not sure where my voice came from but it's working now.

"Wait when did you break up with Milani?" Nkazimulo asks.

"Milani is Alondwe. It's a long story. What happened? Is that her blood?" My brain is slowly coming back to being fully functional and now I can feel my heart beating in my throat.

"Uhm... yes. The security guard found her laying in that pool of blood with multiple stab wounds." I never thought my heart could beat as fast as it is right now. I shake my head and take a step back.

"No. No. Tell me where my girlfriend is? Please. If this is a joke it's a bad one. A cruel one at that."

The two Detectives look at each other as silence looms over us.

I break free from Nkazimulo's hold and rush upstairs calling out her name. I go through every room but nothing. There are two sets of lingerie sitting on the bed. I run back downstairs and check every room there but she is not there. I make my way back to the lounge and the sight of blood turns my knees into jelly. I find myself on the floor as tears fill my eyes.

I feel someone hold me up and place me on a chair. I look up and see Nkazimulo looking at me

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worry written all over his face.

"I can't lose her. I can't."

"You won't. They took her to the hospital. They said she had a pulse when they found her. It was weak but it was there." He tells me.

"The ambulance. That was her?" He nods his head.

"Yeah. We can go to the hospital right now." He says. He helps me up and we make our way to the car. The other ambulance is gone. And with it Grace too. I wonder how she fits into all this. Nkazimulo pulls out his phone and sends a text to someone.

"Kumkani is coming over to make sure there is someone in the house with the cops here. I told him not to tell Sne anything yet until we know how Milani is." He says as we drive away.

"The Detective what did he say happened?" I need to know how Grace fits into all this and how she made it out of the hospital.

"He says Milani's mother came here they called Milani to tell her her mother is at the gate and she told them to let her in. A security guard brought her here and left to do his rounds. When he was driving past here again he saw her mother standing in the street with a knife in her hand and blood stains all over her dress. He came in here since the door was wide open and he found Milani on the floor. He called the cops and the ambulance. But apparently the police from KwaMhlanga were also on their way here to pick up Grace. They say she escaped from the hospital about a month ago and she's been missing since."

"A month? But no one said anything about her missing. No warning or whatever." This doesn't make sense.

"I know but they say Milani is no longer her next of kin so they couldn't alert her about anything." He says.

"That's bullshit. That woman killed two of her kids and the last time Milani was in a room with her she ended up with a bruised neck because she tried to choke her to death." As worried as I am about Milani this whole thing is starting to piss me off. Whoever is in charge of that hospital better pray Milani lives because if she doesn't I will make their lives a living hell.

"Why do you think Milani allowed her to come in? I mean the woman is clearly deranged and a danger to society. Why would she allow her in the house especially because she was alone?" That's a question I need an answer to and unfortunately the only person with an answer is fighting for her life in hospital.

We drive into the hospital and I'm out of the car before it's properly parked. Right now nothing else matters. I need to find out how Milani is doing. I make my way to reception.

"Hi I am looking for information on a patient. She was brought in a few minutes ago. Her name is Alondwe Cebekhulu." I tell the receptionist. She looks at me like I just grew a pair of horns.

"I'm sorry I can't give out patient information to anyone who is not family." She says. As cordial as she is right now she is getting on my last nerve.

"I'm her husband." I blurt out. She looks at my hands. There is no wedding ring there. She looks at my face again and I see the doubt in her eyes. Who told people a wedding ring is the only indicator that someone is married.

"We are traditionally married. We don't wear rings." I tell her. Nkazimulo walks in just as the woman decides to ignore.

"Everything okay?" He asks.

"No. She won't tell me what's going on with my wife." She looks up again and comes face to face with Nkazimulo's face. The scowl on his face is enough of a threat she types on her computer before turning back to us.

"She is in surgery right now. According to her chat she lost a lot of blood from the stab wounds. The doctor's are probably trying to determine if there is any damage internally." She says. I need to practice that scowl clearly it gets things done. "There's a waiting area just down the passage. The doctor will be with you as soon as he is done with the surgery."

Minutes pass like a snail trying to cross the road. I can't even sit down. Looking at the watch is not helping because no matter how many times I will it to go fast it doesn't. Stupid time.

"I need to call her family." I whisper. How do I even begin to explain to them what happened. They just found her and now this. When will we ever catch a break.

"Give me the phone I'll call them." Nkazimulo says. I hand him my phone and tell him who to call. He walks out to the passage. Sebastian practically runs in out of breath.

"Hey where is she? What did the doctors say?" He asks while trying to catch his breath.

"We haven't heard anything. They just said she is in surgery." He sits down on the chair and gulps down a bottle of water. "How did you know?"

"Kumkani told us. Sizakele is with Sne. She doesn't know anything yet. Kumkani says we will tell her once we know for sure how she is." He tells me. Makes sense. She is due any day now and news like this may not be good for her. I nod my head and continue pacing. Sitting down is not helping and neither is pacing but it's better than sitting in the same position.

"Do you know what happened? I thought estates are supposed to be safe. How can someone just waltz in and stab another person." He asks. I sit down.

"It wasn't some random person. It was Grace."

"Her mother Grace?" I nod my head. "I knew it."

"What do you mean?"

"A couple of weeks ago we were having lunch at a cafe down the road from work I saw someone who looks like Grace staring at us through the window. When I told Milani the woman was gone. I thought maybe I was imagining things until I saw her again after work. She was standing across the street watching us. I told Milani again and when she looked she was gone. I thought I was losing my mind." He says.

"So she has been stalking her for the past month?" I ask myself. This woman's dose of crazy is beyond the normal. This was clearly her plan all along. Even if Milani hadn't let her in the house she would have found a way to get to her.

"Most likely. Why does she hate her so much? If anything Milani is the one who is supposed to hate her she stole her from her parents and forced her to raise her kids. Why would she hate her so much she would even want her dead?" He asks. I wish I had answers but I don't. Instead I have the same questions and maybe more. Of all the things Milani has gone through of all the things she has done for her children this is the thanks she gets.

Nkazimulo walks back in and sits down after greeting Sebastian.

"They are on their way." He says. "I asked them not to tell Sne anything." He adds.

"So what now?" Sebastian asks.

"Now we wait. And hope to God the doctor comes out with good news." Nkazimulo says.

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LULONKE

It's been almost four hours since Milani was brought in here and we are yet to get an update. Scelo showed up here about three hours ago demanding answers I don't have. I mean how am I supposed to know what was going on in Milani's head when she let that deranged woman in the house.

Her parents are already on a flight here. I just hope by the time they get here we will have answers for them. Kumkani walks in with some coffee and muffins. I don't know if I can stomach anything right now so I just grab the coffee and chug it down.

