



An Inspirational Story of Courage, Love and Mistrust...

IF ONLY...

by Segodi Leshalabe

If Only...

(Free Draft)

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***Dedicated to my Late Mom: You will always be the Girl...In my life for all times!
I miss you so so much!!!***

***And to God Almighty: Thank you for the Gift of Life, the Gift of Writing, the Resources and
Ideas You provided, and for Your Unconditional Love!***

And to all my family, friends, colleagues and Everyone I know: Thanks for the Love & Support!

*To all those who follow my Author page on Facebook, thank you for always keeping me inspired
with your comments on my writing, and thank you for forcing this book out of me..lol. I got you
all to thank for this first draft. Yes, it is a work in progress, and will get other versions out
eventually. But you all made it happen! Thanks! I **LOVE** You So Much!!!*

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Chapter 1

Have you ever found yourself in a situation where you wish you could turn back the clock and undo everything you have done? It gets worse when what you have done inflicted pain on someone else and you can't take it back. What's even worse though is if you can't find that person to tell them how sorry you are. Well, that's the story of my life.

The background of it is that I have always been unlucky in love. Take for instance, my first boyfriend Ben, always putting up his best behaviour when we were in public places, but what an abusive guy he was. After several bruises courtesy of him, we parted ways. That was when I met Killer. I guess his name should have given him away. He told me he got it from his soccer prowess, something that turned out to be a lie. He was into lots of criminal activities. When we eventually parted ways, I was just grateful the parting was amicable. Then there was Madime, a great dresser, a smooth talker and a charmer but also a serial cheater. By the time I ended it with him, I have just about had it with guys. I just wanted to be alone. So I made a bold decision not to get involved any longer. After all, my heart had been bruised so many times I just didn't think it could take it anymore.

That was until that fateful day at the bus stop. As I sat waiting for the bus, I began reading a novel by one of my favourite authors. I was the only one there when he arrived. His name, I later learned was Kopano. He greeted me and immediately struck a conversation about the author of the book I was reading. He mentioned that he was his favourite too. Yeah right, I thought to myself, nice try mister, but now beat it. I put on the meanest behaviour I could, and yet he remained calm, eventually asking me whether I was always that mean to every new friendly person I met or whether he was just unlucky with me. Finally, he gave up, and sat by himself, also pulling out a book to read. I then realised that either he was just lucky or he was telling the truth about my author being his favourite too because the book he took out was by the same author I was reading. But still, I stuck to my guns, refusing to have any conversation with him.

But all that changed when we got onto the bus. I found that I had forgotten my purse at the office. All my bus tickets and money were in there. Sure enough, they were safe as I always kept my office locked, but right now, I needed my purse to make this trip. Despite my earlier meanness to him, he kindly offered to pay for my bus fare. We then both got onto the bus. I chose a seat and expected him to take advantage of his having helped me out, by coming to sit next to me. He didn't. He decided to sit much further away from me. From that moment onwards I couldn't continue reading. I kept on trying to look at him, to see whether he was looking towards my direction at all, but he wasn't. He seemed absorbed in his world.

I also soon got absorbed in my thoughts. I began replaying the scene that unfolded at the bus stop and also what happened when we boarded. I recalled how I frantically searched my bag before remembering that my purse was in my drawer at work. I vividly remember how he spoke with his soft

voice to offer to pay for me and how I flatly refused. He looked around and looked back at me and said, "let's try reason this one shall we. You have no money with you, and you want to get home, I don't see anyone else who can help you unless if the bus driver offers credit. Do you offer credit sir?" The bus driver shook his head. "There you have it, no credit for you. It seems like I'm your only hope now, unless you have other plans?" I looked at him; I hated that he was so right, I wanted to say no to his offer, but he was right, he was my only choice. I just looked at him and couldn't say a word.

"I didn't think so", he proceeded. He then handed the fare to the driver. The driver gave me my ticket, and I just went straight to my seat. That thought hit me hard. I didn't even say thank you to him. I was so bent on being mean to him I didn't even have the courtesy to thank him for his help. I felt bad. At that point, I decided to swallow my pride and at least go to him to say thank you. I looked back at his seat, but he was gone. I looked to the front, and there he was standing, ready to get off at the next stop. My heart sank. I tried to think of what to do. I couldn't exactly just get off there because I didn't have money to catch the next bus. At the same time, I may never see him again, meaning I may never have the opportunity to thank him. I hadn't seen him on this bus before, and so the chances of ever seeing him again were that slim. Time was ticking and fast. I took another look at him and had to quickly look away because I found him looking at me too. We both looked away quickly. Deep inside of me, I had a small smile from that. Somehow all my meanness to him were turning into some liking I didn't understand. He did look kinder cute; his composure too was what struck me. While I was quick to raise my voice during our earlier conversation, he just listened and will respond with a short and yet precise reply, in his soft smooth tone, a response that will just shut me up. The bus was now slowing down, approaching the next stop. I thought of making a fool of myself by just standing up and screaming at the top of my voice and say hey mister, thank you for the bus fare. He probably deserved that. I covered my face with my hands, gave that a little thought and then took a decision to just do it. It's the least I could do, and at least I will not spend the rest of my life feeling bad for not having said thank you. Slowly I uncovered my face and got ready to stand up and do just that. But before I could carry out that act, I looked outside a bit, trying to gather my strength but then I couldn't believe what I just saw outside.

It was my block of apartments, which meant the next stop was my stop too. I couldn't believe what just almost happened; I almost missed my stop. That has never happened to me. I quickly grabbed my bag and got ready to get off as well. To make sure I'm as close to him as possible, I did the rare thing I ever did; I stood up before the bus stopped and began moving forward. He was looking intently into his mobile phone. Curiosity got the better of me, and so I tried to peek a bit. He was reading a map. That suggested he might not know where he was going, which will make sense because like I already said, I had never seen him on this bus before, and certainly not on my bus stop.

A few more passengers began to stand up as the bus drew to a halt. He was first, then another passenger, then myself. I intentionally made sure there was someone in between us so that I could have an extra second to follow in the direction he takes and say my thank you's. Then I will head home as soon as I possibly can.

Finally, the bus stopped, and we all began to disembark. He turned in the direction to my apartments, and I followed suit. Then he stopped, continuing to look at the map. This was my opportunity, and I took it.

“Hey, hmmm...listen, I never got to say thank you for paying my fare. Frankly, I don’t know what I would have done if it wasn’t for you.”

I startled him, seemingly he wasn’t even aware that I had gotten off too. But his face suddenly lit and he responded with a smile, giving a response I hadn’t anticipated. “Are you following me? Are you stalking me?”

“Noooooo, I’m not, I stay.....”

“Relax, I’m just kidding”.

I took a deep breath. He got me on that one. Of course, I knew he was kidding, but the way I replied, my reaction, let’s just say I also couldn’t make sense of it. I didn’t know what else to say, but then he helped by saying something further.

"That's okay; I'm glad I could help. One day it could be me".

“I know, but still, you know I haven’t been the friendliest person to you, and yet you did such a great favour for me, and I didn't even say thanks. I feel so bad.”

"Don't worry; I've seen worse". We both laughed.

“Anyway, will you be on this same bus tomorrow because I want to pay you back?”

“I will be yes, but pay me back? What do you mean pay me back?”

“I mean, give you back your money, the one you paid for my fare with?”

“But I never gave you any money, so why would you give me some money?”

“I know, you gave it to the bus driver to...”

“So then you must do the same”

“Do what? Give it to the bus driver.”

“No, actually, I was going to buy coffee with that money, so I reckon you can give it to the cashier at the coffee store, and he/she will give me coffee. At that point we will be even.”

“But that means I have to come to the coffee shop with you?”

“Yes, after all I also went into the bus with you”, this he said with a smile. I could see where this was going.

“Wait a minute, are you asking me out?”

“Depends on what your response is going to be”.

“All right, you win. But I still don’t have any money with me”.

"We can do this tomorrow; I'm sure you will have your purse with you then."

“Okay, tomorrow it is then”.

"Yep, we are catching the same bus, right?"

“I am. I don’t know about you?”

“I love having coffee with beautiful people, so I will make an exception to catch the same bus”, he smiled.

“Right, I will see you tomorrow”.

“Wait, I didn’t catch your name? I’m Kopano by the way.”

“My name is Nkele.”

"Oh, such a beautiful name. Pleased to meet you, Nkele.”

“Same here.”

"Before you go, look, I'm new here, and I'm trying to find this place I'm going to, but I seem to be getting lost, and my map isn't helping".

Don’t worry; I know this place like the back of my hand. Let me help you. Let’s see”.

He showed me the name of the place, and I was taken aback. This was a complex just next to mine. Does it mean he stays there or? I began to wonder. He seemed ecstatic when I told him I was heading in that direction and that this was in my neighbourhood. I promised to take him there, and he asked me to promise him I won’t steal him. We both laughed at that. He was quite a funny guy.

I had taken the walk from the bus stop to my place many times and always found it boring, but not today. Somehow he had this effect on me that I couldn’t explain. I got to learn that he was a lawyer, a commercial lawyer specialising in mergers and acquisitions. Originally he was from Stellenbosch, and he had only come to Centurion on a work assignment. "I will probably be here for 5 or 6 months", he said. For the past few days he had been staying at a hotel while still looking for a place. It was a bit of a struggle because almost all landlords wanted a lease of at least a year. This place he was going to view today was a bit different because the person staying there wanted to leave before their lease expired, and so he was going to take it over for the remaining six months.

“That is if I like the place and the neighbourhood, but judging by the people staying around it (*this he said looking at me and smiling*), I think I already like the place”, he carried on.

I always have many things to say, but I must admit, he often tended to get me speechless with his remarks and comments. One thing for sure though is that he sounded and seemed different from every other guy I ever been out with.

"Here we are, this is the place", I said, pointing to him the complex he was coming to.

"Thank you so much; I owe you one".

“Be careful of what you say, you know I might just demand payment”.

“Then I better leave before you hand me that invoice. I guess I will be seeing you tomorrow?”

“Yeah sure, same place, same time, and don’t get lost”, I remarked.

“I won’t, that I can promise you. Not when arriving there means I’m going to share coffee with you”.

Once again, that got me smiling. I waved him goodbye, and we went our separate ways.

But as I walked to my apartment, I began to have lots of thoughts on my mind. Somehow I was getting cold feet regarding the coffee session tomorrow. While he seemed like a great guy, they all seemed like that, until the fateful moment they shred my heart to pieces. He just seemed too good to be true. Besides, he said he’s only here for six months at most, so why get close to him in the first place. But how do I get out of the date? I needed to think, and think fast. That I had no way of contacting him made it even more difficult for me to cancel. Why didn’t he ask me for my number, I wondered. What if I just don’t pitch, use a different bus, an early bus. I was in deep thoughts as I entered my apartment. I didn’t even realise who stood on the hallway waiting for me.

It was my friend Sindi, who had made me a surprise visit. I hadn’t even noticed her car in the parking lot. Anyway, I was just so happy to see her. I needed someone to talk to about the pending date, and Sindi was just the perfect person. We have been friends for as long as I can remember. She witnessed my trouble in dating paradise and always provided a shoulder to cry on whenever I needed one. I remember the words she used to tell me, that “someday someone is going to walk into your life, and who will make you realise why it never worked out with everyone else”. Those words kept me going, helped me stay positive and remain hopeful. I wondered whether Kopano was that someone.

We ran towards each, a quick greeting and a customary hug followed. I was happy to see her, and she was just as excited to see me too. I wasn’t even aware that she was already back from France, a work assignment she undertook two weeks earlier.

“So where’s that French hunk you promised to bring me?”

“Choma, it was so freezing we stayed indoors all the time. I didn’t even get a chance to see Paris the way I had hoped. Plus they cut our period there short, which put us under enormous pressure to complete the project within the new timelines”.

"Yes, I was about to ask why you back so early. Wasn't expecting you till the weekend."

“They said something about the travel agency bungling our accommodation and travel arrangements. But I doubt that was the reason. I think the real reason is that we were required back home for another project that is also running late. Oh choma, it’s so crazy in that place sometimes I just want to resign with immediate effect”.

“I feel you hey. Remember my company did almost the same thing to me when I went to the UK for my project. But as for now, let’s go to my place, plus I have some news to tell you”. Soon the lift arrived, and we were on our way up. We had a lot to talk about, and soon Kopano was in the picture.

“From the time I saw you walk into the building, your face seemed brighter than usual, and I wondered what was going on. I could swear you were even smiling alone. Now I know why”.

“Hayi suka, I wasn’t!”

“Say whatever you like, I saw what I saw”.

“Well, that’s my story and I’m sticking to it”.

"Whatever! This guy seemed to have made a big impression on you though."

"Yeah, I'm afraid he has. There’s something about him I just can’t explain. He’s a lil mysterious in a sweet kinda way”.

“Aaaaah my friend, I think I wanna meet this guy. Look at what he has done to you”. We both laughed.

“I still don’t know if I wanna go to this date though,”

“Say what? Why do you always do this? No no no, this time you are going, that’s it. End of story, besides, it’s just a cup of coffee. It’s not like he’s asking you to marry him or something.”

“I just don’t know if I’m ready.”

“I understand choma. After all you have been through, it's normal to be afraid. But you know what, you owe it to yourself to go. If you don’t, you will spend the rest of your life wondering what could have been”.

“I guess you are right. Anyways, enough about me, tell me about your trip”.

We spend the rest of the evening catching up and talking about every crazy thing you can think of. Sindi and I were just like that. She even insisted on choosing an outfit for me for the next day. "From the way you described Kopano, I think you should wear this dress tomorrow. It should match his

taste if your description is right”, and after those words, I couldn’t argue. After all, she was the fashion guru, and she influenced half my wardrobe. It was already after 11 pm when she left. I had to chase her away because she was only due at the office around 10 am the next day. I on the other hand, had to be there by 8.

Chapter 2

It was after a long day as I began my walk to the bus stop. I did go spend a few minutes in the ladies room freshening up. I always did that before leaving the office, but today I took a bit longer. I couldn't make sense of it, but somehow I think I was getting more interested in Kopano. I tried to dismiss that, but my heart seemed to have different ideas. That could explain why I was so nervous walking to the bus stop. He wasn't there yet, which reduced the pressure off me a bit. I could walk properly until I sat down, not worried whether I might trip under my high heels and end up falling.

I sat down and took out my book to read, trying to make everything as usual as possible. Although I had opened the book, I couldn't read. I kept on looking around to see if he was coming, but there was no sign of him. After reading the same paragraph in the book for about five times, I realised that this wasn't working, and so I put the book away. The bus was only five minutes away, and he still wasn't there. I was slowly becoming sad. How could he do this to me, I wondered. He's just like all the others, I told myself. I looked at my watch again and kept on hoping he will appear, but he was nowhere to be found. Then the bus appeared and came to a halt. He still wasn't there. Slowly we boarded.

I was the last one as I kept on glancing in all directions, hoping to see him come running and waving for me to stop the bus. Still, there was no sign of him. Finally I also boarded. As I walked in, I looked around hoping to see him, but he wasn't there either. Hurt and disappointed, I slumped onto my seat. I could feel a lil tear from the corner of my eye. The bus began moving, and soon we were making the turn to join the main road. Then the siren started. First, it started low, sounding from afar. But soon it got louder as it seems to approach. Then I looked up and couldn't believe what was happening.

I opened my eyes to be greeted by my bedroom ceiling. The siren, or should I say the alarm clock was ringing even louder. I reached out to switch it off and started getting ready to wake up. I was relieved that this was just a dream, and what a bad dream it was for sure. I began to wonder what if Kopano doesn't show up, just like it happened in the dream. Thankfully I was running late and so didn't have much time to dwell on such thoughts. I got up to get ready for work, realising that this could well be one of the longest days in my life.

I had another careful look at the outfit that Sindi help choose for me the previous night. The weather was just as expected, and thus the outfit was good to go. But I just wasn't sure whether this would fit well with the occasion. It was semi-formal kinda dress code. What worried me though was what if Kopano comes dressed formally, that is if he does show up, unlike what happened in the dream. After toiling on this back and forth, I finally decided that the outfit was okay. So off to work I went.

Did I tell you I work for a hi-tech company? Yes I do, Techno Global Investments (TGI). I studied Information Systems at UJ, went on to do my Honours and Masters degrees before entering the work market.

With technology taking a forefront lead in many industries, it was every graduate's dream to work for a technology company upon graduation. It didn't matter what discipline one was from, as long as you could play a role in some tech company structure. After all, everyone was talking 4IR as if this was a new fashion trend that you wouldn't want to be left out of.

Amongst the much sought after companies was a leading tech company called Techno Global Investments (TGI). As the name says it all, their focus was on investing in technology companies across the globe. Not only that though, but they also had their own app development subsidiary that produced apps and some tech equipment for their clientele.

For many students, this was the Crown jewel because of its international opportunities as well, with branches in the UK, The US and Europe. It also had subsidiaries in several other African countries.

Under the leadership of its flamboyant CEO, Lupa, the company thrived even in difficult times. Lupa was often credited with growing the company to its current size. He came on board when the company had only branches in South Africa and their only international office being in Kenya where they had interests in some agricultural apps making companies. His dedication and obsession to turning it into a multinational led to its current success.

When I graduated, several companies came on campus on a recruitment drive. I tried with some of them, but none had what interested me. It was until I met up with TGI. The procedure was always that you would submit your resume, then meet with their HR for some sort of interview and also discuss available options before taking it from there. With TGI however, things turned out slightly different. I arrived for the session expecting to meet with their HR, but instead, I was introduced to a certain Mr Jackson, who introduced himself as my future boss. He was one of the senior managers at TGI. He looked much younger than you could expect for a senior manager, and his dress code as well was not your traditional suit and tie vibe. He introduced himself and one other lady who was from HR. What startled me was that after the introductions, he asked me whether he should call me Nkele or Tina. Now Tina was my nickname from high school when I used to play netball. I hadn't heard that name in close to 6 years now. From there on, he explained how thorough job they had done in assessing my profile. "We only spend an hour on your resume and another couple of days on your life history. We studied your life through your own lens from back in high school till now. Everything is there online. We just spend time mining it, studying it and in the end, we feel you are the best candidate for the position we have. You will report directly to me, I will mentor you, and I promise you that in just five years you will be one of the best female executives around, that is provided you are also willing to put in the hours. But from what we have seen of your life events, I know you will", explained Mr Jackson.

I was shocked and didn't know what to say. When he presented me with their offer, I was even more surprised. He concluded by saying that he wanted to save me time and so I should cancel all other interviews and sign up to join his company. And the last bit that got me sold was when he said they were going to send me on a three months training in London before I fully joined the company. Needless to say I signed on and at the start of the following year, I was at TGI. That has been my

home for a couple of years now, and Jackson has been my mentor ever since. I have now managed to obtain my MBA and only graduated recently. I can say I'm almost the best executive that Jackson said I would become. I'm the assistant director of sales, reporting directly to Jackson. Not that it had been smooth sailing though. There were at times, some complaints or allegations of sexual harassment allegations against some of the top management by several employees. Lucky for me, it never happened to me. Working with Jackson was one of the greatest adventures. He taught me everything I know, and even when I wanted to drop out of my MBA studies because of work pressures and personal issues, he was the one that cheered me on. Did I mention the great family man he was? Yes, he was married with two kids. Occasionally he and his wife would invite me to their house for a meal, and when I had troubles in love paradise, they would often joke about how they should be the ones to hook me up with proper dudes because "I didn't have game in that department". We had lots of laughter moments, especially when they declared themselves my professional parents, seeing that my biological parents were far away in the Free state.

The TGI office was already buzzing when I arrived. That was the norm anyhow because I was rarely an early bird. Jackson, an early bird of note, was also already in his office. He was on the phone, and so I just waved to greet him when I passed and headed to my office. I had just settled down when he knocked by my door and asked me whether I had a minute. Even if I didn't, I knew he was going to come in and say whatever he wanted to say anyway, and so I allowed him in and pointed at a chair for him.

He slumped into it and said "This is probably going to make the news very soon later today, but I want you to hear it from me. I have tendered my resignation, and I will be leaving the company in about a month from now".

"Say what? How did that come about? What happened?"

"I just got better opportunities I want to explore, plus I haven't been happy with how some things have been happening around here lately. Remember how I told you I had often had a difference of opinions with some of the executives? Lately I have been feeling alienated, and so I decided to rather jump before I get pushed."

"Where are you going? Gosh, they going to be so lucky to have you".

"I got a position at Andra Consulting, a UK based company that I have worked with in the past. I'm going to be their director of sales for Africa".

"Oh wow, congratulations. Will you be based here in South Africa or you are relocating?"

"We are relocating. My wife wants to pursue her studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London anyway, and so my opportunity came just at the right time. We have been discussing it for some time though".

"This place is not going to be the same without you".

“But it’s a great opportunity for you. I’m going to recommend that you fill up my position when I leave. I feel I have trained you enough and you are ready”.

“I don’t know hey. Those are big shoes to fill”.

"Relax, I have taught you everything you need to know. In this company right now, there's no one more qualified and experienced for that role than you. That I can assure you, you can even go for higher roles in other organisations. You are that good. You just need to believe in yourself."

"I guess I will just have to pray about it."

"Yeah, now that's more like it. On that note, let me allow you to carry on with your work. I have lots of HR forms to attend to". At that, he left.

The rest of the day turned out to be long, really long, just as I anticipated. I was too anxious for later on, while at the same time thinking a lot about what Jackson had said. I kept on wondering what was going to happen that afternoon/evening. The dream I had still worried me a bit. What if it turns out to be true? I wasn’t too sure whether I could handle the emotions that went with it. Knock-off time finally came, and I got myself ready before leaving the office. As I began my walk to the bus stop, I suddenly went into thinking overdrive. My mind was all over the place, and my nerves were also having a field day on me. As soon as the bus stop came into sight, I knew that there was no turning back now. I pulled myself together and walked with confidence.

As I got closer, I saw him already there. "At least he is here unlike what happened in the dream", I thought to myself. He looked very different from the previous day though. Today he donned a nice pair of jeans, a casual jacket with a matching shirt and he had sunglasses on too. He was different from the commercial lawyer I met the previous day. He looked more like a movie star. Luckily my outfit was on the same footing, Sindi is a genius I must say. As soon as he saw me, he began to smile. It then dawned on what a beautiful smile he had. My steps became harder and harder to take, my heart was pounding, and deep inside I prayed that I shouldn’t trip or stumble. Then he did something that almost brought me to tears.