My phone rings its been ringing none stop the past few hours everyone wants updates. I see Nhlendla's name on the screen and get up to answer the call outside the waiting room. I need the fresh air anyways the waiting area feels like we are waiting for a death notice.

"Hey man."

"Hey I heard what happened. Is Milani okay?" He asks. I can hear his fiancée mumbling something in the background. It's quite something that my friends were more welcoming to Milani than my own family. But then again I guess this is the family I chose..

"She is still in surgery. We haven't heard anything yet."

"No news is good news." He says. I'm not sure about that.

"More like no news means anxiety for me. I keep playing the worst case scenario in my head and it's not pretty." I dont know what's going to happen to me should anything happen to Milani. I know it sounds selfish but the most few months I've learned to lean on her more than she knows. Her presence in my life has shown me a bigger world view than I had before. I'm sure by now I would have crawled back home and begged my father for my job back but I'm here with my own firm because she believed in me. I need to be able to tell my grandchildren one day the story of how this firm started and I need her to be right there beside me..

"Dont overthink it man. The fact that there hasn't been any news means the doctors are working on her. She will be fine. Do you need me to come up there?"

"Dont you have that meeting tomorrow with the overseas investors?"

"I do. But I can always cancel. You know those people will do anything to try and exploit our people. I'm having doubts about them." He says making me laugh.

"Nhlendla not all white people are bad."

"Please as long as they have some residue from their grandparents then they are bad." For someone who went to school with white people heaven only knows where this distrust comes from. Or maybe it's because of that. Who knows.

"Look just stick to the terms of the contract we drew up and dont let them bully you in any way. As long as the contract favours you and your people there is little they can do about it. At the end of the day the main goal is to empower the people. Just remember that and you will be fine." He takes a deep breath. I'm not even sure why he is freaking out about this Nhlendla has never allowed anyone to dance on his head and I know he wont start now.

"I hear you. Mpumelelo is on his way though." Well there was no stopping that one.

"I know. I tried to tell him not to come but you know him stubborn as a mule." I see a doctor walking towards me. Maybe he has some news. "Listen man I will call you back the doctor is here."

"Okay keep us updated."

"Of course." I hang up the phone and wait.

"Alondwe Cebekhulu's family?" He asks. Thank God he is black and he can pronounce the name right.

"Yes. The others are inside." I lead him to the waiting area and everyone stands.

"Okay I am Dr Ramabulana uhm so we have managed to stabilise her. Although she did lose a lot of blood so we had to do a blood transfusion as quickly as possible. The stab wounds arent as severe as we expected on the shoulder the knife hit a bone and cracked it but it should heal in the next few weeks. On the arm the knife missed the bone so it should also heal quickly. And the one on the abdomen missed her vital organs as well as her uterus by a few centimetres. Thank God for that because it missed the baby. She is in recovery right now and....."

"Wait it missed what?" He did not just say a baby did he?

"I think he said a baby?" Nkazimulo whispers behind me. Milani is going to kill me this is not the five year plan we agreed on.

"I'm sorry I thought you knew." The doctor says. Well, i definitely did not know that and I doubt Milani knew either.

"Is she going to be okay though?" Scelo asks. At least if she lives I might be able to convince her it's not my fault she is pregnant the condom broke or was it the antibiotics? I dont know anymore.

"She will make a full recovery. If you want to see her I can only let in one person at a time." He says. I'm definitely going to be the first one to see her. I follow the doctor to the recovery ward. If not for the beeping machines and drips stuck into her it would look like she is just sleeping.

"Is she breathing on her own?"

"Yes. Her vitals are very strong. The only thing that was a problem was the loss of blood

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"Is she breathing on her own?"

"Yes. Her vitals are very strong. The only thing that was a problem was the loss of blood other than that she should be back to her old self in no time." He says. I doubt that. Something like this changes people. "I'll leave you to it."

He pats me on the shoulder before making his exit. I pull up the chair and sit down. I take Milani's hand in mine and stare at her. Maybe if I had booked an earlier flight none of this would have happened. Grace would not have even stepped foot in my house. If I could I'd turn back time and maybe do things differently. Or maybe I should have kept better tabs on Grace. It's clear a hospital cannot keep someone like her. The calls she kept making and threats should have been a clear indication of how dangerous she is but I overlooked everything because I thought those hospital walls would keep her away. If only I had known.

I wipe the lone tear trekking down my face. After all the obstacles we've gone through who would have known her mother well Grace would be the one to almost end it. I'm not sure if a relationship should have this much obstacles on its first year but hopefully this means the next fifty years will be a breeze.

"I'm sorry I wasn't there to protect you Sthandwa sam. I'm really sorry." I say. I sit there for a while just watching her lay there. The sounds of the beeping machines serving as a constant reminder that she is alive. I didn't lose her. She will be fine her and the baby. I place my hand on her stomach as gently as I can. I can feel the bandage covering her wound under the hospital gown. I'm not totally mad at this new development but it does scare me. Now I have no choice but to work twice as hard to make sure my firm succeeds. If not for me then for the little life we are expecting.

The door swings open and her mum rushes in with her dad on her heels. She's parents are here too.

"I tried to stop them." Scelo says coming in. I doubt anyone can stop a mother when their child is in danger.

"Oh my baby." Her mum says wiping her tears. I get off the chair and hand it to her. "Why would anyone want to hurt her why would anyone do something like this?" She asks holding Milani's hand. I guess Nkazimulo didnt tell them everything.

"What happened?" Her father asks. Scelo looks at me. I doubt they know Milani and I live together. But I guess now they will know.

"Grace stabbed her." I say.

"Who?" Her father asks.

"The woman who stole her." Sne's mother tells them.

"Isn't she supposed to be in a mental hospital? How did she get to her?" Her mother questions.

"They say she escaped about a month ago. I guess she has been stalking her because Sebastian says he saw her a couple of times and then she disappeared again." I also dont know the whole story until Milani wakes up and tells it herself we will be asking and answering questions we don't know anything about.

"But how did she get to Milani? Was she at work or at the flat." Sne's dad asks. I see Scelo chuckling.

"She was at my place. I was flying in from Cape Town and by the time I got there she had been brought to the hospital. I'm really not sure what happened before then. Only Milani can tell us." And she can also tell them that we live together. At least they wont be too mad at her. And I am not telling them she is pregnant either. That's her story to tell.

"This makes no sense." Her mum says. The machines start beeping out of control Milani's head starts whipping from side to side and a frown forms on her face my heart starts racing. "What's happening?" Her mum asks. The doctor and nurses come rushing in and order us to get out. "I'm not going anywhere." Her mum says. The conviction in her voice is enough for the nurses to not even insist. The rest of us however make our way out.