You probably might think that I was being dramatic but trust me, I was not. You see in life there are things that for some it means a lot while to others the same thing is taken for granted. For me, one of those things was receiving flowers. I love flowers with all my heart, and it just so happens that I never get them. Of all the previous guys I dated, Madime was the only one who ever bought me flowers, and he didn’t just buy me flowers, he did because he wanted to apologise for something he had done. This he only did once and never again after that. I always longed for flowers but never got any. If ever I watched a movie and I saw someone given flowers, I would come close to tears. Maybe for you they are something simple, but in my world, they mean a whole lot.

So that afternoon when I got to the bus stop and someone I consider somewhat a stranger at that stage, walked up to me and did something for me that none of my previous ex-boyfriends managed to do, I became emotional. I mean I had given my heart to them, confessed my love, but they never

managed to do this. Now here comes a total stranger, someone mind you the very previous day I was mean to at some stage, and he does this for me, in my world that's big.

He walked up to me slowly, one hand almost hidden behind him, and just when he was a few inches from me, he revealed what his hidden hand had. He had a rose in his hand, a single rose and as he gave it to me he said "some people don't like flowers. I don't know you well, and so I didn't know whether you like them or not. But I got you this rose. I could have gotten you the whole bunch of them, but in case flowers aren't your thing, I opted to play it safe".

I was already emotional at this stage. I wanted to jump and hug him, maybe kiss him, but I held myself. I reminded myself that I don't really know this man. I reached forward to receive the flower, smelled it, smiled and said, "Thank you so much. You have no idea how much this means to me".

"That's a relief; I'm glad you like flowers because I enjoy giving flowers, but to those who appreciate them".

At that, I thought Lord, who is this man and where has he been all along, is he for real or is he just a charmer like Madime was. My protection instincts kicked in at that moment. Suddenly I wanted to creep back into my shell and protect my heart from being hurt again. It was a bit of a confusing moment for me. One second I wanted to hold this man in my arms and not let him go, yet the next I wanted to push him as far away as possible. I guess I was a prisoner of my previous failed relationships. Sometimes we are just like that, without even realising it. Sometimes we make people who care a lot about us, pay for the mistakes that others did. The saddest thing is that we more often than not, do this without even realising it.

I stood silent for a moment, without even being aware I was. It was only when Kopano started talking again, that I got pulled out of my "lost in transit moment" and got back.

"You look tired, why don't you come to have a seat? The bus is not due for another 10 minutes or so". He said this while holding my hand and leading me to the next available seat.

As I walked towards the seat, I pinched myself a bit, trying to verify whether this wasn't just another dream. It wasn't, it was real, and we sat down and began chatting some more.

"Hey guess who's your new neighbour?"

"You like the place? Are you moving in? When?" I asked all those questions, failing to hide my excitement.

"They showed me the place, I liked it, and now I have submitted the lease to my company to approve. I should be able to move in this weekend".

"Oh wow, I'm happy for you. No more hotel food neh?"

"I'm not a good cook, so hotel food was saving me. It's probably just going to be replaced by take-aways".

“That is not healthy at all. You must learn to make a few dishes man”.

“I don’t know hey, I’m a willing student, can you be my teacher?”

“HmMMMM, let’s see. What level is your cooking skills? Beginner, intermediate or...”

“Is there a level below beginner? Because that’s where I will be probably”, he interjected before I could finish my sentence. His response drew some laughter from both of us.

"No, you can't be that bad. You must throw a house warming and cook something; then I can evaluate which level you are at”.

Our conversation was cut short by the bus's arrival. There were already a few other people, and we began boarding. As we approached the door, he whispered in my ear "You know if you don't have your bus coupons even today, I won't mind paying your fare again, you will in turn just repay me with a second coffee session, especially if I don't fare well in today's one".

I was beginning to enjoy his sense of humour. He had this thing of saying unexpected things at unexpected times. He was unpredictable, and that was refreshing.

Unlike the previous day, today we shared a seat on the bus. We still had a lot of catching up to do, but then again we also still had the entire evening ahead of us. After we sat down, our conversation continued. He had already insisted that I choose the coffee place since he was new and didn’t know the area well. I was okay with that. In fact, I already knew where to take him.

"So how do you like Gauteng so far?" I broke the silence once the bus started moving.

"It's okay, a little bit too fast for me, but okay. Oh but I hate the traffic."

“Tell me about it. I’m somewhat already used to it. You just have to wake up very early”.

“That’s the thing; I'm not a morning person. Sometimes I put hours into midnight and beyond. In return, I expect to wake up a bit later. I can't do that here though because we have regular morning meetings with the client”.

“I’m almost like you as far as waking up early is concerned. But I also don’t like sleeping late. I guess what I’m trying to say is I love my sleep”.

“It’s okay; every princess deserves their beauty sleep”, this he said while looking straight into my eyes. He got me blushing, and so I turned and looked away just for a moment.

What I said next, I had no idea why I said it, but I did. "Do you need help moving in this weekend? Not that I will do much because I don't boast big muscles to carry heavy objects but...."

“You kidding me? That will be great. If the company approves the lease tomorrow, the movers should arrive on Saturday morning. I usually battle to decorate the place properly. Normally my sister will

pop in just to help because she knows I'm hopeless in that department. But this weekend she's in New York on a work assignment, and so your help will be very much appreciated".

I couldn't believe what I just got myself into. It was supposed to be a joke, but now I had just got myself into a corner I couldn't get out of. Then I remembered that Sindi still owed me a favour and so could pretty much get her into my situation as well. I wasn't about to face this alone, especially after what she always put me through. So I committed us on her behalf.

"I'll ask my friend Sindi, and we will come to help you, to show you that we the people of GP still have the spirit of *ubuntu* operating in us".

"That will be great, the more of us, the quicker we will finish. I can't cook for you as I told you regarding my cooking, but there's something I excel in, braai".

"Really? You? Braai? You don't look like the braai type, not with those suits and ties?"

"You don't know me too well, but I won't blame you. Let's wait for Saturday. In my hometown, I'm the reigning braai master, so you will get to taste the best braai compliments of the best braai master, yours truly".

We were still enjoying our conversation, but this was brought to a sudden halt when I looked outside the window and saw him sitting there, playing his violin as he did everyday right at the entrance of the mall. Passersby continue to flock to him, some standing for a few minutes to listen, while others simply put in some cash in his collection basket and quickly walked past, without stopping to listen. I enjoyed his music, and whenever I came by, I would stop for a moment to listen and also give in my donation. He played beautifully. At that moment I turned to Kopano and said: "This is the mall where we are going to, the bus stop is just around the corner".

"I'm feeling a little bit cold, can't wait for the coffee", he responded.

Minutes later, we were walking the pavement as I led the way to the coffee shop I had chosen. It was my favourite spot that I always visited whenever I needed to unwind. Rarely did I bring guests with. Coming to think of it, Sindi was the only person I ever took there.

As we approached the entrance, Kopano took a lot of interest in the violinist.

"I love music, and this guy is amazing, mind if we listen a bit?" he asked.

"Not at all", I replied. "We can stand here as long as you want".

Few minutes and a small donation later, we made our way to the coffee shop. Being knock off rush hour time, the place was slightly busy as patrons ordered their fix to drink on their way home. The seating area wasn't too full though, just the way I liked it. Moraba, the owner, came by to greet us as soon as we walked in. "I see you got company today?" he continued after the formalities.

"Yes, I do. Kopano, this is Moraba, he owns the store. Moraba, this is my friend Kopano, new in town and I'm showing him the best coffee place for whenever he's thirsty".

"Nice to meet you Kopano. A friend to Nkele is my friend too. Please do feel free to pop in whenever you need some warm cup of coffee".

"Thanks man, I will certainly take you up on that one".

"Nkele, your favourite table is ready, so if you may follow me".

At that, we proceeded to the very back of the restaurant. There by the corner was the table ready and waiting. It stood facing the backside of the mall where one faced the small lake. A few geese enjoyed their evening swim, or should I say float on the water. Looking across the lake was for me the best part, especially at this time of the day, the sunset. At times I would come here just to come to sit and watch the sunset, I love nature, and that explains it all. Kopano seemed impressed with the view also. As we sat down, he remarked "this is such a beautiful view. Especially the sunset, it reminds me back home when I would sit by the beach and watch the water and the sunset".

"Unfortunately we don't have the sea nor the beach here, just a smaller-nyana lake but the sunset is for real". That brought some laughter as we settled down, ready to make our order.

"The waiter will be here to take your orders soon, please do enjoy the rest of your evening and Kopano, hope to see you here again", said Moraba as he got ready to leave.

"You got it", Kopano replied.

"So, now that the owner is gone, what do you think of the place?" I asked as I flipped through the menu even though I already knew what I wanted. There was no reply from Kopano, and as I lifted my head, I found him looking intently outside. Though there were no tears in his eyes, I could see an element of sadness all over his face. His mind was somewhere else. I looked at him for a few seconds, and he didn't even notice that. It was only when I waved my hand to his face that he came back.

"Sorry about that, I guess I just got caught up in the moment".

"Yeah, I saw that, are you okay though?".

"Long story but I'm fine".

"Wana talk about it?"

"Sure, but after we ordered something".

I continued to wonder what the view had triggered on his mind. The night was still young, which means there was still ample time for him to tell me all about it.

"This is such a beautiful place, thanks for bringing me here".

"It was the least I could do, especially after you bailed me out yesterday. I love this place, and I always come here whenever I wanna sit and relax in a peaceful and quiet environment.

The waiter came, and we placed our orders.

As soon as we finished placing our orders, I was quick to ask the one question I have been dying to ask. Up till now, the only bit I knew about this guy I was sitting with was that he was elegant, charming and someone just lovely to be around, yeah, there I said it. But my defence senses were still on high alert, and I wanted more. "You know you are still a closed book to me. Please tell me a bit more about yourself, who exactly is Kopano?"

"Oh gosh, this feels like an interview, and I haven't done one of those in a long time. So I'm a little rusty, please bear with me".

"Oh please..."

"You already know my name and that I'm from Stellenbosch. I have one sister, my little sister Lerato, who means the world to me, and eeeeh...", he looked toward the sunset again, and I saw the sad face, the same sad face I saw earlier.

"What's wrong?"

"I only have my sister. Our parents died while we were very young. I was 8; she was seven".

"Oh no, I'm so sorry. What happened? If you don't mind me asking that is?"

"Car accident".

"I'm so sorry. We don't have to talk about this you know, let's change the topic."

"No, it's okay. The only memory I have of them was school holidays visit to the coast. We will spend the day playing along the beach, but in the evening, we had this spot that my dad always took us to. We will sit there and watch the sunset across the ocean. It was always the most amazing sight for me. To this day, whenever I watch the sunset across any volume of water, it reminds me of him. I can see his smiling face, telling us all his made-up stories that we always believed. He was a very humorous man".

"Hmmm, I see where you got that side of yours from...hahahahaha"

"Believe you me; I'm nowhere close to him. He was a natural".

"Maybe you should let me be the judge".

"That's a bit dangerous because you don't really know me...Anyway, my aunt took us in, and we became like her kids. But our bond grew stronger, sometimes people mistaking us for twins. That's how close we were and still are. We even went to the same varsity. She was just a year behind me, always has been from childhood".

“If your sister is anywhere close to being like you, then I sure would like to meet her”.

“Don’t worry, you will. She’s going to ask me who helped me decorate the house and you have to be there to answer for yourself”.

“I hope I meet her standards”.

"You will, I know we will. We are a team, right?"

"Yeah, for sure. And this travelling thing?"

"I love travelling. My company specialises in mergers and acquisitions. I can do everything from our head office and maybe only fly in for meetings and so forth, but I always opt to set up an office on the client site. That way I get involved daily. For that, clients like it, and I also like it because it enables me to travel and meet lovely people, like I did here".

He certainly caught me off guard with that one, and it was my turn to look away and smile.

It wasn’t long before it was my turn to be put on the hot seat. My life was pretty simple one anyhow. Overall though, we had the most fantastic night, to say the least. When it was time to leave, I wished the night could just carry on. He offered to pay the bill, but I refused, reminding him that the reason we were there was because I owed him for having paid my bus fare. He conceded defeat on that but then said something that ensured a second date for us. I can call this a date, right? Because it certainly felt more like one, and the best one I had had in a long time. He exuded honesty in his voice.

"I have never gone out with a lady, and they pay. It just doesn’t sound right, and certainly, my sister won't approve of it either. But then again I always keep my promises, and in this case I promised to let you buy me coffee so that I can keep my promise. However, you have to allow me to fix this. Can I take you out for dinner sometime next week?"

There was no way I could say no to his request, not after the great night I had. So I agreed. He also finally asked for my number, a request to which I gladly handed him my business card. We eventually left and headed to our respective places, him back to his hotel, and me to my apartment. Sindi was going to call me if I didn’t call her. She wanted a lowdown of what went on tonight. I tried to think of ways to put it in such a way that I will downplay the whole thing, but I knew my excitement was just going to give it all away. While I was busy thinking of all that, little did I know of what awaited me at the office the next day. It was just I don’t know how to explain it. It will bring me to tears.

Although I didn’t like waking up early that much, on some days I still managed to wake up so early such that everyone at the office will be surprised. Today was one of those. Not that I just woke up voluntarily so though, nope, not at all. I was woken up by a phone call at 5 in the morning; it was one of many. Amid everything happening, I had forgotten that it was my birthday. Sindi was the first one to call. She was the only brave one to call me at 5, others called a bit later. But once she had called, all

my sleep was gone. Not that I minded though, Sindi was one of the best singer friends I had, and so I always looked forward to hearing her sing for me on my birthday. Ever since we became friends, year in and out she will call me to sing for me on my birthday. I will listen, and at the end of the call I will say "You are very talented, I'd like to give you a chance and see how far you can go, so it's a yes from me. Come and get your golden ticket and will see you in Sun City". This was me mimicking what judges on a local musical talent show called Idols will usually say. Today I did the same, and as always, we laughed about it. But other than that, I expected my day to be the same, with nothing else special.

When I grew up, birthdays were quite a big deal for me. My parents used to pull all stops. Since my childhood, for as long as I can remember, they always made sure they spend some time with me on my birthday. Whether it be a quick breakfast or short lunch, or even them just passing by the office to drop me a gift or home-cooked meal, they always made it a point to see me on my birthday. I was their only child after all, and so they pulled all stops. For 25 years they were at it, including the big surprise party they threw me for my 25th. But this year I knew it was going to be different. That was probably one of the thoughts that made me not look forward to my birthday. Earlier in the year, my parents told me they were separated and heading for a divorce. I was distraught. I grew up watching them love each other so closely such that even when I got hurt multiple times in the name of love, watching them together made me to still believe in true love. That kept me going, and I always believed that one day I would find someone and we stay together for years, just like they did. So you can imagine what their breakup did to me. It was probably one of the reasons I remained single after my last failed relationship. My faith in love was lost. And even though Kopano seemed to have been pressing the right buttons, still I wasn't so sure. I mean upon hearing the news about my parents, I did everything I could to try and keep them together, I booked them for counselling, I tricked them into surprise evening dinners together, picnics and many other gimmicks but nope.

Not only did all my attempts fail, but they all ended with disastrous results. The way the two fought was something I couldn't comprehend, especially when I knew how I grew up seeing the way they loved each other. I concluded that if they could just pack up and go their separate ways like that, after all the love and affection they had for each other, what hope was then there for us?

The office was almost empty when I arrived. Our secretary, an early bird she always had been, was already there when I got to the office. She was shocked to see me arrive that early. After our greetings, she reached into her desk, pulled out specially designed and signed birthday card and handed it over to me. It was our office tradition to do that. Each staff member will write what they wish for you on your birthday. The messages were often hilarious, and so I looked forward to reading all of them. First though I headed to the kitchen to make some strong coffee. I needed some wake me up drink, and I figured a strong coffee would do.

Just as I was approaching the kitchen, I heard the secretary shouting for me from behind.

"Do you want some coffee or tea? Today is your special day, and I can make it for you", said the secretary. I stood there a bit baffled. I had never gotten such an offer before, but then again, I couldn't object.

It was almost as if she didn't want me going into the kitchen. I stopped, smiled at her and turned back to head for my desk. I was eager to read the card and my emails anyways, I thought. "Thanks, Diana, I feel so special. One strong coffee, two sugars and warm milk thanks", I said.

"Great, coming right away. You just go to your desk and wait there".

I went to my desk still wondering. I thought I heard some voices, but I ignored that. A few minutes later the secretary appeared with my coffee. I was still reading my card and incoming messages, and so I carried on with that.

It was almost 30 minutes later when suddenly our secretary reappeared and told me someone was here to see me. I checked my diary and realised that my next appointment was not due until around 9 am. I asked her who it was but just told me to go to the kitchen. A couple of my colleagues had already arrived as I headed to the kitchen. As I entered the kitchen, I couldn't believe what I saw. For a few seconds I stood frozen. I couldn't believe what my eyes were showing me. Tears began going down my cheeks as I just stood there, too emotional to even say a word.

The sight in front of me was one I hadn't seen in a very long time, one I had longed for, for so long, and one I was to live to cherish for many years to come. They stood on the corner in each other's arms, enjoying a quiet, peaceful moment that they sealed with random kisses. Completely lost in each other's company, they hadn't even noticed that I just arrived in the kitchen. Seeing my parents standing there like newlyweds, new love birds or some lovers from a romantic movie, restored a lot of faith in love for me. I just stood there in awe of what I was seeing, unable to even utter a word. Then without even thinking about it, I uttered the words I always spoke whenever I would find them at home having an intimate moment. "Would you like me to get you a room?" This startled them, and my dad was the first to respond, "Hey girlie, you are here", good morning and happy birthday.

"I told you dad I'm now older than that name; please tell him, mom."

But instead of taking my side, my mom made it worse. "Oh puntsu puntsu, look at you, a princess fit for a birthday celebration bash".

"Oh please mom".

"In our eyes, you shall always remain our little girl. You might have grown in years, but the age gap between you and us has remained constant", said my dad.

"Besides, kid, we brought you into this world, and we can take you out", my mom added. Those, by the way, were my late granny's favourite words.

I approached them, and we had a long group hug even as they continued to wish me a happy birthday. Then my dad, like his usual self, began to pray and speak blessings over my life right there and then. It was one beautiful family moment; one I had thought I would never see the rest of my life. I had done all I could to keep them together like I already said. I even prayed and fasted but saw no immediate results. I began to understand right there and then, how vital patience with God is, once

we have prayed for something. He goes to work, and while we may not see the results immediately, they are still coming.

The traditional happy birthday wishes followed that moment. It was the sweetest moment for me yet. And all this time I couldn't wait for them to finish and for me to thus get a chance to ask them what happened. Finally the pleasantries were over, and I got a chance to ask the all-important question I had been dying to ask: "The last time I saw you, you couldn't even stand together in the same room, but today you are inseparable?" They looked at each other, smiled, and my dad said "Let's discuss that over breakfast. We spoke to your boss, and your 9 am appointment has been moved; hence we can have you for the morning. We will tell you all about it over food".

For breakfast with my folks on my birthday, I didn't even hesitate at all—no second thoughts. I rushed to pick up my handbag, and off we went. We weren't going far, the restaurant was in the same building, just on the rooftop. Within minutes we sat there, ready to be served. "Here we are now; please tell me your amazing love story".

Then my dad led the conversation again. "We had this foolish idea that we could just pack our bags and go our separate ways."

"Yes, we thought separation and then divorce would be the best way to go", my mom chirped in.

"I guess we let our pride get our way, and we also let our guard down on our communication with each other", my dad added.

"But after some time apart, we realised how miserable we were, how our differences were so small as compared to our being away from each other", said my mom.

"And upon that realisation, getting back together was a no brainer. And that being apart has really helped bring us together even more closer. We no longer take each other for granted."

"Yes babes, we don't", added my mom as she leaned over to kiss my dad.

I stood there looking at them, and I thought this was the greatest birthday gift I could ever receive. My faith in true love was indeed restored to the highest level. We spend the rest of the morning together before we parted, them heading home while I went back to my office.

Did I mention that I work for a tiny department in our company? As such, we all know each other. Our offices occupy just a portion of one of the floors of the main building in the office park next to the train station. Because of the small nature of our team, we are also a tightly knitted family, almost knowing everything about each other's personal lives, although once in a while we do get hit by surprises. Today was one of those days where employees got caught by surprise about one of us over something they didn't know or see coming. That employee was me. What complicated it a bit was that I was also surprised.

Everyone knew of my troubles in dating land and how I had vowed to not venture into that territory in a while, a very long while as I liked putting it. Nobody knew about Kopano, since I had only met him two days earlier, so you can imagine my surprise when I walked back into the office after my breakfast with my parents and our secretary at the front door asked me who Kopano is? I was going through our mailbox when she asked me that. For a second I froze, even dropping the two letters I had already picked up from the tray.

"Who is who?" I asked as if I hadn't heard what she said before.

"I said who is.....", she was about to rephrase the question when the phone on her desk started ringing and she answered it. I, on the other hand, went back to checking the mail, an exercise that became a lot harder because my mind was running wild, trying to figure out how on earth our secretary came to know about Kopano. I finished checking my letters and she was still on the phone. I decided to wait for her to finish so that I can get her to answer my question. I had no intention of letting her off the hook just like that.

"Oh there you are", was the voice of one of our colleagues who appeared out of nowhere, "I thought I heard your voice but was wondering why you are not coming through. Come on girl; everyone is waiting for you".

Now that got me worried. I couldn't exactly say to her I'm still waiting to ask the secretary who is Kopano, because then she will also wanna know who he is. So at that, my secretary was off the hook, for now.

I followed my colleague into our open-plan office space. Something seemed amiss. Everyone paused to look at me as I greeted and walked past. You know that look that suggests everyone else knows something that you don't? I had already been by the office earlier, and so they couldn't have thrown me a surprise party. But certainly something seemed amiss. Everyone looked at me with a smile before getting back to their work, even those I saw earlier before going for breakfast, now looked at me as if something else had changed. It was as if they were saying we know what you did last night.

We continued walking with my colleague, who was for some odd reason, very quiet and not saying much. Our offices are towards the left corner of the office space, so it's quite a walk to get there, and today it seemed even longer. Eventually, I couldn't hold myself anymore.

"What's going on?" I sheepishly asked my colleague.

If I was confused up till that stage, then her answer threw me deeper into confusion land.

"No, you gotta tell us what's going on", was her short and straightforward reply.

I gave up asking, and luckily we were about to reach our desks, and then I saw them, a bunch of neatly arranged roses on my table. They most certainly weren't here earlier and so whoever brought them must have done it while I was out for breakfast. I wondered who could they be coming from. After all, Kopano didn't have my work address, unless he has seriously researched me. My colleague who

was leading the way had also already said I should give them an explanation, and so she clearly had no idea what was going on or who they came from. Deep down inside me though, amidst all the confusion, I was thrilled. I already told you how much a sucker for flowers I am, so this really brightened my mood, especially after the unforgettable evening I had had the previous day.

I walked closer to my desk, still in deep thoughts, wondering what was going on. I hadn't even noticed that most of my colleagues had left their desks and were beginning to gather behind me. There was a little note attached, and I quickly opened it to read it. I could tell that someone had already opened it before. It was at this stage that I turned around to find all my colleagues around me. "You guys read this?" I asked, not expecting an honest answer. They all just shrugged their shoulders, not uttering a single word.

I proceeded to read the message with a smile. It simply read: "I got worried that the single rose I gave you yesterday might be lonely, so I send some more to keep it company. And since now I know you love flowers, I know they will all be taken care of. When my company first suggested I take this assignment, I wasn't keen. I tried hard to refuse, but in the end, they won. But if I had known that coming here meant I was going to meet someone like you, then I'd have jumped at the assignment. . . .:-). Anyways, take care and hope to see you soon. Kopano. PS: I hope Express Flowers do deliver these before you get to the office, they promised to".

By the time I finished reading the message and smelling the flowers as well, I couldn't hide my smile and joy from all my colleagues anymore. And then they were all on me, taking turns to ask me questions about who this Kopano is and how come they never heard of him till now. "How long has this been going on?" they asked. I tried to explain that I barely knew Kopano and that I met him two days ago, but they will hear none of it. It will be another two weeks and an intervention by my friend Sindi before they could believe my story.

As soon as the dust had settled down and everyone had gone back to their desks, everything began to sink in. I still couldn't figure out how Kopano got hold of my work address though. He didn't even have any of my friend's contacts, so no one could have assisted him. Either way, my day was made. I also didn't need to interrogate our receptionist anymore; the flowers had explained everything. My emotions were certainly having the better of me, as I was almost in tears. Finally, I regained my composure and was just pondering on sending him a thank you message when he called.

"Hey you, just when I'm about to send you a thank you message for the lovely flowers."

"Oh, so they did deliver them I see. I was a bit worried because I only ordered them late last night, but they say they are Express delivery, so I guess they proved to be. Do you like the flowers though?"

"Like them? I love them; they are so beautiful. Thank you Mr Kopano, you are one of a kind I must say".

"I can only try..."

"You doing very well."

“Thanks”

“Although you got me in trouble with the whole office. They all want to know who you are”

“I can always pop in and let you introduce me...”

“I know you might do that. You are so full of tricks. And how did you know my work address anyway?”

He started by laughing and said, "I been waiting for that one".

"Yes, so please answer me, mister..."

“Last night I asked for your phone number....”

“And I gave you my business card, which has my office address on it. Why didn’t I think of that”?

"Frankly, from the time I gave you the one rose, and you told me how much you loved flowers, I started thinking about how to get some to you. I thought I would bring them to the bus stop but when you gave me your card, and I saw the address...."

“I remember seeing you smile when I handed you the card..”

"Yeah, I was just happy, thrilled to be precise."

“This is good though, thanks once again. Plus it’s my birthday and so this just added to making my day”.

“Oh my, wow, why didn’t you tell me? Happy Birthday”.

“Thanks. I guess I just forgot to mention it. Besides, I have only known you for like what? Less than two days?”, this I said while continuing to smile deep inside.

"You have a point. Will wait for our second date to uncover all the additional information about you. I hope you are not married with kids?"

“Hahahahahaha, you know I’m not hau Kopano."

"Just checking. I wonder why not, but don't answer that for now, leave it for our second date."

This I suspected was his way of reminding me again and again that we had a second date pending.

Our chat soon ended, and it was time to get back to work.

Chapter 3

Saturday was the day on which Kopano had requested that I come to help him unpack and organize his new place since his sister wasn't going to be around this time to help him as she usually does. I on the other hand, recruited Sindi to come with. I more like forced her to come along. After lots of protesting, I reminded her that she still owed me a favour, that settled it, and she agreed to come. Kopano had already warned me not to come dressed formally because we were going to be doing lots of work, "wear your cleaning clothes", was his instruction. It was a bit of a battle for me because, on the one hand, I still needed to look good in his presence, yes, that mattered for some reasons.

On the other hand, I needed to obey his memo. So finding the balance was a bit of a struggle. That was until Sindi arrived, finding me not yet ready. She quickly went through the wardrobe and pulled out a pair of jeans and a matching top. They just looked perfect with my red sneakers. I don't know how she does it, but Sindi has a way to just figure these things out. To complete my look, I put on a matching cap. We were going to walk in the sun from my complex to his anyway, so a hat was a requirement.

Our preparations were done, and so we started the short walk to his complex.

"Do you think he's gonna be having some fine looking guys there?" Sindi asked me, catching me off guard. My mind was fixated on Kopano and on how the afternoon was going to be. I hadn't even bothered to ask him whether there will be other people there apart from us".

"I don't know yazi. I didn't ask him. Should I call him now to find out?" I teased her.

"It's obvious you were only thinking for yourself and didn't think of me. Now I'm going to be your spectator there. This is just not right. Imagine me being a spare wheel", she retorted.

"Relax, there's nothing like that. This is not a date, its work."

"Yeah right, then why were you battling to find something to wear? You literally spend hours in front of that mirror".

She had me cornered right there. While admittedly it wasn't a date, clearly I was intent on making an impression on Kopano. And while busy doing that, my friend Sindi could get left out.

"Don't you worry my friend, I got your back. You will be just fine. And who knows, you may find that he's got a hot friend for you", we both laughed at that idea. It was my lame excuse out of desperation. Trying to make sure Sindi doesn't decide to bail out. Knowing her, she was quite capable.

The moving truck was by the parking lot when we arrived at Kopano's complex. I immediately assumed that it was the one moving him in. It seemed empty though. As we got closer, the driver appeared still carrying a small file in his hand. He summoned the crew, and they all left.

"It means they have already unpacked. This must have been quick because it is still early", I commended.

We entered the building and headed straight to the security checkpoint. They will have to call Kopano so that he can open for us to come in. That wouldn't be a problem because he was expecting us anyway. As we got closer to the security, I realized that he's someone I know. He was the same old man that worked in our complex a few months earlier, Ntate Modika. He was the friendliest security guy I have ever known. He liked me and often referred to me as her adopted granddaughter. Upon seeing me, he beamed with a smile. We greeted each other, and I told him where we were going. In his true comedian style, he called Kopano and said "man, you must be a true player. You haven't even finished moving in, and you already have two beautiful women asking to come to see you. Shall I let them in, or should I refuse them entry?".

"I see you haven't lost your sense of humour?" I teased him as soon as he put down the phone.

"Laughter is the best medicine. If you wanna live as long as I have, into old age, then you got to laugh a whole lot in your life". That by itself got us laughing.

Minutes later we had finished signing in and were in the lift to the third floor, where Kopano stayed.

He was already waiting for us on the corridor when we reached the third floor. Ntate Modika had let us in without Kopano having to come to the reception. This he did because he knew me, and also Kopano had said it was okay. He began smiling as soon as he saw us come out of the lift. He waved at us as if we hadn't seen him already.

"I stay right at the end of this passage, the last apartment. The balcony gives me a great view, come you going to love it", these were his first words as soon as we reached him.

"Hello KP", I said, reminding him that we haven't greeted each other as yet.

"Oh, where are my manners, I guess I'm just too happy to see you guys".

"This is my friend Sindi, the one I told you about. Sindi, this is Kopano".

"Oh yes, the famous Sindi. Nice to meet you. They told me so much about you. I feel like we already met".

They greeted each other formally, exchanging some pleasantries as we headed for KP's apartment. Oh yes, I called him KP. Apparently, that's what most of his friends called him. I like the shortened version of his name.

"I saw the moving truck leaving, was it the one bringing your stuff?", I asked as we neared the door.

“Yes, I forgot to tell you that I get my apartment already furnished and all in place. I only bring my personal stuff and décor material. And that’s where I hope you guys will use your creative flair to help me. Oh and the kitchen utensils too. I always battle with the kitchen. The only thing I know for sure where to put are the eating utensils, your forks and knives...the drawer”. We laughed.

“Don’t worry, that’s why we are here”, Sindi pitched in, “We will organize your apartment in true Jozi style”.

The door to his apartment was wide open, and we walked in. Overall the apartment was already neatly organized. It was in a better state than what we came anticipating. Several clearly marked boxes sat stacked up on every available open space. Surprisingly the furniture looked new, and I was about to ask when Sindi beat me to it.

“Is this a new apartment? All the furniture looks new”, asked Sindi.

"The apartment no, but the furniture yes. We select our choice of an apartment; then we submit our furniture requirements to our company. They use one of our inhouse suppliers to supply what we asked for, and the client foots the bill."

“Really? You guys live large mos”, I said without having given it much thought, “and you are only here for a short period?”

“Yes it's true, but remember the work that we do is very intensive. Sometimes one goes for hours without sleep. Hence the apartment where one stays is very important. I bring most personal stuff to make sure I feel home. I choose the furniture to go with those. But enough about that, let’s get to work. All the boxes are clearly marked. Feel free to open anything and suggest how to decorate this place. It’s all in your hands. I shall get the braai meat ready as well”.

The rest of the afternoon was greatly spent. I liked the way Sindi got along with KP. The work was not intensive but required lots of thinking, especially since myself and Sindi often disagreed on how to décor the place. But in the end, we did a great job, and even Kopano hinted that his sister would be happy to put a stamp of approval on the work we did. That was very important for me.

I was beginning to like him, and his character just made him different from every other guy I ever met. I at times imagined myself in his arms, and that thought always came with a safe feeling. One that said you could spend the rest of your life with this guy.

Oh, and his braai, he wasn’t lying about it. He prepared for us the best braai I ever had. And before you say I’m biased, let me indicate that it was Sindi who said that and I agreed. For a while, we even forgot about our figures as we went for seconds and thirds. That's how tasty it was.

Overall, I couldn’t have thought of any better way to spend my Saturday. I also became so familiar with the apartment (*phela it even had my signature décor akere*), such that I will always feel home in weeks to come whenever I came to visit.

The evening eventually came, and we bid KP goodbye, but that was not before he asked me to join him for a movie the following day, that is the Sunday afternoon. I agreed but only after I went to church. At that point, he asked me if he could accompany me to church. "I have been here not for long, and I haven't found a church. So I would like to come to visit yours if you don't mind?"

I agreed, and in my heart I thought wow, he even goes to church, and I couldn't stop thanking God for this great guy. I wondered whether he had any interest in me because I was so into him it's not funny. I kept on trying to remind myself to play it safe, worried that he might break my heart in the end. But unfortunately, my heart wasn't cooperating; it just wanted to give its whole self to him. So unfair of it because when things go wrong, I then have to nurse it back to a state of happiness. Everything in my life will feel the impact. Nevertheless, the moment now was a great one, and I guess I was right to just carry on to celebrate it.

Chapter 4

Sunday morning came, and I got up early to get ready for church. Today was not like any other Sunday because KP was joining me to go to church. He had already requested that we go for lunch after church, and I had agreed. As much as I was happy to have him come with me to church, I was equally worried. I just wasn't ready for the barrage of questions I already anticipated from my church mates. I have had so many run-ins with them in the past such that I really just went to church and thereafter went straight home. Surprisingly so, my friends outside of church were much friendlier than my church ones.

Nevertheless, I had always told myself that I wasn't there for them. Thus it didn't matter what they went saying or doing. I wished it were different, but I had also learnt to live with the status quo. My focus was on God, serving wholeheartedly and caring less about what everybody else did or said. I wasn't perfect, but I was striving to live right. At times, I was left feeling as if I wasn't getting much love from church people, but then like I said, my focus was not on them anyway.

My phone received a message and I quickly went to check. It was from KP, asking whether I was ready for him to come to collect me. We were going to drive in his car. The roads were less busy on weekends and thus driving wasn't a bore. During the week it was always best to use the bus. With its dedicated lanes, it meant getting to one's destination quicker than if one was driving. The traffic could come to a standstill on some days. Hence I preferred to take my book, sit on the bus and read, letting the driver worry with navigating us to our final destinations. But today was different, the roads were open, and the busses were few anyways.

After reading the message, I panicked because I was far from being ready. It was still before seven and church didn't start till 10 am. I clearly remembered telling him the time. So why would he text me so early? I replied and said no I wasn't ready, far from being ready actually, and then reminded him that it was not yet 7 am, and that church was only set to start at 10 am. I added that it was less than fifteen minutes drive away. Then he sent back the most unexpected reply: "I know church starts at 10 am, and I know this is too early, and there is no way you could even be close to being ready. However, I wanted an excuse just to text you and say something, and asking whether you are ready was the best excuse I could use". Next to the message was a hidden face emoticon. From panicking, I suddenly found myself smiling all by myself. I didn't even know how to reply to his text.

I jokingly send back a message saying "missing me that much hey?"

Within a few seconds, my phone blinked with the response: "Was it that obvious?"

If I thought the previous message was hard to reply to, then clearly I hadn't seen nothing yet. This one got me stumped for sure. I didn't know how to respond further. He most certainly had gotten me charmed. So I just send back some smiley faces with the text, "Let me go get ready so that I don't delay you when you get here".

“Yes yes yes, see you later ke” was his short and sweet response. He will later tell me how much he found himself smiling alone that morning before hitting the shower. “I made his day”, he will later say.

I stood staring at the phone for the next few seconds, wondering what had just happened. That was just the beginning of my eventful morning. Selecting what to wear followed next. That proved a mountain to climb. I so wished Sindi had been around to assist. After trying several outfits, I lay back on my bed, defeated, not knowing what to wear and slowly becoming late every passing second. I then remembered a dress I bought earlier for a friend's wedding. I looked good in it the last time I fitted it, and with the wedding still a good three weeks away, I decided that will be the dress to wear." I can always replace it later on", I told myself. I headed back to the closet, pulled it out, checked it on me in the mirror before even putting it on, and I immediately saw myself as a stunning princess. I had to go all out, I thought. A few minutes later, I had it on, looked at myself in the mirror, and I gave myself a five-star rating or approval, if there ever were such. The timing must have been perfect because at the very time, KP sent me a message saying he's leaving his apartment and is coming through.

I'm driving a black Porsche SUV he said. That worried me. Is he a flashy someone? Is he perhaps a womanizer? Using his cars and flashy lifestyle, (and his natural charms), to lure girls into his life? All these thoughts flooding my mind suddenly dampened my mood. My smile was gone; I even felt like changing the dress I was wearing. I mean why go through all this trouble for a womanizer. Do I even want to be with this man? I don't think so. Fortunately or unfortunately there was no longer ample time to change the dress, so I headed downstairs to meet up with him.

He was already there when I arrived. He donned a nice grey suit, with a matching shirt and tie. He had really cleaned up, and the shades he wore and the timepiece just put him in a class of his own. For a while, looking at how great he looked, I was happy I wore the dress I chose. When he saw me appear, he beamed with a smile. He came close to meet me halfway, complimented me on my looks, held my hand and without me realizing it, led me to turn around as if to show off the dress. I don't know how he did that and got me to acting precisely the way he anticipated. We both just laughed even as he gave me a hug to complement or complete the greeting. I had never been that close to him, and I must also add that he smelled good. We proceeded to his car and where he promptly opened the door for me. It also was my first time riding in a Porsche, a fact I immediately shared with him as I complimented him on his great ride.

“I love it too thanks. I have always been a big fan of SUV's. But this one is not mine. It's a company car. I wish it were mine though, but one day maybe I will get to own one too”, he responded.

“So you don't own this car? Your company must be pretty rich. The way they take care of you from the apartment, then now the car. What else?”

“A sucking lifestyle, that's what else”.

“What do you mean?”

"Making me always be on the road. It's even tougher for the others. At least I don't have a family yet."

"And why is that? You seem like a great guy; you got a great career going. How come you still not married? "

"Perhaps I'm overqualified?"

"Or maybe you have a secret wife and kids back home?"

"No ways. I think I just never been lucky with love hey. I'm like single single....".

"You are what? What does that even mean?"

"It means not only am I single; I don't even have a girlfriend."

"Really, why do I still find that hard to believe?"

"I'm being for real. What about you? Got anyone special in your life?"

"Ah, not really hey...I..."

"Not really? What do you mean by that?"

"You know what, let's save that for lunch shall we? For now, we have a church service to go to." This I said to avoid answering his question. As much as I was so much into him, I still wanted to leave him guessing about me. I didn't want to appear all desperate. The truth, however, is that, if he asked me to marry him at that very time, I'm afraid I might have said yes.

"Okay, you win for now, but don't think I will forget. And I hope there isn't a jealous boyfriend waiting for you at church. You see, I'm not the fighting type. I will just either run as fast as I can, or call the police". We laughed at the latter.

"Okay, where are we going?"

"To church hau...duh?"

"Yes, to church, but where is this church? I'm new here remember?"

"Oh yes of course, I forgot. Sorry about that. Let me punch the coordinates into your GPS, will be easier that way, lest I make you turn right where you supposed to turn left. I'm that bad with directions". I felt a lil embarrassed but little did I know I was about to be even more embarrassed.

He started the car then asked me for the coordinates to church; he then proceeded to punch them in. After the GPS calculated the road and gave the time estimate to church, he looked at me and said, well, looks like we are going to arrive at church still with a whole thirty minutes to spare, let me steal five minutes of it. Before I could ask for an explanation, he reached into the glove compartment and pulled out a small box. At this moment I was too anxious, wondering what was happening.

"Listen, I didn't know it was your birthday the other day, and I never got to get you anything. You have been the best friend I have had ever since arriving in this city. You have done so much for me. It's only fair that I do something in return. So here's a little something to say thank you and happy belated birthday." At that he handed me the small carefully wrapped box.

"But you didn't have to. I mean I..."

"Yes I did. Now go on, open it. I hope you like it, but if not, we can always return it and get you something you like. It's hard to buy a gift for someone you don't really know hey".

I hastily opened the box and was wowed. It was my most favourite neck bracelet, one I secretly wanted to have but couldn't afford for a while. Now, either he was very lucky, which I doubted, or he had some help. "It's so beautiful; I love it, thank you", I reached over to give him another hug. He had undoubtedly just made my day, and the day hadn't started much yet.

"I'm glad you like it hey", this he said while smiling. You know that smile that said, "I knew all along you were gonna like it".

"Something tells me you had some sort of help in getting me this. It's almost as if you knew exactly what I wanted", I said this looking at him straight in the eye. He had nowhere to hide.

He looked away, laughed a bit and said: "please don't make tell a white lie on Sunday morning, and just before we go to church nogal".

"I need a confession mister", I stood my ground.

"I didn't think you were going to find out so early, but well yeah, after battling on what to get you, I did get some help. Yesterday during the braai, your friend Sindi did give me a small tip".

"I knew it. You two.."

"I hope I didn't get her into any trouble?"

"On the contrary no. She did well, I must say".

"Great. Now turn around, let me help you put it on".

Like a princess, I turned around to allow him to help me put on the bracelet. But then he said something that got me frozen for a second or two.

"Eh, will it be okay if I also remove the price tag on your dress?"

In all the hurry this morning, pulling out a new dress, I forgot to remove the price tag. I regretted why I didn't remove it the very day I bought the dress, like I usually do. I felt so embarrassed I didn't even know what to say.

But then he made me feel a whole lot better when he said luckily I still have the scissor that I used to remove my jacket price tag earlier, guess it will come in handy for you as well. He was holding them both in his hand, the scissor and the price tag. My embarrassment turned into laughter, to which he joined in.

“Yes please remove it before everyone else sees it. You are a lifesaver”, I said still laughing.

After all the eventful start to our morning, we eventually made it to church, arriving still on time before the service started.

The service was awesome also. I got to learn that KP was both not a good dancer or singer, and was also somewhat shy amongst people. When they asked visitors to stand, he refused. I tried everything to get him to stand up, but he would have none of it. In the end, I decided not to make him uncomfortable, so I left it at that.

After two and a half hours, the church service ended, and we walked out. Luckily we didn’t bump into any of my church mates, which meant there were no lots of questions. I knew however that the following week I might get many questions, but then I had the whole week to work out and prepare answers, which meant I could relax. On the other hand, KP was very impressed with our church.

"Wow this was fun, I'm blessed out of my socks. Your church knows how to party in God's presence you know that", he said. "I should come here every Sunday".

Those words were exactly what I was afraid of. I still wasn’t sure how I would explain him to my church mates in his presence. But I wasn’t complaining either. I was just hoping he would not end up being like the others, leaving me all alone to become a laughing stock at church. Not that I cared what they would say or do, but sometimes these things get to you. Sometime you could end up leaving church not because God told you to, but because you just can’t stand the torment from your fellow church mates any longer. Instead of us loving each other, strengthening each other and supporting each other, we instead tend to tear each other down. It’s like we rejoice in each other’s downfall.

“You are more than welcome to come through hey”, I found myself saying that with a smile. Sure I was worried about my church mates, but I was also happy to can get to spend more time with him. By now I’m sure you can tell I was over heels in love with this guy. He was just doing everything right. He was almost too good to be true, and that often worried me a bit. Sindi also had similar sentiments, but she also said we need to give him the benefit of the doubt, and not give him a hard time, especially since he hadn’t given us a reason to. I kind of agreed but kept on being worried at the same time.