The last time I prayed I was in varsity asking God to make me pass my exam so I can graduate. I'm not sure if he still remembers me but they say He knows and sees everything hopefully he has been keeping an eye on me too.

I slide down the wall and sit butt flat on the floor. I close my eyes and open my mouth to say something but nothing comes out. I remember my Sunday school teacher used to tell us that we can

pray internally too we dont always have to open our mouths for God to hear us. I guess today me and him are having a secret conversation.

"Dear God. I dont ask for much you know that. Atleast everyone says you know everything so you know that right? I'm a believer in working hard and not burdening you with too much. You've already blessed me more than I can imagine. Although my life has not been smooth sailing it's also not something I've seen as worth complaining about. Lord you brought Milani into my life I said I was done with women after Slindile but it's clear you had other plans. I know Milani and I didnt cross paths coincidentally it was all you. For some reason you saw me worthy of her. Now I am asking you Lord please dont take her from me. I need her. Just do this one thing for me and I promise I will go to church every Sunday. I know Milani has been slacking lately when it comes to church but Lord you know her heart better than anyone you've protected it all these years. No matter what she went through you made to sure nothing hardened her heart. That's why she is a ray of sunshine in my life. I am asking you Lord If not for me then do it for her. Please let her live. Please."

"She is up." The doctor says popping his head out the door. My eyes fly open.

"Your turn around time is impressive Big guy. Thank you."

I get off the floor and follow everyone inside. Sure enough her eyes are wide open. She gives us a faint smile.

"What's your name?" The doctor asks her. She opens her mouth trying to speak but she cant. Her mum helps her drink some water. I wish I was the one doing that but I need to respect my elders.

"What's your name?" The doctor insists.

"Alondwe Cebekhulu." She says even though it's seems to be a bit difficult. Her mum slaps her hand over her mouth. It's the first time they are hearing the news. It wasnt supposed to happen until her welcome home ceremony which is constantly being held up by the man she used to call a father and his stupid demands.

"Do you know where you are?" The doctor continues.

"The hospital."

"And do you know why you're here?"

"I was stabbed." The doctor nods his head and makes notes in her file.

"Good. Everything seems to be okay. I will have the nurses transfer you to another ward. But everything seems to be looking good which means you might be out here sooner than you think." He says and squeezes her hand before walking out.

"When did you change your name?" Her father asks taking up the spot the doctor just left on the other side of the bed.

"A few months ago." Milani replies trying to smile despite the pain.

"It suits you." He says.

"What happened nana how did you end up here?" Sne's mum asks. Milani sighs and closes her eyes.

"I was stupid and now I'm paying for it." She says.

"This is not your fault." I say. She shakes her head.

"It is. I shouldn't have let her in the house when I was alone. It was a stupid decision on my part."

"It doesn't matter now my angel. What matters is that you're okay and you will make a full recovery."

Her mum says putting an end to the pity party. For some reason I feel like Grace would have got to her eventually. If she has been stalking her for a month now clearly she had a plan. Now I need to find a way to make sure that woman never sees the light of day ever again.

89♥

ALONDWE

I've never felt as stupid as I feel right now. I don't know what possessed me to think Grace would be civil and go back to the hospital without a fight. Stupid me. I should know better. But here I am in pain and laying in a hospital bed. Thank God I didn't die.

The door opens and Sne is wheeled in by a nurse. The nurse leaves her by the bottom of the bed and walks out. She gets off the wheelchair and makes her way across the room on her wobbly legs. She pulls up the chair next to the bed and sits down. She stares at me. I don't know if she is happy to see me or not because her face is as blank as a white sheet of paper.

"You're stupid." She says after a moment of us just staring at each other. While others were worried and sobbing thinking I'm dead this one comes with the insults. I mean I know she is right but come on a little sympathy. "I'm pretty sure when you open the dictionary and search the word idiot your

face comes up." She adds. "You're like someone with zero common sense." I could stop her but I understand where her frustration is coming from. "You're very very stupid."

"I know." I reply.

"What were you thinking? Please explain that to me because I am not understanding. What possessed you? What demon took over your brain? Answer that for me?" Her voice rises with every word.

"I dont know." I reply. I really don't. She sighs and gets off the chair.

"Shift." She says. I open some space for her on the bed. She struggles to get up. "Word of advice don't have kids." She says trying to pull herself up. After what feels like a lifetime she gets up.

"Still overdue?" I ask. She gives me a side eye as she fixes the covers.

"No. I had the baby last night. When they told me you were here I went straight to labour and now I have stitches on my coochie." She says.

"Then what are you doing here? Shouldn't you be with the baby?" I ask.

"Trust me she is fine. Everyone is oggling her like she has a halo. She will be fine. Besides she's been sucking my boobs the whole night. You'd think she was starving in the womb." I try to laugh but the stitches on my stomach dont allow me.

She lays down on my good shoulder and I place my bandaged hand over her.

"How is she?"

"She is healthy and big. Kumkani can't even hold her because he thinks he will break her." She says. We lay there for a while not saying anything. It reminds me of when we first met and she found out her high school boyfriend had a new girlfriend at UP. Her first official heartbreak. We'd sleep together on my bed for days on end. It became a habit after that even if there was nothing to comfort her for we would share a bed on most days. "I named her Milani." She says after a while. "I know legally and all you are Alondwe but besides the fact that i love the name I have this hope I guess that if she can grow as strong fearless and amazing as you and still be kind and loving and just an all around good person I will have done a good job." She adds.

I feel my tears run down my face. I don't even know what to say and I tell her as much.

"You don't have to say anything. Knowing what we know now you and I were supposed to be like twins even though we have different parents I'm not sure what cosmic force was at work making me choose UJ as a school but I am glad I did." She says.

"I hear you. Now i just need to stop giving Grace the benefit of the doubt when she constantly shows me who she is and move on so i can enjoy being with my real family." I reply.

"I dont think that's going to happen." Ye of little faith.

"Trust me it will." I say adamantly. I'm done with Grace. I know I say it a lot but this is the proverbial last nail in the coffin. Sne lifts her head up and looks at me.

"It won't happen. I know I said you're an idiot for letting her in the house but the truth is despite her flaws and choices she is your mother. She is the one who breastfed and nourished you as a child she was the first person you ran to when you were hurt. She carried you on her back until you fell asleep deep down you still love her. You may hate all the things she has done to hurt you still care about her. And that's not something that you can easily let go off." She preaches. She is wrong though. I might care about Grace but that's where it ends. Time and time again she has shown me who she is and time and time again I refuse to believe her. This is who she is and now it's more clearer than ever.

The door opens again and Lulonke walks in. I was waiting for him to yell at me yesterday but he didn't. He spent the night here until he was forced to go and take a shower this morning.

"Ladies." He says setting the takeaways on the side table. "Aren't you both supposed to be resting?" He asks looking at us.

"We are resting." Sne replies. Lu shakes his head and stands on the other side of the bed. He stares at me for a moment. I hold his stare a part of me is hoping he can just tell me how stupid I was for what I did and get it over with. Everyone else has except for him.

The nurse who brought Sne in walks through the door.

"New mummy baby needs to eat." She says setting up the wheelchair.

"How long before I can put her onto formula?" The nurse laughs. She's either genuinely a nice person or Sne paid her. I'll go with the former.

"About six months." She replies a smile still plastered on her face. She's definitely a nice person.

Sne snorts. "Don't worry breastfeeding is good for the baby plus it will help you lose weight." She helps her out of the bed.

"I dont want to lose weight. I like this body." They make their way out chatting like old friends.

My eyes dart back to Lu and he still has his eyes glued to me.

"Are you not going to tell me how stupid I am?" I ask eventually. He slightly shakes his head and takes a seat. He pulls my hand and kisses it. Something is off about him. I know he is happy I'm alive but I feel like there is something else I am not being told. I wiggle my toes a bit thinking maybe I am paralyzed and everyone is scared to tell me but they are fine. But then again how can a stab wound to the abdomen paralyze someone.

"I was scared you know." He is looking at my hand and playing with my fingers. "I thought I'd lose you. And for some reason I am glad I wasn't there when they found you but I am also angry that I wasn't there when you needed me the most."

"Shandu."

"I pictured every scenario in my head and none of them made sense without you." His voice is quivering and I can feel his hands shaking. "I don't ever want to go through that again." He adds. He leans his head on my hand and takes a deep breath. "Ever."

I wish my other hand wasn't bandaged too so I can comfort him. It's clear my stupid decision didn't just impact me but everyone else too.

"I'm sorry. I didn't think any of this would happen."

"I know. I am just happy that you're Okay. That's all that matters." He raises his head and his eyes are red. "Have you eaten?"

"Yes

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"Yes I had some bland breakfast. What did you bring me?" His smile fills his face as he opens the takeaways.

"He hands me a fruit salad. I don't know why I was expecting junk food from him. He will make sure I gag on healthy food till I am better.

"No burger?" He chuckles and hands me a green smoothie. Jesus.

"Nope. I have to tell you something by the way. But you have to promise not to get mad at me or the universe for that matter." He is feeding me the fruit salad and helping me drink the smoothie as if I am an invalid. I know it's coming from a good place though so I let him.

"I'm not sure I can promise that but tell me."

"I can't tell you unless you promise not to get mad?" He insists. I stare at him trying to read him. He keeps wringing his hands and then running them through his hair. This must be serious then.

"Okay I promise." He takes a deep breath now I am more convinced than ever that what he is about to tell me will drive me nuts.

"Okay so yesterday the doctor told us how the knife wound on your stomach practically missed your uterus by a few inches. Which is good because had it been anywhere close to your uterus it would have killed the baby." He says and then pushes the chair back making sure he is out of my reach. As if I'd do anything with one arm in a sling and the other bandaged.

It takes a while for what he just said to register in my head. I try to replay the words in my head. Knife missed my uterus. Got that. Anywhere closer it would have killed the baby. What baby is he talking about?

"What baby?" I ask after trying to wreck my brain for a moment.

"The one in your womb." He replies pushing the chair even further back. Ain't no way there is a baby in my womb. I have an IUD on so there is no way. The doctor is wrong.

"That's not very funny?" Who pulls a prank on someone when they are in a hospital bed. Such a stupid thing to do. I pick up a piece of kiwi with my bandaged hand and flinch as the pain sweeps over my arm. This will be a long ass recovery. He notices my discomfort and pulls himself close to me. He picks up the fork and feeds me the fruit.

"Its not a joke Sthandwa sami. We are going to have a baby." Henis serious. Deadly serious at that.

"I have an IUD on there is no way that one time we didn't use a condom your super powered sperm destroyed the IUD and penetrated my womb." He is laughing. Does he honestly think this is funny. Besides the contraceptive I made sure we used condoms. Always except for that one time we ran out of condoms and only realised when we were already horny. I made him promise to pull out which he didnt but I made sure to take morning after pills the next morning just to be sure. There is no way all those precautions went out the window just because of that one time.

"Stop laughing. This is not funny. We cant afford to have a baby right now." I say. I cant even yell or scream because of the pain. He tries to stop laughing and fails.

"Baby I dont have super powered sperm but that one time wasn't actually one time. One night yes but there was more than one round and I'm pretty sure it only takes one for a baby to be made." He says. He pulls out a piece of paper from his pocket and hands it to me. It's a sonogram picture. "The doctors took that after they had stitched you up to make sure the baby was okay.

I dont even see a baby here just a small blob on the paper.

"I know this is not the plan we had but if there is anything you and I have learned over the past year we make plans but none of them ever come out the way we planned." He says. "I mean you planned on going to graduation but missed out because of everything that was happening I had this idea to throw you a small intimate party at the house since I couldn't do a bigger one but everything went wrong from the get go your gift go lost and the courier company couldn't even do shit about it. The last straw was the cake I ordered which looked like someone had shit on it and I couldn't let you see

that. I figured I'd rather have you think I forgot your birthday than let you see all that mess you deserve way better than that." He adds playing with his hands.

"You didn't forget my birthday?" I ask. This whole time I thought he was busy with the firm that's why he forgot. Not that I mind I understand the importance of getting the firm off the ground birthdays come every year but the firm failing would haunt him for a long time.

"No." He whispers. Men and their ego. I'm pretty sure I would have loved that cake because it would have been from him but he is too much of a perfectionist.

"Maybe you're right we need to stop making plans and just wing it cause it's either we are bad at making plans or God thinks our plans are a joke. I mean we were supposed to go away next weekend for your birthday but now I'm here." He lays his head on my lap looking at me.

"Clearly. Look now there is a baby we didnt plan for." He says gently rubbing my tummy. "But everything happens for a reason right?" I wonder what that reason is.

My family walks in a few minutes before visiting hours are over. Laying here and watching everyone chatting and laughing makes me happy. I am grateful that despite Grace's attempt at ending my life she failed. I get to live and experience a family. A warm kind and happy family. Lulonke is definitely right our plans never go accordingly but whatever detour they take we always land at some happy place. And this this is my happy place.