“Great then, for the next few months I’m here, I shall officially be a member of your church ke. For now though I’m starving. Let’s go for lunch”, he said.

And off we went. This time he told me that there is a place that he picked up online and would let his GPS take us there. I asked for the name, but he refused to say. "It's a surprise" was all he was prepared to say. I was too hungry to spend time arguing on that, so I obliged and went along, but not before I

said "Just don't steal me please. My father is a police officer; if you try anything, he will hunt you down with his big gun".

"I am so afraid", he laughed, "Don't worry, I do not harm people I like a lot".

I pretended I didn't hear that, but deep inside I smiled broadly.

We reached the stairs, going down to exit the church main entrance, and again, like a true gentleman he held my hand as we went down the stairs, and as we got to the parking lot, he gently opened the car door for me. Those were just simple little things, but they were the things that also mattered the most to me, that made a big difference. Little did I know he had something big in store for me, something that will catch me completely off guard.

The queue of cars leaving the church premises was already building up, and soon we also joined in. I wished we had come out earlier and avoided all the traffic. Somehow I didn't want many people catching a glimpse of me and KP because the stories that were going to come out of that...let's just say we do have lots of gossipers in our church.

Luckily the traffic was flowing, and soon we were outside the church gates and joining the main road. He pressed a few buttons, and the GPS voice came up, indicating we were 25 minutes from reaching our destination. I tried to ask him where we were heading to, but he just looked at me, smiled and said "I told you it's a surprise. Now if I tell you where we are going, that will spoil the whole surprise". And just like that, I was defeated. I tried to think of all the eating places I knew, but none of them was in the direction that we were heading. It's either we were lost, or I was being taken to a place I never been to before. How ironic that will be, a total stranger showing me my own neighbourhood. Needless to say that's precisely what happened.

We were about five minutes into the journey when he asked if he could play some music. "Yes, please", was my quick response.

I love music, mostly gospel music and RnB. If I were alone in my car, then I would have tuned in to Metro's Romantic repertoire, my favourite romantic jams on Sundays. But now I was a guest in someone else's car, and so I held back and hoped his taste of music would match mine.

"I usually stream my music from my online subscription service, but my data sim is currently blocked, and I don't have any CD's, so I'm afraid we are going to have to stick to radio. Let's hope the DJs have some great music for us" said KP as he fiddled with the radio. "Let's try this one".

At that, he tuned into Metro FM. I smiled deep inside because it's precisely just what I hoped for. And the song that they started playing, goodness, it was just amazing.

"I hope you don't mind listening to this type of music, especially just after such an amazing church sermon, but if so, then I can change the station?" remarked Kopano.

I was still lost in the melodious tune of John Legend's All of me, such that it took me a few seconds before it registered that KP just said something requiring a response. I snapped out of that small trance, and my first words were "What, what did you just say?"

"I was saying...wait, where's your mind at? You didn't hear what I just said?"

"Sorry. I love this song so much. If I were ever to get married, it would be my wedding song."

"Interesting" this he said with some hidden smile.

"What is it that you said earlier though?"

"I was saying I hope you don't mind listening to this type of music, especially just after church. Ke ska go ntsha ko moyeng...".

"You want to know a secret? I always listen to Metro every Sunday, from the morning before going to church till the evening".

"You kidding me? That's me also. Even though the music sometimes makes me miss someone I haven't met". That broke us into laughter.

As the GPS continued navigating us, we were now seemingly in the middle of nowhere. As much as I trusted KP, some uneasiness began forming inside of me. Although we had been following the GPS directions all along, still I was a little worried. I mean here we were, right in the middle of some hectic forest, and the GPS was saying we are a mere 2 kilometres from our destination. My worries were however laid to rest when I saw a road sign right ahead of us with the words "Mountain Top Restaurant". I had heard of it before but I just never been to it. Apparently, it's a great restaurant, set up on top of a mountain, with striking views. Sindi and her work colleagues had one of their work functions there, and she never stopped raving about it. I had thought of going at one stage, but my budget didn't allow me. And now here I was, about to experience it for the very first time, courtesy of someone I was meant to meet not so long ago when we first met. That thought itself made me laugh a bit inside. I couldn't hold the excitement any longer, and so I asked: "I saw the board said Mountain Top Restaurant, is that where we are going? Because that must be the only place within the next two kilometres radius?"

"What is your favourite dish?", asked KP, completely ignoring the question I just asked. I knew I must have been right and so I just laughed back at him, before responding that I love all sorts of food. "It's hard to pinpoint just one, and I'm not allergic to anything, as far as I know, so it's a question of any food, bring it on".

"That's good because I had to select a list of a few dishes as part of the booking I made. They needed that to work out my pre-booking fee estimate. But you are welcome to order anything else not on the list. Don't let the list limit you. This, after all can be taken as a delayed birthday celebration for you".

Our conversation was ended by our arrival at a huge entrance with security guards. After a brief interrogation about where we were going, they let us through, giving us clear instructions on where the restaurant was, where to park and some few brochures that detailed what other attractions the estate offered. We drove further a little while, and then the forest ended. We were greeted by a vast amount of space with some of the best views one could only dream of. The whole area was transformed into some sort of an amusement park. An artificial lake, surrounded by several fountains, was at the centre of it all. I was wowed. I now understood why Sindi made so much noise about the place. It was booming with many people, all going in various directions for various activities. I turned to look towards my left, and there it was, literally built on a mini mountain stood our very famous restaurant. They added a bit of class to it with a blue carpet leading directly from the parking lot to the entrance on the foot of the mountain. From there were a few steps that zig-zagged to the very top. While the view where we were was amazing already, I began thinking about what it must be like up there in that restaurant. It must be a marvel to watch.

"This is so beautiful. Thank you for bringing me here. You have just made my Sunday. Thank you, thank you, thank you", I found myself saying that, unable to hide my joy.

"It's the least I can do. You are my first real friend in this city, and you have already done so much for me. I had to do something in return".

"Still, you didn't have to. This has really been the best week of my year so far". I found myself becoming emotional when I thought of everything I had gone through, and now a total stranger had just come out of nowhere and was here bringing me so much joy.

We drove a little further, and a parking attendant was already at hand, showing us where to park. The majestic Porsche SUV made its last growl as it entered the parking lot to claim a spot where it will lay in wait while we enjoy the meal inside.

"Here we are. I hope you do like everything planned for us because if not, then this day will be a major let down", said KP.

"I'm already happy; I'm already satisfied. This is more than enough already. Nothing can top this".

"I'm happy to hear that. It helps ease the pressure."

We stepped out of the car and headed for the restaurant. Then KP said he needed to make one phone call to a friend who had recommended the place. He dialled their number, and the conversation was a short one, that we managed to find the area and are making our way to the restaurant. He finished and then turned to me again: "I have never been here before, so please pardon me if we get lost. But don't worry, I'm one man who asks for directions when lost".

"I can believe that, just like you did ask the first time we met".

"That day I had to. It seems like the only conversation I could have with you without your being mean to me."

"Oh gosh, this is so embarrassing, please don't remind me."

"Don't worry; look at how it all ended up being. Here we are together as great friends. As they say, it's not the beginning that matters, but the ending thereof, and our ending is nothing but the best". That left me smiling.

We started going up the stairs, and for some weird reasons, I missed one step and almost tripped. Although I regained my balance quickly, KP insisted from there on to hold my hand until the top of the stairs. "I can't afford your falling before the afternoon starts. We have so much to do, and your falling will spoil it all", were KP's words. Not that I minded his holding my hand anyway. I had come to enjoy that over and over again. He could hold my hand anytime, even down the aisle. Okay, that's a bit farfetched but hey, to be honest, most times he held my hand, a thought of him doing that after we exchanged vows did cross my mind. A girl is allowed to dream, right?

"Welcome to Mountain Top Restaurant, have you got a reservation? A table for two?" said the friendly waitress who rushed to us the minute we entered the restaurant area.

"Yes please, we got a reservation under Kopano, aka KP", responded Kopano.

That seemed to catch the waitress off guard because it was almost as if she froze for a few seconds before she then said, "Follow me, let's go verify your reservation and which table you have been allocated". She turned and we followed as instructed. We reached the end of the blue carpet, and there was a mini reception serviced by another waiter.

"Please check for me a reservation under Kopano aka KP", said the waitress to the waiter. The two looked at each other a bit for another few seconds before the gentleman started scrolling on his computer. After a moment of searching, he looked at us and said "I'm sorry, but I don't see your name on the list here. When did you do your booking?"

"Yesterday. Are you sure it's not there? Don't you want to check again?"

He obliged, did another quick scan through that really seemed like "I'm just doing this because you asked me, but I already searched, and your name is not here, so beat it".

"I'm sorry sir, there is nothing, and today we are fully booked.

"I know you are fully booked, but please check if there aren't any cancellations? My friend is new here in town, and I really want him to experience the finest places in town. It will be nice if we could dine here", I found myself chipping in even though uninvited to the conversation. The two looked at each other again as if more confused, then the lady said, well, let me go ask the manager, perhaps he can do something.

"Oh, thank you, that will be great", I responded.

At that, she disappeared to the back of the restaurant.

"You know what, I'm not sure how long this is going to take, and I have been needing to use a bathroom since we left the church. Would you mind if I go find one while we wait?" said KP.

"Please do go ahead, I shall wait". At that, the waiter pointed me to a seat that I would use while waiting. KP was directed to where the bathrooms are and off he went.

It must have been a good 5 to 10 minutes of waiting before the waitress returned, followed by another gentleman, whom I supposed must have been the manager. His face looked a bit familiar, but I couldn't tell where I knew him from. Perhaps he is a well-known businessman, and so I would have read about him in the papers, I concluded.

"Hello mam, sorry to have kept you waiting for so long. We have found something for you two and so if you could follow me. Where is your friend?"

"He went to the bathroom".

"It's okay; they will direct him to where you are sitting when he comes back. You can follow me to your table. It's in the VIP section as it's the only place we found a cancellation. You will love it".

Wow, from being without a table to sitting in a VIP section, I found myself thanking God quietly in my heart.

We were already about to enter the area that had a big door and the words VIP section when the manager got a phone call. He stopped to answer it, before asking the person to hold. He then turned to me and asked me to go through to the VIP area, and another waiter will show me to my seat. "Just push open the door and walk to the reception", this he said as he stepped aside to continue with his call.

I proceeded, opened the door and then I found a long passage with an arrow pointing that the VIP room is to the right. Thus it was another walk before I could reach this VIP Room. The passage wall was arrayed with lovely paintings, some of which were probably much older than I am. The ambience was terrific. The soft classical music that played softly along the corridor brought with it some soothing and relaxing tone that I cannot explain. Everything about the place was just classy nje.

I continued to walk towards the VIP room while keeping on looking behind, hoping I will see KP running towards me. Honestly speaking, I was a little bit nervous. I took another look at what I was wearing, wondering whether it was good enough for a VIP area. My nerves began having the better of me, the more I approached the closed VIP area door. "Why would they keep it closed?" I asked myself. Without any reasonable answer, I inched closer and closer to the door, realizing that there was no turning back. I hoped somehow a waiter or a waitress would open the door while I was still approaching, allowing me to have a sneak peek of the seating arrangement behind the closed door. None of that happened.

I opened the door to be greeted by an almost dark room. The only light was from a big screen projector on what seemed like a stage. As I stood there still wondering what to do next, my picture appeared on the screen with the words “Happy Birthday Once Again Nkele – from all of us”. I was still trying to make sense of it all when suddenly the lights inside the room all came on and a shout of “Surprise!!!!!!” Sindi was in front of everyone as she came to hug me. All our friends were there, some even from church. I couldn’t figure out how they managed to do it all behind my back. My mind was running wild, wondering where KP was, and whether he was part of all these. The venue, let me tell you about the venue. It was nicely decorated, the room lights remained dimmed, while the screen in front continued displaying a slide show of photos from the many memories we had shared with my friends. What shocked me was to see some of the pictures that were from a few minutes ago. They were pictures of me and KP walking in. How did they do that? I kept on asking myself. KP will have to explain because I was pretty sure he had something to do with it. But he was still nowhere to be found.

The room wasn’t too big, very intimate if I can put it that way. On the far corner was a small jazz band that began playing as soon as Sindi requested everyone to go to their seats. I wasn’t sure where to sit, so I just stood there waiting for Sindi to direct me where to sit. While everyone sat down, I noticed one person still standing; he was holding a bouquet of flowers in his hand, staring right at me. For a while I couldn't recognize who it was because where he was standing, the light wasn't too bright. Then he started talking, and I recognized the voice. All along I thought he was in the bathroom; meanwhile he was busy changing into another set of clothes and planning to ambush me with the others. He called me to join him at the table where he was. There were three other chairs and I wondered who the other two were for. I walked over to him, accepted the flowers with a smile, before whispering into his ear “I can’t believe you did this to me, I’m gonna get you for this”. He simply smiled, before pulling out a chair for me to sit down.

Sindi returned and headed straight to our table, followed by a familiar face, a face I had seen just a few minutes earlier. Yes, the “restaurant manager”.

“Meet my colleague from work, Musa," said Sindi as she got to the table.

I looked at his face again, and the familiarity from earlier returned, then I remembered. This must be the Musa that Sindi often talks about. I had seen him from their work photos, hence the familiarity when I first saw him earlier.

“Hi, I’m Nkele”, I extended my hand to greet him.

"Musa is my name."

"You not the restaurant manager, are you?"

Everyone broke into laughter upon my asking that question.

"Between you and me, I'm still the manager."

"When you first appeared, I thought I knew you from somewhere."

"We debated this a lot during the planning. I was worried you might recognize Musa and the whole surprise be ruined. I'm glad you didn't recognize him", said Sindi.

Turning to look at KP, it was now my turn to grill him. "I can't believe you were also in on this. I didn't even suspect a thing."

"I was a last-minute addition. When Sindi called and said all I had to do was to bring you here, I obliged"

"Yes, he was the only one we were pretty sure you could come with, without being suspicious".

"I still cannot believe that you guys managed to pull this off behind my back. I thought I knew everything that goes on around here. But thank you guys, it really means a lot to me", this I said with tears already beginning to build in my eyes. My day had turned out even a lot better than I had imagined. All the people I cared the most about were there, my parents included. I was still trying hard to fight the tears when Sindi came to my rescue by asking that everyone sits down so that the official programme could start. Yes, you heard that right, they had a programme with various speakers lined up. The four of us sat on the same table. I don't know whether it's important to mention that KP pulled out a chair for me to sit down. Having been out of the dating world for some time meant that I had forgotten about some of those small gestures that kinda mean a lot. I looked at him, smiled and said thank you. He smiled back and promptly pulled out a chair next to mine, to have a seat also.

The rest of the afternoon was made up of speeches, jokes and gifts presentation by my friends. They even projected on the screen pictures I had totally forgotten about, and some of which I didn't even know they existed. KP on the other hand was having a field day.

"I'm learning so much about you; I'm happy I made the guest list. I just need to get my hands on some of those pictures, frame some of them or share them on social media."

"You dare try that; I'll kill you."

My conversation with KP was disturbed by the MC calling KP to come and say something. I didn't know he was also on the programme. He stood up, grabbed the mic and began to speak.

"Unlike the many you who are here, I have only known Nkele for a few days. And in those few days, I have come to know her to be the most amazing person to be around. Although the first few minutes of my meeting weren't exactly that amazing", this drew some laughter from the audience. "But once we found ourselves needing each other, we just clicked, and the rest is history. Thanks for making me feel so welcomed here and for showing me around. Because I don't know you that well, finding you a gift was the hardest thing, but I figured the one thing we had in common from day one was our favourite author. And he has a new book, so I got you one, but not only that, I arranged to have it signed by him, to which he agreed."

That got me smiling and happy because I had been waiting to get the new book, but it hadn't hit our bookstores yet, and now I was not only going to get a copy but was getting a signed one. That was just amazing.

"Well, there is something else. But let's first get the book to her," he continued.

I was still waiting for the book when the most breathtaking moment happened. I couldn't believe it. I just became so emotional, and this time couldn't hold back the tears

I stood up, and suddenly there was this loud cheering from everyone in the room. At first, I thought it was for me, but then I saw everyone looking in the one direction. I turned to look in the same direction and then I saw him. I couldn't believe my eyes. I felt like I was dreaming, but I was not. I was standing face to face with my most favourite author, who was about to give me a signed copy of his newest Novel. Not only was he South Africa's king of romantic novels, but he was also the country's best selling author, and guess what, he was at my birthday party. I didn't know what to do with myself. I was literally shaking, with tears of joy all over my face, I just stood there not knowing what to do. One thought was to turn around, run to KP and give him a kiss for this gesture, while the other was to rush to my favourite author to receive my book and get to shake his hand for the very first time. I was just too overwhelmed.

Then I felt a hand over my shoulder, and when turning to look, my eyes met the smiling KP.

"I knew he's your favourite author; thus I figured if he can deliver his new book to you in person, perhaps that could brighten your special day a bit."

"Hello Nkele, happy belated birthday to you. My name is Mmabi and..."

"I know who you are..." I interjected.

"I understand you are a great supporter of my works and so I brought you a signed hardcover of my latest Novel. Any friend to Kopano is my friend too. When he told me there was someone special he wanted me to deliver a signed copy to, I didn't hesitate to agree to do that. And looking at you now, I see why he went this extra mile. Here's your book; I hope you enjoy the read".

"Thank you. This means a lot. I'm such a big fan of your writings; I read every book you wrote".

"They told me you have a full collection of my books. That was one other reason I had to come".

I stepped forward to receive the book, then requested a photo with him. KP did the honours, and Sindi too. Many others had their mobile phones on, capturing the whole moment on video. In the midst of all these, I remembered that I hadn't thanked KP properly. So I stepped to him, said thank you and hugged him.

"Wait, let me get this clear, I bring you the one and only Mmabi, Mzansi's finest author, and all I get is just a hug?"

I knew KP was capable of that. That was very much like him. I just didn't think he was capable of it in the midst of so many people.

"What else do you want? A dance?" to which everyone laughed.

"Yes that too, but first this..." at that he looked to the side, putting his two fingers on his cheek. Everyone could tell what that gesture meant. And all eyes were now on me.

I got over my shyness, leaned over and kissed him on the cheek, to which the whole room responded with huge clapping of hands.

The party carried on into the evening. Mmabi left a bit earlier, but not before so many others requested photos with him. Eventually everyone left. Myself, Sindi, Musa and KP were the last ones to leave the venue. This concluded what had been such an eventful and fun day.

As we walked back to the car, just the two of us, I had a chance to ask him how he managed to pull it all together.

"As I said, I was just a last-minute addition. It was a bit tough though, because when we got here, they were still preparing inside. We arrived earlier than anticipated."

"The phone call you made, was that to warn them?"

"Yes, you got that right. Even inside, the waiters, everyone was in the whole thing. The coordination was not so well done because of things running late, but we did it. The best part was when you stole my line. You almost threw us off our plan".

"What? Which line?"

"The part where you said my friend is new in town, and so forth, and they said they would go ask the manager, remember that line?"

"Yes, but how was it your line?"

"You see, I was supposed to plead with them, saying I'm new in town, I really wanna experience their restaurant, can they at least speak to the manager to see if there's anything he can do, given I'm from out of town".

"And I virtually said almost all that, well, except for the speaking to the manager part".

"Yeah, and we were shocked, left us confused for a moment as the waiters wondered whether you were the organizer and I was the one the surprise party was for. Luckily they caught onto the script fast".

"But thank you. This had been the most wonderful thing any guy has ever done for me. Sometimes I wonder who are you and why are you doing all these for me".

“My name is Kopano, and I'm doing all....”

“Oh geez, stop it. You know what I mean”.

“You are a great and amazing person Nkele, and great people deserve to be treated with great and special care because they are far and few in-between”.

I was blushing. I didn't know how to reply to that. Luckily we had just reached the car, and he concentrated on opening the car door for me. I had already decided to use that very moment to change the topic. So when he opened his door to join me in the car, I moved quickly to steer the conversation elsewhere.

“I get it all, but Mmabi part, how did you manage to pull off that one? He's such a great author, and big in the industry. I felt so privileged.”

“I met him about three years ago. He and his partner wanted to acquire a small publishing company in Durban. By the time they called us in, the deal was at a very advanced stage. I worried about why the company rushed things so fast. After a sleepless weekend of going through tons and tons of paperwork, I uncovered some hidden information surrounding the deal. Not only was the company overpriced, but it also had some pending lawsuits against it. They could easily have lost millions of Rands had they gone on with the deal. I restructured the whole deal and also insisted on the settling of all pending lawsuits before the deal could be finalized. Mmabi was extremely grateful, and we remained friends since then. He somehow feels indebted to me.”

“I will never forget this day. It's been extra special, thanks to you”.

“Me too, it's the day I got my first kiss. It was on the cheek I know but close enough”.

"You are one of the funniest people I know hey. You just are this free-spirited person and very unpredictable. I like that".

"I feel free when I'm with you. I somehow feel I can just be myself without any worries. It's been a while since I ever felt that way around anyone, except for my sister."

Silence from both of us followed that. It was almost as if we were both digesting what the other had just said. We must both have been still wondering what to say next when a song by the late Whitney Houston blurted through the radio, "I believe in you and me....I believe that we will be...In love eternally....As far as I can see...You will always be...The one for me....Oh yes you will...." If we were in a film and what had just happened was one of the scenes in the film, then surely this song would have made the perfect soundtrack. I was still enjoying and relieved on how it took us out of that awkward moment when KP decided to take us right back there with his next words. "Do you think this song could be talking about us?" he asked.

Honestly I hadn't expected such a question, and even if I had expected it, I still wouldn't have known how to answer it. KP had just put me on the spot, not just any spot but a very tight one I must add. I

decided to plead ignorance. "Sorry, what song, what is it saying?" this I said with a smile. He caught on to the joke, and he fired a response back.

"Come on; you know exactly what song and what it's saying".

The few seconds gave me time to think about the whole situation and work my way out of it.

"I don't know. But since you seem to have given it much thought already, why don't you share your view of it?" That most certainly shifted the spotlight back to him, and I was more than happy to have things that way.

"Oh smarty pants I see", a laughter moment followed. He then kept quiet a bit. I wasn't about to also allow him a few seconds to work out a comeback like I did, so I followed up immediately.