90♥

ALONDWE

I am getting discharged today. I am tired of being in hospital and the smell is not helping. I have to see a doctor though before I leave just to make sure the baby is okay. I cant believe I am actually pregnant. It feels like a nightmare honestly with everything going on in my life right now adding a baby will not help matters.

I know Lulonke will be here and all but the past couple of days I've been thinking of actually getting an abortion. I am still trying to get my career off the ground yes I've managed to get a few clients but if I'm going to run my own design business one day I need to ensure I have a portfolio that can rival

the best designers in the business. A baby is not going to help in that regard. And on the other hand Lulonke is still getting his firm off the ground. A couple of clients now cannot sustain the business long term. I know they are big ballers and all that but he still needs to prove himself in order to attract more clients. Being part of his father's firm meant he already had an established foundation and reputation to sustain him but now now he is on his own.

Yesterday I was sure that getting an abortion would be the right thing to do. I was ready to make an appointment and get it done. Then I'd convince everyone I had a miscarriage thanks to my injuries. I was set and ready until Lulonke walked in here with a pair of small shoes he saw in a shop and decided to buy. His excitement was hard to miss. Even with everything going on the fact that he is not seeing a problem in this makes me think maybe I am the one overreacting. It's a baby and baby's grow and eat what we eat right?

I see it in his eyes everytime he speaks about the baby. His eyes always light up and his smile never fades. Scared as I am his excitement makes me think maybe just maybe this wont be such a bad idea. Plus things are different now. Even though I haven't told my parents that I am pregnant i know they will be supportive. The only other fear I have is Lulonke's family. Yes his mother and sister apologized but hatred is not something that easily vanishes just because someone is forced to apologise to you. That alone is another hill we will need to climb.

I am ready to take my shower and get out of here but the nurse seems to be taking her sweet time. If my arms weren't both bandaged I would have done it already but I need help. Fuck Grace I've turned into an invalid all because of her. I don't even know how long it will take for all this to heal. That woman has been a constant dark cloud in my life.

The door opens and look at that Sbongile has come to check on me. And she's not alone Carol Maggie Nomalanga and Zodwa are with her. Their presence is not good for my health at the moment they could just send me into a coma.

They walk in looking like they are here to pass condolences. Nomalanga pulls up the chair and sits down while the others stand.

"Milani Unjani Sisi. (How are you?)" Carol asks as the others mumble a greeting.

"I'm fine." I reply my eyes darting from one to the other. They keep stealing glances at me when they think I am not looking its almost funny how they are pretending to be humble right now.

"We heard about your accident and we decided to come and see you." Sbongile says almost sounding like a concerned aunty.

"Well I am fine as you can see. But why do I get the feeling you didn't come all the way here to check on me. What can I do for you?" They look at each other some shrugging their shoulders. They are definitely not here to check on me.

"Hawu Milani are we not allowed to worry about you?" Zodwa asks. "Phela we are still family despite the newest developments but to us you will always be our brothers child." She adds.

"That's funny because your son doesn't see me as his child. So why are you really here?" The longer they stay here the more irritated I get. It's not even visiting hours yet so how did they get in here again?

"You might not believe this but we actually care about you." Carol says. A chuckle escapes my lips as I feel my heart rate rising.

"Please just tell me why you are here. Please I need to go take a shower before I am discharged. So can we get on with it." I beg.

"We could help you with your shower. It must be difficult with your hands in bandages like that." Sbongile offers.

I glare at her

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the tension in the room becoming thicker with each passing second.

"Look there is no point in prolonging this." Maggie speaks for the first time. She pulls out a brown envelope from her bag and tosses it to me. Opening the envelope is difficult but I manage to pull out the piece of paper out. It's a court order. I read through it and realise it's an order for Grace's baby to be exhumed from Ndwedwe and buried with her own family. If it's not done in the next month the Cebekhulu's can do with the remains as they see fit. I finish reading the document and toss it on the bed.

"What has this got to do with me?" I ask looking at the culprit who handed me the document because she is clearly the only one willing to speak and not dance around the issue. She swallows pulling her cardigan close and crossing her arms on her chest.

"We dont have money to do this we have consulted with some funeral homes and it will be expensive to not only exhume the body but to also transport it back to Nelspruit." She says and all the puzzle pieces fall into place.

"Then let the Cebekhulu's do with he body what they see fit." I reply.

"We can't do that. That child is a part of our family and when we went to consult traditionally we were told the child has to be brought home. If Grace hadn't done what she did the child would have been buried with her rightful family. But now she has been buried with another family and a name that doesnt belong to her which is wrong." Maggie tells me. At least she is honest unlike her companions.

"The child's spirit has been wandering with no direction because the people she was buried with are not her blood. We have consulted before and we were told that there was a baby who died at birth and was not brought home. We didn't take that seriously because we thought all our children were accounted for. Those who had miscarriages were cleansed and their children given names so that's why we didnt take any of that seriously. But now we realise why we were told all that. It all makes sense now." Nomalanga adds as the others nod their head in agreement.

"I hear you. But I am still failing to see what this has to do with me. I am a victim in all this. Have you forgotten that?"

"Of course not." Carol says. "But Milani we know we did not do right by you but we need your help. We spoke to Hlumile and she insists she doesnt have money."

"I'm sorry you did what? You asked Hlumile for money? Where do you think she gets money? She is a student where is she supposed to get money?" I yell and the heart monitor starts beeping out of control.

"We just need to make this right?" Maggie argues.

"You took ten thousand from Peter and called it lobola for your sister. Take that money and use it for this and leave Hlumile alone." I scream. The doctors and nurses rush in.

"You all need to leave." One nurse says pushing them out.

"How did they even get in here because it's not visiting hours yet?" The doctor questions sticking a needle on the drip. It doesnt take long before the voices in the room start fading away. I stare up at the ceiling for a while before my eyes get heavy and they are shut.

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I wake up to hushed voices and the sound of the heart monitor. I keep my eyes closed for a moment and pray those women are not in this room right now. I open them to find my family scattered around the room. My mother is right next to me my hand in hers and her head bowed. I hear mumbling coming from her and I can only assume she is praying. Sne's mum is standing next to her with her head bowed as well and her hand on her back. My dad and uncle are standing at the end of the bed talking in hushed tones. Lu is standing by the window his jaw clenched as he stares off into the distance.

I wiggle my fingers making my mum raise her head. As soon as she sees my opened eyes she smiles and gently rubs my hand.

"Hey nana. You're up." She says and everyone's attention turns to me.

"Are we going home now?" I ask. I'm not sure what time it is. I'm ready to go either way.

"No baby the doctor says you have to stay a few more days. Something happened earlier that upset you. What is it?" Mum asks as the men gather around the bed.

"Its nothing. Why can't I go home?"

"Its clearly something if the doctor had to sedate you. What happened?" My dad asks.

"Grace's sisters were here. They want me to pay for the reburial of the baby."

"Did they say that?" Lu asks I can see his jaws clenching again and a vein popping on his forehead.

"Not in so many words. They even asked Hlumile for the money?"

"And where exactly do they expect her to get it? She's a student for heavens sake." Mum hisses.

"I dont know."

"It doesnt matter. We wont let them upset you again. How are you holding up though?" My uncle asks his face etched with worry.

"I just want to go home." I reply and everyone smiles.

"Soon." Mum promises.

A nurse walks in announcing the end of visiting hours. Everyone says their goodbyes and walk out except for Lu. He stays back and watches the door until everyone is out before he turns to me.

"Hey." He says his contagious smile spreading across his face.

"Take me with you. Please?" I beg pouting my lip. He chuckles and leans down to plant a kiss on my lips.

"Soon. How is my baby doing?" He asks rubbing his hand on my tummy making sure to not go over my bandaged wound.

"Which one?" He laughs.

"Both of you."

"We are okay but we will be better once we get home."

"The doctor said if there are no setbacks you should come home tomorrow or the next day.' He says. I definitely hope so. "Anyways I have to go before the nurse gets back. I will be back in the morning to check on you before I go to work okay?" I nod my head as he leans down to kiss me again. "I love you." He whispers.

"I love you too." He rushes out and the silence that takes over the room is too loud. I definitely need to go home soon.

I grab my new phone from the side table despite the pain shooting through my arm. I dial Hlumile's number.

"Lani hey. Are you Okay?" She asks.

"I'm fine. How are you doing?"

"I'm good but tired. I was handing out CV's earlier. Aunt Carol called and basically blackmailed me into helping with the reburial." She says sounding defeated.

"Blackmailed you? What did she say exactly?" I should have known they would do something like this.

"The usual I will be cursed if I don't help because this is my sister blah blah blah. I just decided to see if I cant get a job and just help them so I can get them off my back." She replies. These women are as shameless as they can be. All of them have jobs but none of them are willing to band together and help their sister. What kind of bullshit is this.

"Hlumile I need you to focus on school. Forget about getting a job and focus on your education. I will give them the money they want."

"You dont have to do that. It's not your responsibility." She says.

"I know. But you're my responsibility and I cant have you distracted from school. You'll get a job during the holidays. For now just focus on your studies and leave everything to me." I hear her take in a deep breath.

"I can help you."

"Hlumile I dont want to repeat myself. You know why you're there. Focus on that and leave everything else to me."

"I hear what you're saying but right now you're in a hospital bed I know you think you're superwoman but we all need help sometimes and I dont mind helping with this." She argues.

"Hlumile. I wont repeat myself. If you fail even one module because you were too busy working I swear to God we will have a problem." I yell. She sighs in defeat.

"Fine. I will focus on school."

"Good. You know I love you right? And all I want is the best for you?"

"I know. And i love you too. Speaking of focusing I have a study session to attend. We will talk before you sleep right?" She asks.

"Of course. I will text you first in case you're still busy."

"Okay. Talk later. Bye."

I hang up the phone and quickly log into my banking app and see how much I can spare for these vultures. I can always use Nkazimulo's watch money I should give myself a pat on the back for still having that money after all this time. I will call Carol in the morning and get her banking details. Hopefully this is a chapet in my life I can officially close and move on.

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Time. They say it heals. They lied. Time heals nothing. Today marks exactly a full year since Siya and Cebo died. As much as common sense says I had nothing to do with their death it doesn't ease my guilt. Today of all days it seems to be fully out to play. My physical wounds are healing but the emotional ones are hard to deal with. Getting back to work hasn't helped me forget or ease the pain.

Lulonke managed to convince me to go to their graves and pay my respects. Yes biologically we are not related but they are my siblings in every other way that matters. He parks the car a few feet away from their graves and we sit in the car for a moment.

"Do you want me to come with you?" He asks grabbing my hand. I take a deep breath before opening the door.

"No I need to do this by myself." He gently squeezes my hand before letting go. If there is one thing Lulonke excels in its reminding me that he is right behind me. No matter what I have to face or go through he is constantly there.

I make my way to the graves and see there is a fresh grave right next to Siya's. They have finally buried their child in the right place. And they have given her a new name Buyile Mahlangu. Nice name. As crazy as it is it's also a bitter sweet moment everything is where it is supposed to be. They have even cleaned Siya's grave and left Cebo's as is. It has weeds growing as if she didn't have a family. Petty much.

I pull out the weeds and make sure the grave is clean before going down on my knees. I don't even know what I am supposed to say to them. It feels like anything I say will be just a way for me to cleanse myself off of the guilt I feel. And if that's gone then what do I have left?

"This was never part of our plans." I blurt out. "You shouldn't be laying here. You should be playing soccer preparing for the Barcelona scouts." I say looking at Siya's grave. "And you should be making mud pies and carrying dolls on your back. I'm sorry I failed you. I should have taken you away sooner. I shouldn't have waited for the right time because the right time never came. Now you're here and I keep imagining what life would have been like if all our plans had materialized." I take a deep breath and close my eyes. "Hlumile is doing well at school. She says it's hard but her results say something different. She's always been a hard worker though so that's not surprising. Soon she'll have Dr before her name. I wish you'd be here to celebrate with her. I'll throw her an epic graduation party I'm already saving for it." I open my eyes and sit flat on top of the grave. I run my hand over my tummy my little surprise human seems to be defying the odds. Even though I have to see the doctor once a week to make sure the baby is not hindering my healing he or she seems to be doing okay.

"I am going to have a baby." I say out loud. "That's something else that was never part of the plans. But it's here and it's happening. I'm not as freaked out as I was when I found out. Partly because of Lulonke. He has made me realise not all men are the same. Not that I have extensive knowledge about relationships and shit but the ones I've seen have not been that great. But with him it's different I know you guys would have loved him. He is pretty awesome." I exhale before I narrate everything Grace has done from the moment she took me in that hospital bed to putting me back there again when she stabbed me. "That woman is way more crazier than I thought. But

after her latest stunt she'll never see the light of day again. She's being kept in a secluded ward with 24 hours of security and cameras at every corner. If they had done that before she hurt you then things would be different. But I guess it's too late now. The damage has already been done." I get up and dust the dirt from my skirt. "I have to go now but I will be back. I promise. I miss you guys so much but I know you'll always be with me with us no matter what. Rest now. I will come and see you soon."