"The people are waiting, your response please".

"You really are having a field day on this one aren't you?"

"But you started it, please, it's only fair you bring a conclusion to it". He was cornered, and I had no intention of giving him any more room to manoeuvre and manage to shift everything back to me.

"I travel a lot with my work, and I meet lots and lots of people, beautiful people and..."

"Beautiful women you mean?"

"Gosh, what have I got myself into. Yes, beautiful women too, some almost as beautiful as you".

"Is that what you tell all of them?"

"You have no intention of making this any easy are you?"

"Make what easy? I'm just trying to get clarity on everything you were saying, just to make sure you know". This I said while looking outside the window to hide my smile. He was right, I was having a field day, and I wasn't about to let go of my position of power that I had gotten.

"Anyhow, like I was saying, I do meet lots of beautiful people, including women", he said the last part louder and facing me. To which we both laughed. "But I have also learnt that beauty is not everything. Let's just say I have had my fingers burnt before, and that had made me to be extra cautious. The first time I saw you, I got to admit, what struck me first was your beauty. But then I tried to talk to you and, let's just say after a few words I regretted having started the conversation with you in the first place. I immediately placed you in the group of people that I steer away from".

"Was I that bad? Please stop reminding me of that moment again. If I could turn back the time to relive that moment, I would live it differently".

"It's okay, no need to worry, I have come to understand why you probably reacted the way you did".

“Wait, what do you mean?”

"Will get to that later. For now, let me finish this part of my story."

"Okay, I was just shocked though that you still decided to help me with my bus fare."

"If you are only nice to people who are nice to you, then you are not necessarily a nice person. I'd say you are nice by obligation."

"Wow, that's very interesting and profound."

“We live in a world where there is a lot of tit for tat.”

"I hear you, but I still have one question that I could never figure it out. You paid for my fare, you wanted to talk to me, and there was an empty seat next to me, two seats actually, meaning there was ample space without any of us feeling crowded. Yet you just walked past it and went to sit elsewhere. Why? Was I that bad?"

"Obviously not hau. But it's purely because of what I said earlier, once I paid for you, you somehow were now obligated to be nice to me. And I didn't want that kind of setup. I just wanted you to be nice to me because you are a nice person".

“I understand. I really felt bad though hey”.

“That’s because you are a nice person, something I have to learn over the past few days I spend time with you”.

“I hope you are not just saying that neh?”

“No I’m not. I think you are one of a kind. And lately I have been having problems because I found myself thinking a lot about you.”

"And that's a problem because? Am I that bad to be thought about?" At this stage I was really having a field day on this whole thing, I was making a meal of it. I hoped he would tell me he likes me. I think that's where he was going, but he suddenly seemed shy and unable to express himself the way he usually will do. His joking ways were also not there at that stage, something that told me he was being serious and nervous. Inside me though I was all smiles.

“It’s a problem because I travel a lot, and I have always tried not to develop feelings for anyone I come across in the places I pass by through work. And that has worked out just fine, until you came along. I just wasn’t ready for you.”

Remember how I had been having a field day with this whole thing? Well, suddenly all that stopped after those last few words. I wanted to say something, but I didn't know what to say. I hoped he would just carry on talking. My heart suddenly was beating very fast. Luckily he found some words to continue, and thus I didn't have to say something.

"I have only known you for a few days, but those days have been magical for me. Spending time with you had been nothing but amazing. You are such a fun person to be with, and I don't want to miss on all those crazy but yet amazing moments with you, I want them forever. And that song that played earlier, I wish it could be about us, because to be honest with you, I really believe in you and me being together."

Then he suddenly stopped talking. I was still lost in that moment and was hoping he will carry on, but he didn't. He obviously wanted me to say something. Because I had almost anticipated him to say something along these lines, I had prepared a line that I would use as a response, and so I just threw it in there.

"But you hardly know me. How could you be sure about me when you don't even..."

"You think I don't know you?" he interjected. "My work involves research. I live, sleep and eat researching companies. It's what I do best, and it's why I get moved all over the place with work. It takes me at most a week to know everything I want to know about a company. If I could be so diligent about someone else's priority, imagine how I will be when dealing with something personal to me. So no Tina (*he said that name with a big smile*), I know so much about you more than you could imagine. But please, don't get me wrong, don't look at this in a creepy kinda way, I just asked around about you and let's just say some good friends were willing to share some information once I told them how much impact you had on me. That coupled with a few social media checks, let's just say I at least know you enough to can confidently say the words I was saying."

"I see", that was all I could say. Clearly I hadn't prepared myself enough.

"Look, I had been let down before, now I'm always extra careful. At some stage I thought I would never fall in love again, I thought I'd be safer just by myself, but you changed all that as I said. And now here I am asking you to consider allowing me some little space to share your life with you, and you mine. So what do you say?"

"I hear you, but I barely know you and haven't done any research on you", that was a lie, a big lie. Okay, my research might not have been as intense as his, but I had done some digging. Sadly though I didn't find much except stuff to do with his work. On that front, he was a master of the game. But personal info was dololo, none.

"That's fair. If it helps in any way, I'm willing to open myself to your scrutiny, but only if deep down in your heart, you at least have some liking of me, and you just want to know me more so as not to make a mistake. Look, I could be wrong, but I kinda hope you are enjoying my company as much as I enjoy yours?"

He had just hit me with a direct question, and I couldn't get myself out of that one even if I had the time. It was either sheer luck for him, or it was just pure genius of him. Either way, He had asked a question, and I had no choice but to answer. I didn't want to make it too easy for him. I guess I was

just enjoying hearing all the words he was saying, watching him bite his tongue with some of the expressions and so on. While still contemplating on what to say to him, he asked something else.

“Maybe I should have first asked whether you are seeing anyone?”

"No, I'm not", I answered so quickly I was also surprised by the speed of my response.

“That’s a relief. My research wasn’t conclusive on that one, although I was hoping you not. Brings us back to my earlier question, do you think I could at least make the shortlist of someone you could go out with?”

We both laughed at his choice of words, shortlist.

Looking away to hide my smile once again, I responded. "I guess we could give it a try. I feel comfortable around you. Something I hadn't experienced with guys in a long while. You make me smile and..."

“Like right now? Is that a smile I see? Look at me”.

I was caught out. And it seemed like he also had just regained his confidence and was about take control of the whole conversation once more, with all the nerves and shyness gone. I decided to steer away from all that and ask one important question that I always had in mind every time I found myself slowly slowly falling for KP.

“But you travel a lot, how will we make it work?”

"I did ask myself that, but my conclusion was that, when two people really like each other, then everything else can be worked out. It's only when one party isn't totally into the whole thing that challenges can't be handled. So between us, we should make it work. I haven't figured it out yet, but I really like you so much and am certain I will strive to make it work, even if it means making some sacrifices".

“I also will be willing to make some sacrifices, if this works out”.

"By the way I'm on a probation period. In that case, a little birdie told me something about you, and this is what I'm gonna do about it."

He reached into his jacket pocket, pulled out some envelope and when he told me what was inside, I went crazy.

A few days earlier it was announced that John Legend was going to have a live concert in the country. Now in case you haven't picked it up yet, I'm thee biggest fan. Unfortunately, all tickets were sold out within two days, which was before I could buy for myself. I had given up on the concert, sad that I wasn't going to see my most favourite artist, but there was nothing I could do. That was until now. KP had four VIP tickets, and he wanted me to come with to the concert. I wasn't going to play hard

to get on that one. I gave a resounding yes I will come along, before I even knew for which date the tickets were for. Whatever date it was, I will reshuffle my things to make myself available.

"I'm glad you can come with to the concert. Would have been a bummer if I were to go alone. Oh, and Sindi and Musa will be joining us as well. It will be sort of a double date. I hope you don't mind that?"

"What? Nope, not at all. The more of us the merrier akere".

It was just before 9 p.m. when we arrived at my place. After bringing the car to a complete stop, KP looked at me and said "Thank you for today. I really had a good time with you."

"Just me only?"

"And with everybody else obviously, but you made it all the more special. For that, I thank you."

"I also had a great time. You really made my day. I haven't celebrated my birthday in such a special way in a bit of a while. Thank you so much."

This was followed by a few seconds of silence. He looked at me before breaking the silence. "Gosh, you are so beautiful hey. I'm glad I agreed to make this trip, and I'm glad I met you". He slowly leaned over towards me. I could hear my heart beating faster and faster as I realised he was about to kiss me. Without thinking about it, I found myself also leaning over towards him. Soon my eyes were closed as our lips locked and we had our first kiss. I soon discovered that he was such a good kisser. For a few seconds it was total silence from both of us as we allowed our lips to do the talking. It was a moment I had been longing for ever since I realised I had fallen for him. As we ended the kiss, we looked at each other closely and we smiled. He put his hands on my cheeks before drawing me closer to him for another kiss.

"You are amazing. I wish I could sit here with you for the whole night, but tomorrow is a workday. Let me get the door for you".

He got out of the car to come and open my door, before escorting me to my complex entrance. Another long hug and we bid each other fare wall.

That marked the end of what had been an absolutely beautiful afternoon and evening. It was the one birthday celebration I knew I wasn't gonna forget in my lifetime. Sealing it with a kiss from KP was but a cherry on top. I was the happiest.

Chapter 5

Monday mornings are usually the busiest at work. The one following my surprise birthday party was no different. For some reasons beyond my understanding, I had woken up much earlier than usual, arriving at work even before Jackson did. By the time he came in, he was shocked to see me. He pipped through my office door, remarking "you didn't spend the weekend here at work, did you? Phela wena I know you, such a workaholic. You remind me of a younger version of me".

I chuckled. "I wanted to see if I could beat you to arriving early at the office, and I'm glad to announce I did it, yeaaaaaaah".

"Someone is really in a great mood. Was the weekend that good?"

"I had a great weekend. I sure did."

"Oh no, I know that look and that smile. I need to see you for coffee this morning, 9h30?"

"I'd love to, but I can't. I have a series of back-to-back meetings the entire morning. I'm already exhausted just thinking about those."

"Don't worry; you will survive. Check you later".

At that he left. It was just in time because at that very moment I received a call from KP. Just looking at his number appearing on my screen got me smiling from ear to ear. Pity we had to keep the conversation short because he was also rushing to another meeting.

By 8h30, I was also in my first meeting, our weekly sales projections session. Today was my turn to chair the meeting and take minutes as well. Thus I made sure I was in the boardroom well before everyone else. I intended to keep the meeting short. I wanted to have that coffee session with Jackson, to fill him in on my latest life changes. Like I told you, him and wife were my professional parents akere.

Luckily we did finish within 30 minutes, thus giving me some ample time to can have that coffee with Jackson. But just when we were wrapping, and I was closing all the open meetings session apps on my phone, I received a call from Derrick. Derrick was the executive for TGI Corporate services. In short, he was Jackson's boss. He rarely ever called me; thus it had to be something urgent. I immediately released the team as I took his call, while also packing the rest of my stuff to leave the meeting room. I had hoped he would be quick, thus allowing me to still get to meet with Jackson, but instead, he requested I come to his office. All my plans were changed. I dropped the call and headed straight to his office.

His secretary ushered me into his office, closing the door behind us. Derrick was on the phone when I walked in. He pointed me to an empty chair to take a seat. I obliged. I was a little bit anxious but also wanting him to finish off his conversation on the phone so that he can explain to me his reasons for wanting me to be there. Deep down in my heart, I was smiling a bit because I somehow believed he was going to offer me Jackson's position. I mean I was more than qualified for it, had the experience and had been Jackson's right-hand man, well, woman, for a considerable amount of time. Surely anyone with common sense will see that I was more than deserving. Even if they were to hold interviews, I will still come out by far the best candidate, unless they extend the search to outside the company, in which case I would still come out the amongst the best, if not the best. Luckily he finished and was ready to put me out of my anxiety.

“Thank you for having come to see me at such short notice. I will not want to waste any more of your time, so I'm just going to get to it. You should by now be aware that Jackson is leaving the company, which means his executive position will be vacant. As a company, we don't want to leave such a critical vacancy vacant for long. We want to have it filled as soon as possible, and we have decided to rather headhunt someone into the position than go the route of advertising the vacancy. Since this falls in my department, I have been tasked to find the right individual to fill up the post. My fellow exec team will still have some inputs into the process, but I have the final say. And in my view I feel there's no one better qualified to fill up that vacancy than you, but it might also go to someone else depending on whether we strike an agreement.”

The last bit had me slightly confused. I opted to assume he was talking about us agreeing on the package and perks that the job carried. All I could say was to nod as a sign of saying okay, prompting him to carry on. Jackson had already intimated what his salary was, and had advised me I was worth every cent of it plus more where possible. So I was ready to fight for my worth. Little did I know that yes, a fight was looming, but it was a very different fight from the one I had anticipated. I listened as he carried on.

“I can give you the job right now if you want it, HR will sort out all the remuneration package and benefits. I promise you it's a competitive package. You will be reporting to me, making you my right-hand partner. But you will have to agree with me that for such a prominent position, one would want to work with someone they trust. I need you to earn my trust. We can do that by taking a short left to Cape Town this weekend while we sort out your visa because after that, I would like us to go play around in Dubai a bit. You are not married right?”

To say I was dumbfounded will be an understatement. For a moment I wondered whether I was dreaming. Of all the things I expected from the meeting, this was not even on the list. “What did you just say?” was all I could echo from my mouth as soon as I had restored my composure.

"Come on; you are an adult. You know how these things work. I'm offering you an opportunity to enter the big league, and also have fun while at it".

"Let me get this clear. Are you offering me the job in exchange to sleeping with you? You are a married man Derrick, a married man with children!!!" I was becoming furious by the minute.

"Look, my wife and I have an understanding. I give her everything she wants, and she allows me to do everything I want. And quite frankly, what I'm offering you is a small price to pay for what you will be getting in return. Plus, I'm excellent in bed, that much I can promise you", he responded, finishing that with a wink. I had just had had enough of it all almost burst in anger.

"Look, I don't know who do you think I am, or who you take me for. If that's how you roll with other employees, then take this, I'm not one of them, I'm not like them, and I will never be like them. I worked damn too hard to get to where I am today. If you feel that I'm qualified for that job, then you give it to me without your nonsensical demands. If not, keep it. And you better pray that you manage to keep your job because I'm going to report you for this". The last sentence I uttered it having already stood up.

"Ayi ayi ayi baby girl. You are just like many others who are naïve. Who do you think is going to believe you? I don't need this post. You are the one who needs it. If it's given to someone else, that will be motive enough for you to start a smear campaign against me with some baseless rumours. In the end, they will be dismissed, and you can kiss your flimsy little career goodbye. Now let me tell you this, no one messes with me. You say a word, I will have you systematically removed from this company, and I will personally make sure that you are blacklisted, that no one hires you out there. Do you hear me? Now you get out of here. Close the door on your way out, and you might as well kiss this post goodbye".

I didn't wait for him to finish. I headed for the door, slamming it behind me as I left. I was sad, furious and feeling helpless. He was right, he held the upper hand on this one. It will be my word against his, and considering the level of respect and influence he held, I felt like I was already a loser before the battle even started. I could feel tears about to come out as I hurried back to my office. Derrick's PA sensed something was wrong, and she asked: "Are you okay"?

"I will be fine. Just a minor setback but I will be fine". That was a total lie. I was broken, and didn't even know how I was going to survive the rest of the day.

"Don't let him get to you."

"Thanks, I won't". With that, I rushed to my office. Luckily Jackson was not in his office when I walked past. I locked myself in my office for some time, opting to cancel all of my meetings for the day. I was distraught, confused, sad and just in no mood to talk to anyone. All of the energy I had in the morning, the excitement of looking forward to the day, all those were gone, replaced by this gloomy mood. I hated that despite all of my hard work, one person could just stand up and block it all, effectively cancelling all of the work I put in to get to where I was at.

I didn't even know what I was going to do next. I was confused. I didn't want to speak to anybody. But all that changed when I received a call from KP. It was almost like I got lifted out of the gloomy world I was in, and was ushered into an opposite and fabulous world. He explained that he wasn't going to be on the bus today as he had to work late, which was fine by me, especially because I didn't want him seeing me like I was. Although he quizzed me repeatedly on why I sounded down, I didn't

reveal the details of what had just happened, opting instead to just say I had some challenges at work. We left it at that. The rest of our conversation was on the looming John Legend concert. It was only two days away, and everyone was excited about it.

I spent the rest of the day holed up in my office. I usually left my office door open, unless away. Today I left it shut, leading to many believing I wasn't in the office. By the time knock-off time came, I had just about had enough. I quietly sneaked out and left. I didn't want to bump onto anyone on my way out, especially Derrick. I wondered how we were going to work together going forward. Anyways, to avoid the potential of meeting lots of people, I used the backdoor, via the staircase and which led to the exit opposite the main entrance. This was an exit reserved mainly for staff members and not guests. Expectedly so it was very quiet, and so off quietly I went.

That night it was hard to sleep. All of my life I had believed in hard work, believing that it will yield success. But now Derrick had showed me the other side, the evil side, the side that says no matter your hard work, we will not recognise you. Stuff the hard work, you can remain sloppy and lazy and just sleep your way to the top. That made me super mad. Ever since I arrived at TGI, I have always been a high performer, having won the employee of the year title twice, salesperson of the year three-times, the prestigious Chairman's award once and more than 17 Employee of the month awards. This was by far the best record by any employee in the history of the company. That ought to have counted for something, but no. The only person who recognised this ought to be Jackson, but now he was leaving. I began to ponder my future in the company.

It must have been way after midnight when I eventually fell asleep. This marked the end of what had been a very much a blue Monday in every other way.

If Monday night was harder to sleep, then waking up on Tuesday was the worst. I woke up not feeling well. After my attempts to shower and still go to work failed, I had to call in sick. I'm not a sickly person, and so this had me confused. My doctor said it could be fatigue, mixed with mounting stress levels. Either way, I was bed-bound for the day.

This, however, had me worried as I was having a meeting to attend to in Cape Town the coming Thursday. I hoped I would be better by then, healthy enough to can travel. This was one of our VIP clients, and despite the ill feelings I had towards my company, the client still needed to be served, and I had to be professional enough to deliver on that. Especially because the client had nothing to do with our internal disputes, that was one of the lessons I had learnt from Jackson early on in my career. It was just one of the many lessons he had taught me. I still rate him the best mentor I ever had.

I was back in bed when I received a phone call from our travel department. A lady identifying herself as Pamela told me she was finalising my travel to Cape Town. I had never dealt with her before. Lulu had always done all of my travels. And I was sure that when I began the preparations, my communique went to Lulu.

“I need your signed approvals for the trip so that I can finalise your bookings please”.

“I’m not feeling well today and am not in the office. Can’t we do this tomorrow when I’m back in the office? We can do it first thing in the morning.”

“I’m afraid all payments need to be done by today. This is an order from the big boss. Tomorrow the whole department is set to engage in audits till next week”.

“Where is Lulu? She usually does these for me and already has all my submissions.”

"I have been asked to step in as she's busy with other tasks. She handed me everything you sent her. I only need the final signed approval, and I will process this immediately for you".

"Okay fine. Let me try to get Jackson to sign and sent you the final approval."

“Not a problem. I have already sent you an email. You can reply to that”.

“Okay, will do. Bye”

“Bye”.

I was still thinking about the conversation I had just had with Pamela when Jackson called. He wanted to know how I was doing as he has only received my message saying I wasn’t feeling well.

"You rarely call in sick, and so when I got your message, I realise it's probably serious."

"Nothing to worry about. I have already seen a doctor, and he feels I'm probably just fatigued or stressed. He instructed me to stay in bed all day, and that's what I'm doing."

“Good. I told you you need to take regular breaks. When were you last on leave? I should force you to go on leave soon”.

"Luckily you are leaving in a few weeks, so I shall survive that forced leave of yours."

"Don't remind me. Between my work and finalising my exit with HR, it's just too hectic. And some of them don't even know some of the processes. I have to teach them as we go along, and which consumes time and gets frustrating, especially when they argue with me and I have to send them to their own policy documents".

"Plus wena you are Mr Policies and Processes."

“Hahahahaha, I wish those applied at home as well because eish, I keep on forgetting to do stuff and my wife ain’t pleased about that. Which reminds me, I need to call her for our extra luggage plans.”

“Before you go, speaking of travel, I got a call from our travel department regarding my Cape Town Thursday and Friday meetings, they want your signed approval for them to finalise.”

"Not sure if I can do the physical signing now, but please forward me the request form and I will email Lulu my electronic approval email by tonight."

"That's the other thing; Lulu is no longer handling this request. There is a new lady called Pamela who is working on it. And she wants to finish everything today."

"That's still fine. Send me the stuff, and I will approve right away. Do you have her email address?"

"Yes, she said she send me an email. I will respond on it to you and copy her. Then you can respond to her"

"Perfect. Take care then. Bye"

"Okay bye".

Tired as I was, I still managed to drag myself out of bed so that I could get the documents to Jackson and ultimately to the travel department to finalise my Cape Town travel. I was feeling a bit better by now, meaning I knew I would make it to Cape Town, perhaps even extend to stay the weekend, and maybe also invite KP over. That last thought got me smiling and quickly out of bed to prepare and mail the forms. An idea had been sown, one which I knew I might follow up on. That was exciting in itself.

I started my Wednesday on cloud nine. This was the day on which the John Legend concert was set to take place. Me being such a big fan, I was over the moon. Plus it also meant I was seeing KP. It has been a few days with us not seeing each other. Yes, we did some video calling here and there, but nothing beat the physical presence and touch. Despite my excitement about the evening, going to the office wasn't something I was eager to do. I just wasn't sure how I was going to behave around Derrick. I despised him. Quite frankly, I didn't even want Jackson's position anymore because it meant I would need to continually work closely with Derrick, something that I wasn't eager to do, like I already said.

I started the day by going through my emails. Although I was gone for just one day, my inbox suggested a different story. Amongst the emails were my bookings confirmations for my Cape Town trip. I was happy that that was done and in order. The trip was the following morning, which meant there was little time left. Luckily on my side everything was done. The presentations were ready, boardroom at the hotel booked, including all the technical equipment, primarily the stage was set. All that was left was for me to fly there and bag the deal. Despite everything else, I was still going to give it my all.