For once walking away from their graves doesn't feel like I am leaving something behind. I know they love me and I know even with my own self-inflicted guilt they know I never wanted any of this to happen. And that's the only truth I am allowing myself to believe from here on out.

"Feeling better?" Lu asks opening his arms out for me. I lay my head on his chest as he wraps his arms around me.

"Much better." I whisper. "I needed this more than I thought. So you were right." His chest rises and falls as he chuckles.

"I should get that in writing." I slightly pull myself away and look up at him. His beautiful smile on full display and his pearly whites coming out to play.

"You have beautiful teeth." I tell him. He pulls in his eyebrows squinting his eyes a bit.

"My teeth?"

"Yes. I'm pretty sure they are the ones that attracted me to you." He throws his head back laughing.

"Okay I have never heard that before." He admits. "Well I'll try and make sure I still have them even in my old age." He adds. We stand there for a moment with me listening to the beat of his heart and realising it's in sync with mine. It's hard not to feel like this is my happy place my peaceful place.

We drive past our old house and seeing it in the state it's in breaks my heart. As much as we would have left eventually but seeing it like this breaks my heart. The grass is overgrown there's a broken window with a cardboard filling the open space the outside stoop looks like it hasn't been cleaned in a long time and the gate is falling apart. If this is what Peter wanted to do to the house then he has definitely succeeded in it. I sigh and sit back as Lu drives away. At some point I need to fully accept that this is no longer my home.

"Are you Okay?" He asks grabbing my hand and placing it on his lap.

"I'm okay. Just disappointed I guess. I never thought I'd see the day the house turns into that mess." He reaches over and takes my hand lifting it up to his lips and planting a soft kiss.

"Its okay. We are going to build our own home now. This is just a part of your past your future awaits and I will be right here with you." He says giving me a small smile. I believe him. My life might not be perfect but its mine and I love it. Most of the time anyways.

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Today I decided to come visit little Milani everytime I see her it's like she is becoming a mini replica of Sne and I. Clearly the Cebekhulu genes do not play.

"You do know if you carry her like that she will get used to being in your arms and then she will refuse to sleep on the bed?" Sne says handing me a bottle. I know she is right but I cant help it she is such a cute little thing its hard to put her down.

"That's why when she gets fussy I will hand her to you and then I'll go home and sleep like a baby."

"Until six months from now. They say revenge is a dish best served cold and I can guarantee I will have my day." She says. I break out into a chuckle. Sne can hold a grudge so I know she will definitely do it. "So have you told the parents yet? Dont wait until its too late. You know what happened with me."

I nod my head. I've been dreading the trip down to KZN. I've been postponing it for the past couple of weeks. This weekend I plan to go there but I'm scared. I mean I am old and employed with a supportive man so I shouldn't be scared i mean i just found these people who says they need any more of my drama.

"So get this Nkazimulo offered me a chance to di my articles at Mbatha and Sons." Sne says.

"And? Are you going to take it?" I know I would. Despite everything Mbatha and sons is one of the best law firms around.

"You wouldn't have a problem with me working for the guy? Inknow he is technically an enemy but the offer is good." An enemy? I wouldn't go that far.

"He is not an enemy Sne him and Lu are good now. Plus this is a great opportunity. Do you know what having Mbatha and sons on your CV can do for you?" I ask. I appreciate her loyalty but this is not the time for it.

"I know. That's why I wanted to talk to you first. This could be a giant leap in my career and I don't want to take it if it's going to cause problems between us." I sigh and place the baby down on the bassinet before I turn to look at her.

"Give me your phone?"

"What?"

"Your phone give it to me." She hands the phone over. I scroll until I find Nkazimulo's number and then press call. It rings for a while before he picks up. He is panting as if he has been running a marathon.

"Snethemba?" He says.

"No it's Alondwe?"

"Who?" Of course not everyone is used to my new old name.

"Milani."

"Oh hey. What's up?"

"Sne will take the articles offer." He is silent for a while only his panting filling the silence.

"Does she know that?"

"Of course she does. Get the contract ready and make sure the pay is good." I tell him. He laughs.

"Yeah we have a standard payment for all those doing internships. It would be considered favouritism if I offered her a higher pay than others." He says.

"Of course she is a favourite. And besides you owe me for all the trauma you put me through." He gasps. Why is he acting like he did not cause me any trauma. The man almost sent me to an early grave because of his watch.

"What trauma?"

"You know exactly what trauma. Get her a higher pay and I will forget about the trauma. Plus she will need all the money she can get to buy your niece or nephew all the gifts they will need."

"Well if you put it like that. I'll make sure her pay is good." He says. I should be hired to negotiate on people's behalf clearly I am good at it.

"Pleasure doing business with you. Goodbye." I hang up the phone and Sne breaks out into a laughter so loud it wakes the baby up. "Stop laughing

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we need to celebrate you're officially a Mbatha and Sons employee."

"Not until I sign that contract. But thank you. I wasn't sure about it but I am glad you're okay with it." She says.

"Please I know how important it is for you to build your career especially with the baby and setting a good example. This will be a great start for you." I say. She nods her head and sits back on the couch her eyes glued on the blank tv.

"If anyone would have told me five years ago that by the time I start my articles I will be a wife and a mother find my long lost sister bury people I love meet more people I love and almost bury you I would have said that's a movie script." She says.

"And yet here we are doing just that."

"Yeah. And it's not so bad."

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My nerves are shot. The closer we get home the sweatie I get. You'd think I am already showing but I have a few more weeks to go before I start protruding. At least according to my doctor. Yesterday I had an appointment and he said everything was going well. My wounds are healed completely. The one on my abdomen is the one they need to keep an on.

Lu parks just a few houses away from home. He on driving me here as if I am incapable of doing anything myself. I know I should be grateful that he is sp attentive but I miss being miss independent and doing things myself.

"Are you ready?" He asks turning to me smiling. He thinks this is funny. Of course for him it's easy getting anyone pregnant means his family name continues. Me I might be bringing shame to the family getting pregnant out of wedlock. It doesn't matter how old one is it still feels like teenage pregnancy.

"Not really. I am shit scared." He laughs. "It's not funny."

"Babe I dont think you have anything to worry about. Your parents are already pretty excited having you back I'm sure this baby will be like reliving the baby years they missed with you."

"I don't want them using my child as my replacement." That would jsut be awkward and weird.

"I'm sure they wont. But they will definitely be supportive. That much I am sure of." He says. I hope he is right.

"I guess. I should go."

"Before you go...." he reaches into his pocket and hands me an envelope. "Please give this to your father." I hope this is not what I think it is.