Around lunchtime, Jackson swung by to check how I was doing. He hadn't been around since morning. Between handovers and human resource admin stuff, he was the busiest man around. Donning an unusual attire of jeans and snickers, with a half-finished sandwich in one hand, a bottle of juice in the other and his iPad under his arm, he walked right in without knocking.

"I could have knocked, but you can also see, my hands are tied, literally."

"As if you ever knock. Hi Mr Jackson. You look so different when not wearing formal here at the office."

"What can I say. It's a sign that these are the last days for me and TGI. How's my patient doing? Will she make it to Cape Town tomorrow?" This he said as he placed his juice and iPad on the table, before continuing to eat his sandwich.

"Of course. And she's going to extend her stay. Not coming back till Sunday night or Monday morning."

"That's great. You need the rest. You deserve the rest. Is the Mr joining you down there?"

"I don't know yet, I'm gonna ask him tonight. We are going to the John Legend concert."

"You lucky fish. I want to go to that concert. Are you sure you are feeling better? Because I can fill your space."

"Not a chance. You know how much I love that man. My childhood crush".

He took the last bite of his sandwich, a sip of his juice and began wiping his hands and mouth. "You have been working too much. Go enjoy the concert and fly to Cape Town after. If you close the deal, you can even take the Monday morning off. Come to the office at 11/12. I'm still your boss, and so I can make those decisions".

As he finished that line, I got reminded of Derrick, "You have been the greatest boss and mentor anyone could ask for. I'm going to miss you."

"I have groomed you for my role. Just walk into it and do what I been doing. And please find someone fresh from tertiary and mentor them also."

I was about to try to change the topic, to avoid anything that can lead to talking about Derrick's issue when he got a phone call. He asked to take it, a request to which I obliged. He had to leave soon afterwards, meaning I was saved by the bell.

Knock-off time eventually came, and I could pack my stuff and leave. KP was coming to pick me up, to pick us up actually since Sindi and Musa were to uber to my place. I quickly made sure I had everything, given that I was only coming back to the office in four days.

The traffic to the Dome was already extending to the highway when we finally took the offramp from the N1. Metro police were all over the area, trying hard to direct everyone to a safe parking area. Most drivers seemed impatient, probably those who were on their way home and just happened to get caught up in the traffic to the Dome. Either way, the cars had come to a standstill, moving slowly at

various intervals. It was just after six in the evening. With the show only set to start at eight, we still had ample time to reach the venue and find our seats, thanks to KP, who insisted we leave early.

As we got to the first checkpoint, KP opened his window and gave the traffic controller a small card. After inspecting it, he directed us to a VIP lane that was flowing much quicker.

"You seem to be well connected. It's like everywhere we go, you are just known and given special privileges", I remarked upon seeing us given access to the fast-flowing VIP lane.

"Most are just company perks hey. We do a lot of dealings with many clients, and those relationships stay for years".

"And who do you know in today's event?", Sindi asked. I was having the same question in my head and was just too happy Sindi asked. I waited for the answer.

"The two directors of the company doing the event are my friends from varsity. We still maintain contact, and last year they came to New York while I was also there. I hosted them. That's when they brokered the deal to bring John over to South Africa. At the time I didn't know I will be in Mzansi when the show happens. Luckily I happen to be here, and someone who shall remain nameless, likes Mr Legend a lot, which means I found an opportunity that created a win for everybody."

"I wonder who that someone might be", said the ever quiet Musa, as he finally found an opportunity to throw in his first word for the evening.

"Let the nameless remain nameless", I responded quickly, trying to make sure I don't end up finding myself in the hot seat. I got my unexpected reprieve when the car in front of us came to a sudden halt, prompting KP also to hit his brakes. That whole incident, though that small, managed to change the topic as we all started commenting on the heavy traffic into the venue. At that rate, the show risked starting late as many patrons might only have been leaving their homes that very moment, which meant the traffic might only get worse.

The parking attendants continued to direct us until we reached a secure underground secluded parking area. The security stopped us from entering, inspecting our papers carefully. He punched a few keys onto his tablet, looked at it, looked at KP, then smiled and said "Welcome Mr Kopano sir, thank you for joining us tonight. You and your guests are free to go in". KP nodded back, said his thankyou and began driving into the secure parking area. There were very few cars and a heavy security presence in the parking area.

Soon we were out of the car and making our way up the escalators. These led us to another security checkpoint and soon we were inside the building. I realised we were backstage. I could hear lots of noise from the main auditorium, which suggested that the place already had a sizeable crowd. We were escorted to a waiting area where there were a few other people chilling and lots of food and drinks, to which we helped ourselves.

“Ladies and gentlemen, John will be coming out here for a few minutes of meet and greet. Unfortunately due to time constraints, we can’t all take individual photos with him”, said some gentleman who appeared from behind us. Before he finished, the room went crazy as John appeared. I was, I don’t even know how to explain my state at that point in time. I had moved from not having tickets and almost not making it to the concert at all, to not only making the concert but be in the same room with John? That was crazy. I couldn’t hold myself, I shouted. Our group was the one closest to the door where he appeared, and so we were lucky enough to get to greet him first and take a group photo. As he passed us and went to greet the other patrons in the room, I was becoming teary and emotional. I looked at KP and could not utter any words to thank him. He could see I wanted to say something and was close to crying. I must have blacked out for a few seconds because the next moment I found myself hugging him tightly and finally, amidst the tears, managed to utter few words of “thank you, thank you some much KP. I don’t even know what to say except that you are just too amazing”.

"It's okay baby. Let's go sit down and enjoy the show". And at that, we all left backstage and walked right across the hallway to an open door. Several ushers stood there, and after inspecting out tickets, one of them took us to our seats. We were sitting in the very front row VIP area.

The rest of the evening was nothing but beautiful. The show did start a few minutes late, but once it started, it was terrific. I wished it wouldn't end. Just being there with my friends, listening and watching my favourite artist on stage, this was just an unforgettable moment. It was well after midnight when we left the concert to head home. Traffic was once again a nightmare to get our, especially as it was also drizzling a bit. But all that didn't matter because after such a beautiful night one had just had, there was nothing, absolutely nothing that could spoil it.

Chapter 6

Having slept late from the concert, waking up on Thursday morning was a hectic mission. The only thing that pushed me out of bed was the scary thought of missing my morning flight to Cape Town. That alone got me jumping out of bed and rushing through all the preparations. Packing all my stuff the day before proved helpful as I now only needed to pack my toiletry.

I called an Uber to take me to the airport. With the time being that early, the roads were open and which made sure I got to the airport still with lots of time to spare. Knowing me and my habits, this was a first. I often will have my name called out as the missing passenger who needed to hurry to the boarding gate. But not today, today I was too early and relaxed, even managing to grab a sandwich before getting to the boarding gate. Very few people were there, and in my heart I hoped that we would remain that few. I wasn't in a mood for a full flight, especially because I wanted to catch a short sleep during the two hours trip to Cape Town.

It was already nine-thirty that morning when I finally exited the airport to catch my ride to the hotel. As always, SoundTech already had a car waiting for me to take me to my hotel. Our first meeting wasn't until two that afternoon, which gave me ample time to can go freshen up, go through my presentation one more last time and be ready to dazzle them. I was a bit nervous with Jackson not being around. In deals like this, he would often be around to take the lead. He will still let me do the presentations, and I will do so with confidence, knowing that should they raise questions I couldn't answer, he will be there to step in. We were a great team. But today I was on my own and that made me a whole lot nervous. I greeted Jane, the driver, and we exchanged a few pleasantries, remarking on how it had been long since we last saw each other. Jane was, should I say our designated driver. Whenever we came into Cape Town for meetings, she will always be the one picking us up. The morning traffic seemed to have quietened down, making our drive to the hotel an almost smooth one, which was just perfect because I dearly needed the little bit of rest. As she dropped me off, we agreed she would pick me up around one to head to the meeting.

As I was busy checking in, my phone rang. It was KP.

“Hey you, I hope you managed to wake up early and caught your flight?”

"You should have woken me up. Luckily my alarm was faithful, unlike some people."

"I was super tired hey. Can you believe I even missed my bus this morning? Had to drive to the office. And you know the morning traffic akere."

“Shame askies. I just got to the hotel, Busy checking in.

"That's great. How was your flight?"

"I don't know. One minute I was in Johannesburg, and the next I was waking up in Cape Town."

"You slept the whole flight?"

"Didn't even blink. And the flight was empty luckily".

"I love those. I love my space".

"But wena half the time your company flies you business class."

"That's only a few times. I still have to fly myself on many occasions you know".

"Oh well, true there."

"What time you arriving back tomorrow evening? I can pick you up."

"I'm supposed to land at nine eight-thirty in the evening. Mara I'm thinking of extending my stay to Sunday. Maybe you can join me?"

"That will be great, plus next week is going to be crazy with work. Let me see if I can get a flight out of here Friday night or Saturday morning".

"Yay. I hope you find one. I'm serious."

"I'm sure even if I can't find one myself, my travel agent will. I'll call you later to let you know."

"Okay bye".

As I headed to my room, I was all smiles. KP's phone call did the magic, and the fact that we could spend the weekend together in Cape Town was something to look forward to.

The rest of the day went well. Jane picked me up right on time (*when it came to time, she was one of the most reliable people I knew, which was why my company always requested for her to be our chauffeur whenever we visited Cape Town*), and we headed to SoundTech offices.

Jason, the chief operating officer for SoundTech was already waiting for me at the lobby when I arrived.

"There she is. Flying solo today. When I heard Jackson is leaving, I told myself that as long as Nkele is the one taking care of our account, I'm okay. How are you Nkele?"

"Jason. I'm very well thanks, and how are you?"

“I’m fine. It’s been a while. The boardroom is already prepared for you to setup. Would you like something to drink? Tea? Coffee? Juice? Whisky?”

We both laughed at the last option. Jason knew I didn’t take alcohol, and had always teased me that the only thing standing between me and joining the boys club is my not consuming alcohol.

“Water and juice will be great thank you. And how’s everyone at SoundTech doing?”

“It’s been a bit busy lately. We are working on our expansion plans, hence your being here today, and that has kept the whole team busy. Our company jet has been in and out for the country a lot over the last few weeks as we prepare to take over the Southern African market”.

“That sounds great. And of course you know our company is the only partner you can trust to navigate the new territory with right?” My sales instincts were already kicking in.

“I sometimes wish you were working here by us. When it comes to sales, no one is as brilliant as you.”

We reached the boardroom and Jason showed me in while he went to fetch his laptop and his colleagues. “You can set up in the meantime. I’m just fetching my computer.”

“Yeah, feel free to take your time. This is home for me.” It did truly feel like home. SoundTech was one of our oldest clients, and Jackson and I had had countless sessions in this very boardroom.

When the time came, I aced the presentation. If there were any doubts about my abilities to conclude this in Jackson's absence, they all went out the window. But this was still the first hurdle. Another session was coming the following day. This entailed presenting to the company exec, and that was a mountain to climb. But the important thing was that I had now won Jason and his team, which meant they would be there to support me at the final session. We went through a few things to iron out some concerns, and soon after that I headed to the hotel.

On my way back to the hotel I received a message from KP. He had secured flight tickets and accommodation at the same hotel where I stayed. This meant he was coming down to join me in Cape Town. To say I was overjoyed will be an understatement. I was ecstatic, looking forward to his arrival on Saturday morning. When I got to the hotel, I immediately called my airline to extend my flights to Sunday. I matched KP's one so that we could fly back to Johannesburg on the same flight. I also extended my stay at the hotel. And to avoid confusion with the company bookings, I simply booked a new room altogether. Although it meant I needed to vacate my room to get to the new one, that was much safer. After requesting room service for a nice and quiet alone dinner, I took an early nap. Tomorrow was one of the most important days of my life. I wanted to prove to everyone in the company, especially Jackson's boss, that I was well capable of filling up Jackson's shoes, and clinching this deal was just one of the steps in that direction.

I woke up early that morning to a phone call from Jackson. "I hear from Jason that you were brilliant yesterday? You sold the concept so well they look forward to your presentation to the exec this morning?"

"I applied everything you taught me."

"Naah, you always had it in you. All I did was to show you that you are capable. I remember when I first saw your profile at varsity, and when we sat with you, I decided that this one is coming to work for me".

"I remember that day like it was yesterday. You telling me to cancel all other interviews and sign up to join your company".

"I came determined to sign you up because your profile was the best there was. My only worry was we couldn't pay you a lot."

"The three months training in London won me over. And I so fell in love with the place. I can't believe you are going to work there full time. I'm so jealous."

"You are still young and have the whole future ahead of you; you probably can work anywhere."

"Yeah, I guess you are right."

"Listen, I called for two things. Firstly to wish you all the best for your final pitch this morning. And secondly, something came up; you are in charge for this whole coming week as I'm going to Mauritius for a week. Can't say much now but I should be back early next week."

"Does your boss know about me acting in your role? Is he happy about it?"

"What? Why? Derrick doesn't interfere with how I run my department. Besides, I have already recommended you to fill my role when I leave anyways."

"No, I was just checking. I will gladly act. Safe travels to Mauritius."

"Thanks. Email me as soon as SoundTech make their decision, or should I say as soon as they say yes to your pitch?"

"Enough with the pressure..."

"Hahahahaha...okay okay okay. Break a leg. Will chat soon."

"Thanks. Bye."

My final presentation at SoundTech turned out to be nothing more than just a formality. It appeared the whole exec was already sold on the deal. The only condition was that with Jackson leaving, I had

to be the lead in the entire venture, of which I had no problems with. We signed the initial memorandum of understanding, with the promise that they will finalise the full agreement and sent it to my company for our legal team to review and eventually, our CEO will sign. For me, my job was now done, and since I was not flying back home today, I headed back to the hotel to catch some office admin, and will later head to the beach for a bit of relaxation. I found myself wishing that KP was already here because together we could then do a lot of fun stuff. It wasn't the same being alone. I gave Sindi a call just to catch up, but she was also rushing for a meeting, and so I was all by myself. I texted Jackson to tell him the deal was in the bag. His response was swift and short, "Congratulations kiddo. What did I tell you? I knew you had it in you. Will catch up later, about to start a meeting with the government officials here".

After a late afternoon of sightseeing and a bit of shopping, (*a girl gotta shop right?*), and a meal by famous restaurant by the seaside, I retreated to the hotel, eagerly awaiting the arrival of KP the next day. I found myself getting deeper and deeper into thoughts about him. I mean he was amazing and all, but I kept on getting worried what if he's got something to hide. I was the happiest with him, and I knew how heartbroken I would be if he turned out to be something he was not.

Waking up on Saturday morning, I sat wondering what time was KP going to arrive, and what were we going to do for the rest of the day. Because this was a spur of the moment holiday trip, I hadn't planned anything, and I doubted he did either. He might look to me for the itinerary. I took my phone to try to look for stuff to do but it started ringing. It was him.

"Hey babe, what's up?"

"I'm all right and you? I'm good, just got here and am checking in now. My flight was very early."

I was not expecting him that early. But now he was here and I hadn't even taken a shower yet. I decided to be honest.

"I'm okay and still in bed. Have not even bathed yet. You are so early?"

"Yeah I know. All later flights were full. I thought you knew my arrival time?"

"Honestly I only paid attention to the Sunday flight because I had to align mine to it. Today's one, I just assumed you are not an early person, so you probably get here around lunch."

"Hahahahaha What? No ways. Better get ready because I have a range of activities planned for the day."

"Wow, okay, I'm on it Captain."

My most significant relief was that I didn't have to worry on what we were gonna do for the day, KP had it covered. I went to take a shower and would later meet him for breakfast.

He was already by the restaurant when I got downstairs. He stood up when he saw me come through. I paid too much attention to him and didn't realise the entrance to the restaurant was one level higher. I kicked the step and almost fell. We both started laughing, much to the relief of the restaurant personnel. And then out of the blue KP rushed to me and without a warning said, nah, I can't afford to have you get injured so early. And while I was still trying to figure out what was he on about, he bent down and carried me in his arms to our table. Everyone in the restaurant started clapping for him. And after he put me down, he kissed me, then did the unexpected. With everyone still looking at us, he lifted his arms to show his muscles, a gesture that left everyone in stitches. I sat there wondering who's this guy, and where's the shy and reserved KP. When he eventually sat down, I asked him, "What did you have to drink on the flight here?" We both just laughed once again.

I ordered my breakfast, and as we sat there, he started filling me in on what he had planned. "You see what I'm wearing?" He was wearing a tracksuit with his favourite Ndebele decorated sneakers, had a cap on and sunglasses in his pocket.

"This is our attire for the day, and you better match it because we have a long day and you will definitely need to be as relaxed as possible. Ever done hiking before?"

"Oh no, are we going hiking? I don't know; I'm so tired and so unfit". It was not true. I was looking forward to hiking, just that I hadn't done it in a while and so was worried about my level of fitness.

"Don't worry, if you get tired, I shall carry you. And you have seen me in action earlier, so you know I'm capable". He was in a great mood today, and so was I. I was glad I invited him along because wow, he was brightening my day with every second that went by.

The day was beautiful. We started off with hiking on Table Mountain. There were many other people along the hiking trail, making the whole journey an eventful one. Although we walked at a slow pace, by the time we were approaching the area where we would catch a cable car back, I was exhausted. For the last stretch, he carried me on his back. It was lots of fun. We then took the cable car to go down the mountain.

When we reached the bottom, he had arranged for us to go for lunch at the Waterfront. And soon after that, we took a boat ride to Robben Island. Have I ever mentioned how much afraid of water I am? I don't get seasickness, but I'm scared of the sea. So I held tightly to KP both on our way there and back. Something he enjoyed much, and made it no secret. "I should take you into the sea more often, just for you to hold me like this", he remarked, much to our laughter and smiles.

Just when I thought we were done, he surprised me with a private picnic at Stanley's Rock in the mountains overlooking Camps Bay. For me this was the highlight of the day. The view was beautiful, not forgetting the fresh mountain air that was a far cry from the polluted air of Joburg. He opened the basket to reveal the contents. It had cocktail rolls with pastrami, smoked salmon, biltong, dried fruit and nuts, assorted chocolates, chocolate brownies and a bottle of wine to down it all. We dug in. As we finished enjoying our meal, we started talking and just enjoying each other's company. Sitting there, listening to the seawater splashing against the rocks, while looking at the beautiful beaches on

the Atlantic Seaboard, made this an unforgettable evening. We finished it off with a few selfies, and he walked me to some rock where he showed me some seemingly very old engravings. "This here is a living memory of my parents and my little sister and I. I don't even know how old we were when they brought us here and we wrote these. I thought they would be eroded by now, but every time I'm in Cape Town with my sister, we come here just to reminisce. It always makes us feel like we are close to our parents. He took out a metal key holder and said, "Here, please add your initial to show that you were also here".

"I became so emotional as I did that, and he captured it all on video. That marked the end of what had been the most beautiful Saturday I had had in a long time. As we went back to the hotel, he said: "Well, that's almost it for the day. We only have one more activity."

I looked at him with those eyes that said oh no, I'm so tired now.

"You look very tired but don't worry, this one last activity you will enjoy".

He was right. He had booked us for a spa massage at our hotel. After such a long tiring day, that was just what my body needed. We ended the evening with light snacks, and we both called it a night.

Sunday was not as eventful, plus it was a short day too. We started it off with breakfast, then a visit to a local church whose address we found online. We then came back for lunch before heading to the airport to catch our flight back to Johannesburg.

Another two hours and we were in Joburg. His car was left parked at the airport. After grabbing our luggage, we took off for home.

As we got to my apartment, he accompanied me to the door as always. When I kissed him goodbye, I also whispered multiple thankyou's to him. He had turned my ordinary Cape Town weekend trip into an extraordinary one. One I will never forget, and will cherish for years to come.

Chapter 7

After a great weekend away with KP, I approached Monday morning with renewed energy and excitement. The weekend had helped me to put all the negative stuff behind me, and was now choosing to focus on the positive stuff. Although Jackson had told me I could come in later in the day, I nevertheless was the earliest in the office again. I was still excited by the deal we closed on the Friday, and was there to try to make sure that the rest of the paperwork was done and everything ratified with legal. It wasn't the biggest of sales, but it was one of the most important ones. It was set to entrench our footing in the Western Cape market, but not only that, the client had branches in Mozambique and Angola, and that was our primary focal point. TGI has always had ambitions to expanding sales onto the rest of the African continent, and deals like this one were a stepping-stone towards attaining that goal.

I was going through the last of the few documents for the sale when the email came through. It caught my attention as it was marked as urgent and highly confidential.

Dear Nkele,

You have been placed on suspension with immediate effect, pending investigations into your recent trip to Cape Town. The reasons for your suspensions are as follows:

- *The undertaking of a business trip to Cape Town without proper company approvals*
- *Unlawfully extending your trip to Cape Town and using the company credit card to finance this expense, including throwing a party for guests on the same credit card.*

You will be required to leave the company premises with immediate effect and only to return for your hearing, which is set for Wednesday morning at ten o'clock.

To let your integrity remain intact, you are requested to voluntarily vacate the company premises within an hour of receiving this email. Failure to do so will leave us no choice but to have the company security escort you off the premises.

During your suspension period, you are not to contact any of our company staff until the day of your hearing.

Yours Faithfully,

Shocked and confused, wondering whether this was a prank or something, my phone began ringing. I picked up the voice on the other end stated they were following up on the receipt of the email for my suspension, and that a physical copy was to be delivered to my office right away, and which I needed to sign and acknowledge its receipt. I tried to ask for more details but the caller wasn't able to give them to me, only indicating that more information will be shared following the full investigations.

"This is not to say you are guilty. We just want you to step away for a few days so as not to hamper with our investigations". Before I could hang up, our mailman dropped off the suspension letter as highlighted.

After signing for it, I read it once again, and I felt like I was dreaming. In my entire working career at TGI, this was the first time something like this ever happened to me. I wished my mentor Jackson was around to help me navigate this. He had already shared with me that his trip was turned from one week into two weeks, meaning he wouldn't be around for another two weeks. I decided not to bother him with all of these, especially given that he was going to be leaving the company soon anyways, and thus I will need to start fending for myself.

The two charges were also not unclear. Unless someone was trying to set me up, there was no way the two would hold. Suddenly all my excitement about closing the deal, and the wonderful weekend I had with KP, all disappeared as I began to face the dreadful future my career prospect faced. This may also affect my chances of promotion, and on that thought, I wondered whether someone after the same post was behind this whole shenanigans. Without much time to dwell on all those, I packed my stuff and left the office.

The wait for the disciplinary hearing on the Wednesday was one of the longest. Without work to keep me busy, and KP always unavailable, busy with his project, and Sindi too, I felt frustrated. I tried to do some reading but my concentration level always ran short. That I wasn't getting any information from the office only made matters worse; all I could do was wait. I kept in contact with my parents, and my mom made it a point to call me and check up on me consistently.

Wednesday eventually arrived and I made my way to the office. Since I was very early, I decided to pass by the company bulletin board, one to push time, and also just to try and keep up with what has been happening in my absence. I wasn't ready for what I saw. Jackson's position had been filled in by another lady called Rachel. My day was completely messed up. I couldn't believe what I had just seen. Little did I know that my day was about to get worse.

I headed straight to the boardroom where the hearing was set to take place. There was only one person there when I arrived. She introduced herself as the head of legal and forensics. Soon another young lady joined us, introducing herself as Pamela. I recalled her as the one who had taken over my travel bookings from Lulu. Two others joined us from HR, and were followed by Derrick and our company deputy CEO, Ntate Zola. It dawned on me that I had never seen Derrick since that fateful day in his office. I wondered whether he was the one behind this whole saga. Part of me said: "I should have reported your sorry a** the same day you made your advances." But still, I decided I would just keep everything friendly and professional. I looked forward to hearing the entire case, especially the spending on the credit card, and which I knew nothing of.

The representatives from HR kickstarted the proceedings, outlining the charges against me, before handing over to forensics lady to explain in detail. I will then be given a chance to tell my side of the story and will take matters from there.

We initially were asked to investigate two matters against Ms Nkele here. The first was on failure to obtain proper approvals before embarking on a business trip, and second was on illegal spending on a company credit card.

On the second one, our findings have led to us recommending the dropping of that charge. We consulted with the hotel, who confirmed that our company credit card was erroneously charged following Ms Nkele's departure from the room and her booking her own room separately. The room was booked out to another client of theirs and who threw a party. However, their finance department made a mistake by charging Ms Nkele instead of the new client. This matter has since been clarified and the charges reversed.

I breathed a sigh of relief when hearing that.

However, on the first charge, we did find that Ms Nkele travelled without company approvals as her form was not accompanied by signature from her manager. This deviated from company policy, and though the trip itself was above board, failure to adhere to company protocols, especially in matters relating to spendings, cannot be taken lightly. We wish to thank Pamela for raising the flag on this matter and for Derrick for acting swiftly to make sure that this matter was given the attention it deserves. Nkele, at this point you can give your side of the story, how everything unravelled and whether you accept to have done wrong. If not, then you will need to explain why, and your defense will be taken into account before our disciplinary committee makes a ruling on that.

I decided to come clean and accept my fate. I had always relied on Jackson sending an approval email, and had not known that was not allowed, that a physical signature was required in advance, and for that I was willing to accept whatever action was to be taken. So I started my explanation. "Yes, I did take a business trip to Cape Town. It was arranged hastily as SoundTech had been waiting to get a slot for us on their exec meeting. And when this happened, and we were invited at short notice, we rushed to make the meeting as the deal was important to our company."

"But that didn't excuse you from getting approvals from your superior?"

"I tried. I send the approval documents to my manager. He was unfortunately unable to sign the documents from where he was, but he did send an approval email with the documents attached. At the time I thought that sufficed, but clearly from what you are saying, it didn't". I was about to carry on when the forensics lady interjected.

"Wait, you mean there was an approval email sent? How come no one has received it?"

I looked at Pamela as I knew she received it. Immediately Derrick spoke for the first time as Pamela seemed confused to can respond. "Well, there is an approval email that Nkele's boss did send, but that still is not enough because our policy clearly states a signed document is required for approval. It

seems like Nkele here and her boss have been doing this for some time and getting away with it. As we speak, another employee, who had been party to this with them, Lulu, has also been placed on suspension as we check how many of these types of transactions she did. And we..."

"Stop Derrick, stop. Which policy are you working from or referring to? The policy, which funny enough you yourself signed off on, does allow email approvals. We did these amendments during the COVID-19 pandemic to enable ease of business, and you signed off on those. As it stands now, you not only have wasted our resources with this baseless case, but you have also put us at risk for possible litigations by the affected employees", said Ntate Zola, who up till that stage hadn't said a single word. And he was not done yet. "I suggest you immediately remove the suspension on the employee you spoke about, and we all owe Nkele here an apology."

I breathed a sigh of relief, looking at Derrick whose face was slowly turning from the smiling one to an angry one. I thought he was about to apologise but what he said next left me in deep shock, and very angry at the same time.

"I'm sorry, but I guess my anger clouded my judgement on this one. Nkele's character lately hadn't been one of the best in my opinion. We all know that her boss, Mr Jackson, is leaving. Things became muddy when she came to my office and offered to sleep with me if I give her the post. Of course I refused. And so when this travel matter was brought to my attention, I guess I was still on the previous matter, and I figured she was capable of anything. On hindsight, I should have checked everything thoroughly before laying the charges and setting in motion the forensic investigation".

I lost my temper. Here was this man, who I decided not to report for his advances, now pinning this on me, just to save face in front of his boss. I couldn't let that happen. Without even thinking about it, I find myself hitting the table with my fist, before standing up fuming. "No Derrick, no, I will not let you lie like that in front of everyone. You called me to your office; you said if I go with you to Dubai and sleep with you, you will give me the position. I told you no, and I told you to stop, or I will report you. And I thought you have stopped, and now you trying to pin this on me? You have no shame. You..." I was about to carry on when they requested me to calm down and have a seat. I could see the smug on Derrick's face because he had now painted himself as the calmer one, and as the one potentially telling the truth. It dawned on me that he had this planned all along either as his ultimate motive or his fall back plan. From here onwards it was going to be my word against his. I regretted not reporting him the same day he made his advances. If only I reported him, I thought to myself.

Ntate Zola continued speaking after asking me to calm down and have a seat. "Well, this is rather complicated now. Both of you are accusing each other, and we will need to get to the bottom of this, to establish who is telling the truth and who is not. I think the best thing right now is to have both of you on suspension as we carry out investigations on this latest matter and we will call you both for a different session where you can both put forward your side of the story.

By the time I left the offices, I was still mad. Driving home under such circumstances was hard. But I had to do it. Just when I thought everything was back to normal, then this. I didn't know how was I going to prove my side of the story. As my superior, he probably would be seen as having nothing to

lose to can lie like that, and me, what did I have? My career might be cut short and may be challenging to get any jobs out there with such a tarnished image. I felt sad. All the work I put in over the years was about to be eroded by a single selfish individual who merely lusted after me and because I wouldn't succumb, was about to come out victorious at my expense. I wished Jackson was around to advise me, but he wasn't. I wished I had told him about Derrick's advances when they first happened, even if I wasn't reporting him. At least he would now vouch for me. I felt lost and sad. Sad to say that even suicide thoughts did pass through my mind at some stage. KP was hectic with work and we hadn't seen each other since the weekend. Even our talks were short as he indicated that they were working long hours to wrap up his deal.

When I eventually got home, I went straight to bed and just cried myself to sleep.... I woke up several hours later to a dark room. It was already after seven in the evening, and I had several messages on my phone. I scrolled through each of them, most of which were adverts. One was from KP though, checking on how I was doing. Too lazy to text back to engage in a back and forth conversation, I opted to call him. He picked up and we spoke for a few minutes. He was still at work with a colleague. I could hear a female voice at the back, and my insecurities began to kick in. But I decided to not dwell much on it. After all, I had had enough issues to deal with for the day. We bid each other farewell as he hurried back to his work and I slumped back on my bed. Even though I last ate during the day, I still had no appetite, and so I made a decision right there to just continue with my sleep.

It wasn't until Friday afternoon that I finally received a message from the office, requesting me to come for my hearing the following week Thursday. This was almost a whole week later. I accepted the invitation, but couldn't stop pondering on how was I going to present my case on the day. It will be my word against Derrick, and his word might carry more weight. I was getting frustrated by the minute.

I also had no plans for the weekend. KP was still busy and unavailable, while Sindi had gone out of town on one of her projects. This meant that it was me and my apartment for the weekend. I spent my entire Saturday on the net, searching similar cases to mine, trying to work out what strategy I could apply. After a whole day of searching, I gave up. I couldn't come up with a plan for my case, despite having gone through hundreds and hundreds of cases online. I was still pondering on what to do next when my phone rang. It was Sindi.

"Hey girl, how are you keeping? And when are you coming back?"

"I'm all right. For once they booked us such a beautiful resort, it doesn't feel like we are at work. And you, how are you holding on?"

"I'm so jealous of you. Me, I don't know. My mind is blank. I got a date for my hearing, next week Thursday, and I spent the whole afternoon trying to find a strategy for the case but thus far, dololo, nothing".

"I'm so sorry girl. I wish there was something I could do, you know."

"I know hey. It's like I did everything right, and yet I'm being punished for it".

"You reminded me of the scripture about the children of Israel, when they were attacked by the very nations they had left in peace when they came out of Egypt. Remember what God said to them? He said they would not need to fight. He will fight for them. Have you prayed on this matter?"

"To be honest, not really. I can't even figure out why I haven't prayed much about it."

"You gotta take it to God. Like you said yourself, you did everything right. Let Him fight the fight for you, let Him help exonerate you."

"I will try, but it's so hard".

"Tell you what. I can't believe I'm doing this because the food here is so divine. But let you and I fast and pray the whole day tomorrow, to ask for God's divine intervention. Then we leave it all to Him. How about that?"

"Yes let's. Honestly, He's my only and last hope."

"Then let's do this. And at six in the evening, let's pray together over the phone."

"Sounds perfect."

"Great. But now I gotta love you and leave you. I need to go have a full supper before we start fasting tomorrow. I guess I should eat for tomorrow as well."

We both laughed and bid each other farewell.

Not having to go anywhere on the Monday morning meant I had the luxury to wake up late. The cloudy weather counted in my favour too. It was already after nine and I was still in bed when my phone started ringing. I looked at the number on the screen and had no idea who it was. Reluctantly I reached over to pick it up. It turned out to be one of my colleagues from work.

"Hey Nkele, how are you keeping?"

"You know, I don't know, everything happening is just too much for me, but I will be all right. And how's everyone at the office?"

"It's not the same without you. And Jackson is also not here. The morale is just low. Anyways, listen, I can't stay long. I'm going to send you an audio link. Please listen to it until the end. I think you will find it interesting. Keep yourself a copy if you can."

"Okay, what is it about though?"

"I can't say. But please listen to it as soon as you get it. I'm sending it right now."

"Okay girl. You are scaring me though. But send it and I will listen."

This got me too curious. True to her word, as soon as we ended the call, she dropped me the link. I played it and when it started, I recognised it. What got me confused was why my colleague would send it to me. I played it further and dragged the timeline to the end. I couldn't believe my ears. I scrolled back a bit and replayed it again, and all I could say was to stand up and started praising and thanking God. I quickly downloaded the audio to keep a copy, and I immediately forwarded the link to Ntate Zola and the forensics lady, advising them to listen till the end, especially the ending. I then stood up to go take a shower as I had a feeling that I might get called into the office sooner or later.

As soon as I finished taking a bath, I went straight to check my emails, and indeed there was one response. It was from Ntate Zola. He was out of town on business but will be back the next day, and was instructing the team to move the hearing to the Tuesday, first thing in the morning. That made me really happy. For once I was looking forward to the hearing.

I called my colleague to thank her for the link, and also to tell her of the exciting developments. "Well, we all can't wait to have you back. We should throw a big party on your return".

I also texted KP to let him know of the latest developments. He was also happy for me, and promised me that we should have lunch the coming Sunday. Plus I got a surprise for you; he kept on saying. I wondered what it was. And even though I felt Sunday was too far, I obliged. I hadn't seen him in close to two weeks now, and I was just missing him.

Tuesday morning I put on one of my best power suits, picked up my handbag and laptop bag and headed to the office. I was eager to see the look on Derrick's face at the hearing. It was about time he got a taste of his own medicine.

I got to the office a lot earlier than most. I looked for my colleague to thank her in person. She was already there and was very happy to see me. We greeted each other before we parted ways, with me heading to the boardroom. There was no one yet in the boardroom, allowing me to choose my preferred spot to sit.

A minute later the team trickled in one at a time, until Derrick, the last person to arrive, made his grand entrance. He was carrying a cup of coffee, even though ideally the boardroom was declared free of any type of drinks other than water. The more I looked at him, the more he looked like a law unto himself.

Ntate Zola thanked everyone for coming, before going straight to the point. "Colleagues, thank you for having come here at such short notice and so early in the morning. The truth is that this case was turning out to be one of the hardest ones we've had in a long while, but it looks like we are headed for a breakthrough earlier than expected. Just to summarise, Derrick, it's your testimony that Nkele

here offered to sleep with you in exchange to getting the position that has now since been given to Rachel?"

"Yes sir, that's correct."

"Okay. And Nkele, it's your testimony that it in actual fact it was Derrick who offered you the position in exchange to sleeping with him?"

"Yes sir".

"All right. Ladies and gentlemen, it appears we have a copy of the recorded minutes of that meeting. We will play it for you and hear exactly what transpired on that day".

"Wait, what? How was it even recorded? I wasn't aware of such a recording?" Derrick complained. I simply kept quiet.

"It appears that this was recorded unintentionally. The recording is on the same minutes file as the one of the meeting that Nkele attended prior to your calling her to come to see you. In her haste, leaving her meeting, she omitted to stop the recording upon finishing her call with you. Thus the system carried on recording until the allotted one hour, and the file was saved with both meetings. Which is only good for us in this case, since we can now hear for ourselves exactly what transpired on the day the two of you met".

"But how do we know if the recording has not been altered in any way?" Derrick went on.

"The recording has been subjected to our normal meeting minutes audio files screening and testing, and in this case, we found it in line with all our internal meetings minutes standards," Ntate Zola responded. "Any other questions or objections?" We all kept quiet. "Then in the absence of any questions, we shall proceed and play the minutes audio".

The audio supported my version of events as I had expected. I could see Derrick's face changing as he looked down while listening to the audio. He was caught red-handed, and I was enjoying every bit of the moment.

To cut the long story short, Derrick was put on immediate suspension, while also Rachel's appointment was to be investigated. All charges against me were dropped, and a letter of apology was also sent through. For the first time in a while, I felt as if a big weight had just been lifted off my shoulder.

As I walked to our team area, everyone was just too happy to see me. I was equally delighted to be back, entering my office for the first time in a long time. With that chapter closing down, I could now refocus my energies into my work. Despite all that happiness, there was only one more thing that could make me happier, and that was seeing KP. I texted him to let him know that everything went well, and also to check whether we could meet up for our traditional Wednesday lunch special the next day. Unfortunately he was still unable to, promising instead that he was still on for Sunday. "It's

gonna be amazing you will see", he emphasised. The merger was not coming right, and it might be put on ice. If that happens, he will likely be released to another project, and the pressure will be off. I was consoled to hear that part.

However, I was still dejected a bit. After I ended the call with him, I immediately called Sindi and inquired if she will be open for a ladies-only lunch. "Plus I really need to have a celebration, having overcome my latest unfortunate incidents at work", I pleaded. Luckily she was available for Wednesday lunch and promised she would come through to my office. That saved the day.

For some strange reasons, going to the office on the Wednesday morning was such a drag. TGI didn't feel much like home anymore. I had won the two cases, but for some odd reason, I didn't have the zeal to keep working at the pace I always had. But I had no choice, I had bills to pay, and so off to the office I went. Another damper was that while things had been great between KP and me, the past week hadn't been so rosy. Granted I got too absorbed by my disciplinary cases at work, but KP also had just not been available. We hadn't seen each other for that long, and he hadn't been on the bus either. He complained of work pressure and that they were spending late nights at work trying to tie up loose ends for the merger he was working on. Not seeing him for that long really sucked. Even phone calls were limited to a simple hi, I miss you and so forth. Yes, he made it a point to text me regularly but still, I wanted to see him in person, just to hold him close to me and have us whisper non-sensical sweet little somethings into our ears. I trusted him, but at times his unavailability triggered memories of some of my past boyfriends. It usually all started like this before I eventually got hurt. I didn't want another such episode in my life.

Sindi though kept on reminding me that KP had done nothing for me to be suspicious of. Although she did admit that his latest behaviour could be of concern. "We should give him the benefit of the doubt", she insisted. A point to which I reluctantly agreed to. I didn't realise that my fears were about to be proven true in a short space of time. Remember I had invited KP for lunch for this Wednesday and he had declined? Saying he will be busy at work and couldn't join me for lunch? Well, things turned very interesting on the day.

Having agreed to join me for lunch at my office, Sindi decided to surprise me with my favourite doughnuts. And so she stopped by Red velvet bakery to buy them. The bakery stood right next to one of the town's favourite restaurant, where local business people opted to enjoy their lunch. It was in the same eatery that she saw KP having a meal with some other girl. Perhaps she's just a colleague from work; she convinced herself. But the way they behaved around each other made it suspicious. They not only sat too close to each other, but they consistently made touchy hands gestures that made the whole setup suspicious. Surely work colleagues will not be allowed to do that. She stood watching from a distance, and eventually they stood up, walked out of the restaurant holding hands. She watched as KP opened his car door for her and the two drove off.

When Sindi narrated the whole episode to me, I snapped. I was hurt but also angry at the same time. Not only did KP refuse to have lunch with me, citing work, but he went out with someone else. I

couldn't understand how he could do that to me. But then again, I should have seen that coming. His smooth-talking and charming abilities should have signalled warnings to me that he can be using the same charm to woo other ladies. My whole day was spoiled. It seemed like my victory celebration over my work situation had just been cut short. I felt like life was coming on top of me like a ton of bricks once again, and this time round, it hurt the most. I felt helpless, hurt and betrayed. "How could KP do this to me? And why?" All these questions kept ringing in my head.

"Maybe there's a proper explanation for all these. Maybe I didn't see properly", Sindi tried to calm me down.

"The thing is he told me he couldn't come to lunch with me as he will be working. Then he goes ahead to have lunch with another girl? I mean what the nerve".

"Look, I'm not saying he's not cheating, I'm merely saying, give him a chance to explain, hear his side of the story. I didn't see them kiss or anything."

"But they held hands, sat too close to one another, couldn't get their hands off each other. I don't know, but if it looks like a duck, swims like a duck, and quacks like a duck, then it probably is a duck", I insisted.

"He said he would meet you for lunch on Sunday right? So just go, pretend as if nothing happened. Hear if he says something, or acts out of the ordinary. Then take things from there".

"You know what my friend. Let's just leave this and enjoy our lunch".

"No, I know that look. Don't do anything crazy please. Don't go to his place today. Phela wena I know you."

I looked at Sindi, took a bite at my doughnut and remarked on how tasty it was. "I missed these"

Sindi gave that smile that says, "I see what you are doing. You are changing the topic, but it's okay."

Soon lunch was over and Sindi left. This gave me a chance to think of the latest developments and plot my next move. I was reminded of the evening I called KP and heard a female voice in the background. Must have been the same girl. I can't believe she's cheating me with a work colleague—the nerve.

By the time the workday ended, I had just have had enough.

Against Sindi's advice, I went straight to KP's flat after work. I was hoping to find him there by luck, but if not, then I will camp right outside his complex till he arrives. I did send him a text to fish his potential whereabouts. It was simple and to the point.

"Hey baby, I hope you had a great day at work. I'm so tired I'm going straight to bed after work. Are you working late again today?"

"Hello love. My day was okay, nothing much to write home about. I am not working late today. I think I'm gonna do the same. It's been a long week. We still on for Sunday right? Plus I have a surprise for you".

From his response, I knew he was coming straight home. I wasn't interested in the rest of his text, especially not Sunday lunch with him. I wanted to confront him by his entrance, and that meant I had to rush to get there before he does. If he drove to work, then he will be stuck in traffic a bit while I will have the advantage of using the bus. The buses have their own dedicated bus lanes, enabling them to travel faster than standard passenger cars. It was one of the ways to encourage members of the public to leave their vehicles at home and use public transport. I took another look at my watch and it confirmed it was time to go home, so off I went.

Throughout the bus ride, I couldn't help but keep on thinking what was I going to say to KP. I liked him a lot, which made it very difficult for me to be angry at him. He had hurt me though, deeply so. He might have taken away every little trust and hope I still had left in true love. I found myself shedding a tear when I remembered the great moments we had together, the future aspirations I had with him, and just the true pure love we had for each other, or I thought we had for each other.

The entrance to KP's block of apartment was busy, an indicator of the fact that it was knockoff time and most tenants were arriving home from work. KP's carport was empty, meaning that he was not home yet. That was a sigh of relief because it will have been trickier if he was already home as that would have meant having to call him. That would have given him ample time to prepare. I didn't want that; I wanted to catch him off guard. An element of surprise if you may. And if he were bringing her home, that would be a bonus.

A small garden with table and chairs presented a beautiful seating area to the right-hand side of the entrance. With no one occupying the area, this gave me just the perfect spot to sit and wait, almost in ambush. It wasn't long before his Porsche SUV drove in and took his parking spot. Lucky for him he was alone. The sight of seeing him made me furious. He still looked good though, and his dress code suggested he might not have been from work. But when he opened the boot and pulled out his laptop and a stack of files, it proved that he might have been at work. He also looked tired. I waited for him to lock his car doors and started walking towards the entrance. That was my moment right there. All the hurt and pain had been fueled into a fit of massive anger, one that had been building over the years with all other guys that cheated on me and hurt me deeply. I never stood up for myself then, always trying to assume I was the one in the wrong, and I tried hard to keep them. Not this time though, not this time. This was a new Nkele we were dealing with, one who will not allow any man, no matter how much she loved him, walk over her, hurt her and get away with it.