"What is it?"

"Its for your father." He insists. That's not the answer I want though. I need him to tell me what business he has with my father.

"I could just open the envelope now or I can do it later. What is it?" He sighs and runs his hand down his face.

"Its a letter asking your father for permission to come and discuss lobola." I knew it.

"Lulonke Mbatha....."

"Okay before you start screaming I know this seems sudden and we've spoken about it but this baby changes everything. I want to do things right by you and our child. Paying lobola for you is not going to stop the firm from growing. I have cows and no I dont mean the ones that were returned I gave those to Mkhulu and then bough a couple of new ones to add to my herd." He tells me. "And besides we are already living together we might as well make it official. Plus I dont want your father thinking i am just using you. I want him to know that you mean everything to me my life would not be what it is without you. And I want this to affirm my love to you. I want to spend the rest of my life with you Alondwe Cebekhulu. Please allow me to do things right?"

I feel a tear run down my face. I have no words. "Allow me to be your husband your best friend your confidant your protector." He adds. I nod my head and his lips curl into the biggest smile I've ever seen on him. How can I say no to that. He reaches over and pulls me into a hug. "Thank you. I promise you wont regret it." Inknow I wont.

I walk into the house a little less nervous than i was. I find gogo in the lounge knitting. She is always happy to see me. And for someone fighting cancer she really looks good. I give her a hug and I see her eyes roaming over my body.

"You're glowing." She says. "Do you have something to tell us?" Of course she is also a walking pregnancy test.

"Its sunburn gogo."

"Yeah right. I've been alive way longer than you my girl I see things. But I understand if you want to tell your parents first."

"Thank you. Where are they anyway?" I look around the room and the house seems quiet. Way too quiet.

"Probably in their bedroom having sex." She says so bluntly I gasp. I hope the bluntness does not come with old age. I dont want it. "What? They are adults and so are you. I'm sure they are done though. Go and tell them I am hungry." I am not about to walk into my own trauma. Not happening.

"I can make you something to eat."

"Don't worry I am sure you wont find anything bad there. Plus I'm sure you want to talk to them. There is no better time than the present." She is right I might as well get this over and done with.

I make my way to their bedroom and gently knock on the door. Going in uninvited is not an option. I have the envelop in my pocket so if things get awkward I can bring it out. Or I can just start with it so it can pave the way.

"Come in." Mum shouts. I slowly open the door and as soon as they see me their smiles light up the room. I'll never get used to that. My own parents being happy to see me.

"Hey you're here. I thought you'd postpone like you've been doing the past couple of weeks."

Mum says pulling me into a hug.

"I know I'm sorry about that. Sawubona baba." He opens his arms to give me a hug.

"You dont know how happy it makes me to hear you say that. How are you?"

"A bit nervous. I have to talk to you about something." Their smiles quickly disappear and concern takes over.

"Is everything okay?" My dad asks. I pull up the vanity chair and sit down while they sit on the bed.

"I hope so." I pull out the envelope and hand it to him. He opens it and they read it together. Mum breaks out into ululating but quickly stops when she realises my dad doesn't seem too happy.

"When did you decide this?" He asks. I could tell him Lu decided long ago and I decided a few minutes ago but that would not make the look on his face disappear.

"We've been talking about it. The plan was for us to wait until his law firm is fully standing on its own." I reply I keep fiddling with my thumbs like a little kid.

"Is it standing on its own now?" He asks. This is going to be tough.

"Somewhat. It will take a while before that happens but right now its operating." He nods his head. I might as well lay all my cards on the table. "There is another reason why he wants this to happen soon. I am pregnant." I was expecting disappointment not the blank stares they are giving me.

"So that's why he wants to marry you? Because you're pregnant?" Mum asks.

"No. He has always said he wants to marry me but now that I am pregnant he wants to do right by me and our child." I know I am stealing Lulonke's line but it did make me cry so maybe it might win them over to.

"And wena do you want to marry him?" Dad asks. I sigh.

"Yes yes I do." I admit so easily it feels natural and real. I do want to marry him.

"Okay then I guess we will have a wedding soon." Dad says his smile returning to his face. Okay this went somehow easier than I expected. Mum starts ululating. I guess i am getting married. No. I am definitely getting married.

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My phone is buzzing under my pillow and someone is shaking me.

"Nana wake up." Someone whispers. "Wake up." She says gently shaking me. The fog washes off my brain and I realise its mum. I pull the phone out from under the pillow and look at the time. It's barely five in the morning. I have a whole lot of missed calls mostly from an unknown number and one from Lulonke. When did he call me? I've been trying to call him but his phone

rang unanswered. I guess he managed to get back to me and unfortunately I was asleep. I turn to my mother and she looks like she is scared of something.

"What's going on?" I ask rubbing sleep off of my eyes.

"Someone is here to see you." She says. "Put your gown on lets go." Who would be here so early in the morning? I get out of bed and put my gown on. I follow mum to the kitchen. Dad is sitting on the table with his head bowed. I know I am sleeping but I am pretty sure this is Nkazimulo. What is he doing here. As soon as I walk in he stands up and looks at me. His eyes are bloodshot red like he was crying. My heart starts racing. Everything about this moment feels wrong. Very wrong.

"What's happening? What are you doing here?" I ask him.

"Please sit down." Mum says.

"No. Not until someone tells me what's going on?" Nkazimulo bows his head his hands clasped together in front of his abdomen.

"Last night something terrible happened. There was an accident." He starts. "I got a call from the paramedics when they couldn't get hold of you." He continues. Why would paramedics want to get hold of me? Hlumile!

"Is Hlumile okay?" I ask as panic sets in. God please let her be okay. Nkazimulo's head shoots up and he looks at me as if I am crazy.

"I dont know. I'll find out. But this is about Lulonke. He was in an accident late last night in Durban." He says. My heart is hammering on my chest. I lower myself onto the nearest chair.

"Is he okay? What hospital is he in?" I ask trying to get my strength back. I need to be strong for him. Whatever it is that's wrong with him we will get through it. I know we will. A tear escapes from Nkazimulo's eye and he quickly wipes it away. Not fast enough though because I see it. And I see the sadness in his eyes.

"He is gone isnt he?" I ask as tears race down my face. What was I thinking? Happily ever after is not for me. I'm not one of those people God had in mind when he was giving away happy ever afters. I blink a couple of times willing Nkazimulo to stand still instead it's like he breaks into two individuals one on either side of me. Their voices get fainter and everything gets darker and darker. My arms go limp and drop to my sides as darkness engulfs me. Maybe this is where I belong in the darkness. Light has never loved me anyway.

THE END