He didn't see me until I was just a few steps away from him, blocking his way. He had been concentrating on his phone and it was only when he put it into his pocket and looked up, that he saw me. He smiled upon seeing me, not sure whether a fake smile or a real one. But I didn't care. I wasn't

about to let my guard down or let him charm his way into making me forget the mission I was here for.

"Nkele, hi, what are you doing here? I didn't expect to see you here. It's been such a long while. What a lovely surprise". He put the files down and came closer, trying to hug me. I pushed him back.

"Baby what's wrong? Did I do something wrong?"

"You tell me. Why didn't we have lunch together today?"

"I told you I couldn't make lunch as I had to work."

"Really? And how was work?"

"You acting weird. Are you all right?"

"I'm okay. No, actually I'm not okay. Did you refuse to have lunch with me and went ahead and had lunch with another girl?"

"Wait a minute. Are you spying on me?"

"Kopano, please just answer my question. And no, I'm not spying on you. I trusted you. Sindi saw you while coming to see me at the office and she told me everything. Is it true that you took another girl to lunch?"

"Look Nkele, you are overreacting, yes I did go for lunch with another girl but..."

"How could you Kopano? I trusted you. I told you of all of my past hurts, and you still go ahead and do this to me?" I was crying at this stage, was hurt and in deep pain.

"Nkele please, let me explain. I was..."

"You know what? I'm tired of getting explanations from people who cheat on me. I thought you were different. I trusted you but look at how you reward me, by cheating on me. It now explains it, your constant unavailability, female voices in the background when I call you late at night. Gosh, how do you guys live with yourselves after you hurt those who love you like this?"

"But Nkele..."

"You know what Kopano, we are done. I don't ever wanna see you again or hear from you again ever. Please don't try to contact me. You can go ahead and have a great life with her. Now you can take her out freely without having to worry about making excuses or being afraid of getting caught." After saying that, I left. I could hear him screaming my name, but I had no time for that. I was done.

When I got home, KP kept on calling me, but I ignored all his calls. He send me messages asking that we talk, but I wasn't going to fall for that. Agreeing to talk has in the past just served to get me more

hurt. This time I wanted to move on quicker, especially because I really loved him and was afraid I might end up caving in.

I got to my apartment feeling numb and all teary. After throwing my bags on the couch, I went straight to my room and threw myself on the bed, still with my clothes and shoes on. My phone started ringing again; it was KP. Realising that he was going to keep on calling, I switched off the phone. Tears kept on coming down my cheek, and though I tried hard to stop crying, I just couldn't. I really loved KP, he had presented himself as this great guy, and for him to cheat on me like that, it was just too much to take in. I don't know what time I fell asleep, but when I eventually did, I slept like a baby till the next morning.

I woke up to over 50 missed calls on my phone, most of them coming from KP. Seeing that, I knew he was going to keep calling, so I moved to swiftly block his number, deleting it from my phone as well in the process. I wanted to start afresh on a clean slate.

Sindi had also called me three times. I began dialling her number, but my phone started ringing at the same time. It was her calling again.

"Hey girl, I'm so sorry. I was such a mess last night I fell asleep with my clothes on and..."

"You had me scared. I texted you, watsapped you, called you and even tried you on Facebook messenger. Where were you?"

"He's cheating on me."

"What? How do you know that? Oh no, I'm so sorry. How did you know? Did you call him?"

"I went to his apartment."

"And he confessed?"

"Well, pretty much so yes."

"Did he at least explain how did this happen? Does he still wanna be with you?"

"I don't know and I don't care. I don't want anything to do with him."

"I'm so sorry girl. I really liked him. You guys were so good together."

"Clearly it wasn't meant to be"

"But how can KP do this? Did he say who the girl is? How does he know her?"

"He didn't say any of that. And quite frankly I don't care".

“I understand. I’m so sorry hey. I did not expect anything like that from him. Let’s go out tonight. My treat”

"No, I don't really feel like go..."

“I insist. Be ready at six tonight. I’m taking you out. I won’t allow you to sit alone in that flat and sulk”.

I knew trying to object to Sindi wasn't going to work, and so I accepted her invite. I still wasn't looking forward to it, but I also felt it would do me good. It will help clear my mind off KP. We finished our chat and I began to get ready for work. That was something else I wasn't up for, but as you know, bills need to be paid, and so off to work I went.

I got to the office well before rush hour and went straight to my office. I left the door half-open, an indicator that I was really in no mood to talk to anyone. I tried to get some work done, but it became a struggle. One by one my colleagues began arriving. Soon the office was a full house, buzzing with the usual office gossip. I decided it was time to get myself a cup of coffee.

I had just finished my coffee when Jackson peeped through the door and asked if I had a minute. I didn't even know he was back. Seeing him back brought me smiles.

With him leaving soon, everyone wanted a piece of him, and it just made my day that he came by my office. I wasn't sure how much of the drama I went through in his absence did he know. But I was ready to fill him in. After all, I was his mentee. And in many ways, he was my hero. His belief in me was beyond words could express.

"For you, I got more than an hour. I know everyone wants to spend time with you but hey, I think you should allocate some extra time for your mentee, seeing that you will be gone to a foreign country soon".

"Oh, don't remind me. My wife is freaking out with all the packing, wants to ensure we don't leave any important item behind."

"We are always the organised ones. You guys are just hopeless without us."

"I know. When I first met my wife, I was a total mess at home. Yeah, career-wise I always had it together, but boy oh boy, when it came to creating a home out of my apartment, I was hopeless. You know what was worse?"

“No what?”

"I didn't know how hopeless I was until she came into my life and began cleaning up all the mess."

"I gotta give it to you though; you are a great family man. The first time I met your wife and children, you all became my role models for what I'd love for my future family. How old is your eldest daughter now?"

"She's 10, and she asks a lot of questions. But she's a bright kid. I hope she adapts well to the London weather".

"Don't worry she will. On the other hand, I don't know how we are going to survive here without you."

"I'm not indispensable you know. You guys will be just fine. I'm not sure about this department though. I still can't believe they overlooked you for the department manager post. The way things are done here, that's why I'm leaving actually".

"Eh, there's something I never told you. They didn't exactly overlook me for the job. Your boss offered it to me and..."

"What? And you didn't take it? How come you didn't even come to discuss that with me, your mentor? I might be leaving but I'm still here now, and I can't afford to see you making decisions that will hold your career back. What are you afraid of? I know you are ready."

"I also know I am. After all, I had the best teacher in you."

"And how come you didn't take the post then?"

"It was the terms that went with it."

"Was the salary too low? Because we could have argued that. They should have offered you same as I was earning, if not a bit more."

"We didn't even get to the salary party. It all stopped when the boss asked me to sleep with him in exchange to getting the post."

"What? And how come I didn't know about this?"

"Shhh, don't make too much noise on it. I'm trying to get the dust settle down on that, and I don't want the drama to erupt around it all over again."

"Yes but that was not right. You should have reported that son of...Please pardon my language. It just makes me angry because I have seen that episode play itself before. It's like there's this sort of boys club up there, calling the shots. I always differed with them on many things, which rendered me very unpopular. That's why I'm leaving. The London opportunity came up just at the right time. I don't know how much longer I would have lasted in that nightmare of an executive team".

"I threatened to report him, and while I was still pondering on it, that's when I was served with suspension."

"Wait, what? When was that, and where was I? How come I didn't even know about it either?"

"It is a very long story. A lot happened when you were gone. I got suspended twice in...."

"Suspended twice? Nkele, I wasn't even gone for two weeks. You kidding right?"

"You know, a lot can happen in a short space of time. Have you got time? Perhaps you should grab a seat so that I can fill you in."

"You got it. It sounds like you have breaking news headlines".

He grabbed a chair and sat down. "Okay, hit me. Tell me what happened".

I narrated the entire turn of events, and as I carried on talking, the more he was left in awe. When I eventually finished, and he got a chance to put in a word, he remained quiet for a few seconds.

"I can't believe what you just told me. And nobody bothered to tell me. I mean, I was exchanging emails with them daily. And you also didn't tell me?"

"I didn't want to bother you, and besides, you are leaving in not so long. I need to learn how to fight my own battles because you won't be there to help me."

"It feels like they waited for me to be out of town before doing this to you. I'm just happy you came up triumphantly though. And as for Derrick, there are so many other stories about him; he got what he deserved. And I'm going to motivate that Rachel's appointment be looked into. It doesn't seem above board."

"Yeah well, I think I need a few days off to clear my head and recharge. I might submit a leave request for next week, will you approve it for me?"

"Yes of course, you have earned it, might I add".

We were still talking when a young man arrived with a delivery of nicely arranged flower bouquet. Jackson excused himself, saying he needed to catch up with his reports now that he was back in the office. I in turn signed for the flowers and began reading the card. They were from KP. And as soon as I realised that, I threw them in the bin. I didn't want anything to do with him; I was determined to stick to my guns.

Chapter 8

Having booked leave from work, Saturday morning I took the first flight out of town to Durban. "It's time to clear my head, to reboot my life once again", I had told myself. With KP staying not far from my block of apartments, I worried that either I'm going to stumble onto him soon, or he is going to show up at my doorstep. I wasn't ready for any of those, and so I figured going away for a week will do me good. Being away from work was also another plus factor. Sindi wanted to join me but I refused. I just wanted to be alone.

I checked into the Hilton hotel, and for my first day, I arranged for room service, choosing to finish off my current read at the time, a book simply titled "The Girl on the Beach". It was a love story, a remarkable love story. I know what you are thinking, how could you be hurt and be reading fantasy about love? Well, I was trying to make sure I don't totally lose my belief in love. Besides, nothing beats reading a great book, while chilling in a warm tub for hours, with soft music and a glass of wine. It's simply divine. By the time I went to bed, I felt rejuvenated.

I started my Sunday with buffet breakfast before heading to the spa for a full body massage. All those took the entire half of my day. I intended to head to the beach in the afternoon, but my plans were disturbed when Sindi gave me a call.

"Do you have a TV nearby?" she asked me frantically.

"Yes I do. Why"

"Please turn to Business Channel 7 right now."

"I took the remote and turned to the channel while busy protesting why she was just not telling me what I needed to see. I thought maybe it will be my favourite artist performing, or perhaps some story of interest, but what I saw was not what I expected or wanted to see. It was KP speaking at some press conference. Sitting next to him was a beautiful young lady, wearing sunglasses and looking intently into a file next to her. The sight of KP almost made my heart skip a beat.

"What is this Sindi? You know I don't want to see this face at all! And who's the lady next to him, his girlfriend?"

"That's the girl I saw Kopano with, and that's his sister".

"Whaaaaat?" I almost collapsed. I felt my entire body go numb. I remembered how much KP wanted to explain and how I didn't want to hear his explanation. How I ignored his hundreds of calls. **If only I had listened, If only I had not let my past cloud my judgement, If Only I could turn back the clock to go to that day and undo everything. If Only...**

"I'm sorry girl. Apparently she just flew in to help him with some aspects of the merger he was working on, and together they uncovered some irregularities, which has led to the merger being cancelled. This press briefing is about that."

"Oh my God, what have I doooooone...The only man who showed me love like I have never seen before, I messed it up. I should have given him a chance to explain. He was so sincere."

"Well, you should speak to him. Go and apologise to him. You at least owe him that much. Maybe he will take you back."

"It's not that easy. I'm in Durban, and I don't even have his number, I blocked him and deleted it from my phone. This is a mess".

"What about Facebook? You can inbox him?"

"I can, but I'd rather speak to him directly, either via the phone or face to face. He deserves that. And he's not active on Facebook anyway." I was distraught now. All my enjoyable holiday moments completely gone, forgotten."

"I think I still have his number at the office. I took it when we planned your surprise birthday party. Let me look for it on Tuesday when I get back to the office, and I will send it to you. Then you can call him."

"Sounds like a plan. Why did I come to Durban! Now I could be walking across to his apartment."

"It's okay choma, leave everything in God's hands. If you two are meant to be together, then He will make it happen".

We ended the call and I couldn't stop looking intently at the TV screen. Seeing KP sitting there, talking slowly in his soft-spoken voice made me miss him the more. I began to cry. I wanted him back, and I was willing to do whatever it took to get him back, or at least to just ask for his forgiveness.

My return flight to Johannesburg was for Tuesday during the day. I made up my mind that I will call him on Tuesday when I get the number, and will then go straight to see him on when I got to Joburg. There was nothing else I could do for now except just to wait. Needless to say that my entire holiday was ruined. Suddenly my plans of going to the beach became unappealing. I was once again an emotional wreck, not able to venture anywhere outside my room.

The much-awaited Tuesday morning finally arrived. I was still a bit tired from the long walks I had done the previous day. I had gathered the strength to take a short walk on the beach. The sea breeze did me wonders, followed by some shopping at a nearby mall. Retail therapy does help, right? Even if it doesn't, I did feel good afterwards, and my evening was a lot better than the Sunday one. But all that was yesterday. Today things seemed to have gone back to scratch. Reality was beginning to kick in, the reality that I had to make a phone call and a house visit. The latter was the more difficult one.

The airport shuttle was already waiting for me downstairs, ready to take me to the airport.

After checking out, I took another look at my phone, hoping Sindi would have texted me KP's number, but there was nothing. Although I needed it, I also found myself relieved that it wasn't there because hey, I just wasn't ready to make that call. As I made my way to the airport, I kept on wondering what was I going to say when I call KP. I had not planned things to that extent. All I knew was that I needed his number, and I needed to call him and ask to see him. Then I can apologise to him face to face. But several scenarios began playing in my head. What if he says no he doesn't want to see me? What if he doesn't answer? For the latter, I will simply walk to his apartment and hopefully he lets me in. Else I will camp by the entrance. Driving along the coastline back to the airport juggled some memories I would rather forget. I found myself being reminded of the fabulous Cape Town mini-holiday I had just had with KP not so long ago. Oh how things have changed quickly. I was guilty I know, but try cut me some slack, I made a mistake, a terrible one for that matter, I know I did, and I was now trying to fix it.

We were already halfway to the airport when Sindi's text came through. I looked at the number she provided; it looked very familiar. I took one deep breath, then click on it to dial it. My heart was pounding at this stage. "The number you have dialled is not available at the moment, please try again later", was the swift and immediate response. I dialled it again and again, the same thing. "What was going on. Did he block my number?" I wondered. I asked Sindi to try it, and she also got the same message. Maybe the phone is off; I will try it again when I get to Joburg, I consoled myself.

It was already just after one in the afternoon when our plane landed at OR Tambo International in Johannesburg. Our flight had had a couple of delays, but when we finally took off, we were in Johannesburg in less than an hour. The Gautrain was my net companion. With the time being off-peak, the train was empty, just what I needed. Upon sitting down, I tried KP's phone again, and again had no luck. Maybe he's in a meeting, or the battery for his phone is flat, I convinced myself once more. There was only one thing left to do; I will have to go to his apartment unannounced. That might make it too awkward, but there was no other way.

After getting home, I waited till after 5 to walk to KP's apartment. His phone was still off. The first thing I noticed on arrival was that his car was not there either—instead a different car parked on his parking bay. I walked to the reception area to ask them to call him. As I walked in, I was happy to see that the security on duty was the Ntate Modika.

"Hello. Hau ntombi, you haven't been here for some time now. You didn't even bid Kopano farewell?"

"Hi Malume. What do you mean bid Kopano farewell?"

"Yes, he left yesterday in the afternoon. He said he was flying out of the country".

My heart sank when I heard that. "Do you know when will he be coming back?"

"I don't know, but it didn't look like he's coming back. He thanked me for his stay here, and even gave me a big tip. His apartment is currently occupied by a certain young lady called Lerato. I think it's Kopano's sister, but I'm not sure."

"Is she in? Can I possibly see her? Can you call her for me?"

"Let me try." He dialled the apartment number but got voicemail. I suspected that the apartment was still linked to KP's number. I tried to see if he could let me go upstairs but he refused, citing complex regulations. Defeated and dejected, I thanked him and left.

I wasn't ready to give up though, and so when I got to my place I had another idea. I decided to search Lerato on FB using KP's profile as the link. I was on that FBI mode I tell you. It didn't take me long before I came across her profile. And unlike KP, her wall showed she was active and had posted a status the very same morning. KP on the other hand last posted weeks back. He wasn't very active on social media.

I proceeded with my plan. I sent Lerato a message, requesting to see her. The message was short and to the point. I introduced myself as KP's friend, and that I was there earlier, heard KP left the apartment, and that I was requesting to come to see her and perhaps get her to pass a message from me to Kopano. I figured she would reply later in the evening, if not the following day. But to my surprise she replied the same time, sharing that she was home right now and I could come back if I wanted. I jumped at the opportunity. I felt it would be easier talking to her than to KP. She can then pass my message. She promised she would wait for me downstairs, given the fact that the reception doesn't have her number and can't call her as a result. Without wasting any more time, I took my walk back to her building.

As I got to the reception, she was already waiting for me. I greeted her and she greeted me back with a smile. Quick introductions followed, and after signing me in, she led the way as we went upstairs.

"Did you say you were in Durban? How was the weather there?"

"It was okay. I needed a bit of a break, and I did make the most of it."

"I could do with a break. Work has been crazy. On some days, one slept for only two hours. I'm just glad it's all over, and one can get a break. But only until the next project".

We reached the apartment and she opened the door and showed me to go in. The apartment was a complete opposite to what it was a few weeks earlier when we helped unpack the boxes and organise it. Most things were now back in the boxes. The furniture remained intact of course as it belonged to the flat. I was too anxious and couldn't wait to ask about KP, and so I went straight to the point.

"I know you said Kopano is not around, but when will he be coming back?" I asked.

"Do you want to have a seat? Have something to drink while we talk about this?" She asked in return, clearly ignoring my question or delaying to answer. I still needed answers, but after such a bad behaviour on my side, I was in no position to make demands. As a result I obliged. "Rooibos tea without milk will be fine thanks".

When we eventually got to sit down, she looked at me and uttered these words that I honestly didn't want to hear: "So you are the girl that broke his heart?"

I was out of words. I didn't know how to respond to that. She carried on.

"You know I have never seen my brother so happy like he was in the last few days. The shocker for everyone was when he asked the company for a permanent office here. That was a first. In the past seven years, he has never stayed in one branch for over six months. Despite various huge offers the company made to him to pin him down, he just wouldn't do it. But they couldn't let him go either because he's one of the best dealmakers in the world. Thus they always acceded to his demands.

You can imagine the shock we all had when he offered to work permanently here and without the need to adjust his salary package. I knew there must be someone in the picture, and he eventually confessed. He really loved you, you know?"

"I know now", was all I could say. I wished I could turn back the clock because then I would do things differently.

In my silence she continued, "He had planned a surprise lunch to introduce us this past Sunday. I think he had made bookings at some Mountain Top Restaurant or something. He said it was your favourite. All those plans were cancelled."

My eyes went moist at that very moment. I was just too sad. She carried on talking and I just listened.

"When you refused to speak to him, his last words were, there's nothing left for me here. I lost the girl I love the most. I suck when it comes to love. I might as well go deal with London and it's unfriendly weather".

"So he's in London now?"

"Yes he is. I don't know for how long though".

I couldn't stop the tears now, they began rolling down my face and she handed me a box of tissues. I had hurt and driven away the only man who loved me so much and who would have done anything for me. I knew I needed to do something; I just didn't know what...

With me remaining silent, Lerato carried on: "You see, a few years ago, my brother lost someone he loved dearly and has never been the same. It was awful because she left him at the altar. And since then, he totally lost faith in love. I have tried on numerous occasions to get him back onto the dating scene but have failed. You can imagine my surprise and joy when he told me he was seeing someone. I was very happy for him".

"Oh no, that must have been bad. That's the worst cruelty you can ever do to someone. I mean why say yes to their proposal if you know you are not in it wholeheartedly?"

"Tell me about hey, and go ahead in planning the whole wedding till the last day".

"Some people are cruel. I wonder where she is now"

"That was another drama on its own. Moghel had hooked up with some celebrity singer who by the way was meant to sing at the wedding. Imagine"

"Oh no, that's even worse "

"But that didn't last long, after a few months it was over, and she wanted to get back together with my brother."

"The nerve."

"Exactly. Obviously my brother would have none of it. He harboured no hard feelings for her, and I suppose that's what made her think they could get back together. My brother is a very nice guy and..."

"I can attest to that. He's amazing".

"Hahahahaha, you are still going to need to tell me why you broke his heart like that neh? So yeah, like I was saying, he didn't become mean to her or anything, but at the same time he wasn't keen on getting back together. I don't know what happened to her, but I'm certain wherever she is, she's still regretting".

"Just like me. I feel so bad and was hoping I would find him here so that I can apologise."

"What happened? Because my brother was somehow too emotional to even can explain. At some stage he almost got upset with me because he didn't want to talk about what happened, and I kept on pressing him. When you send me a message, I got excited. It meant I could ask you myself and please just be honest with me".

"I don't know where to start. The first time I met your brother, I was really mean to him. I had decided to stay away from men because of a series of bad relationships I have had. So any man trying to do small talk, I will use my meanness as a defence mechanism. And most times it worked. Some respond by being mean too, while others simply walk away. I will say I had also lost faith in love, but KP, sorry I mean Kopano, I call him KP. He restored my faith that there are still great men out there."

"Sounds like you guys were just perfect for each other, to help each other regain faith in love?"

"Talking to your right now and hearing the story about KP, it is making me realise that. What you are saying is true. My problem was that, because of all the bad relationships I have had in the past, the bad experiences and all, I was almost always looking out for signs of him disappointing me, just like

all the others. He was just amazing, almost too good to be true. I loved him so much I will be afraid of losing him as I knew it would cut deep. Sometimes I wondered whether I should end the relationship before he hurts me because that's what all others had done. But day after day, he kept on surprising me and showing me love, the kind of love I had only seen in movies or read in romantic books. It was like I was dreaming." I began shedding tears again so I paused and took out another tissue.

"I'm sorry. Look, you don't have to talk about this if it's too emotional for you. I will understand"

"No, it's okay. I wanna talk about it. I want you to explain this to KP in full when you see him, as I might not get to see him again, and I hurt him so much. Days leading to the day my friend saw you guys having lunch together, KP was too busy and unavailable. He explained that work was hectic, and he still called me often and texted too. It's just that for me these signs were too similar to what I had experienced in the past before my heart was shattered. And because I had been looking for them, I was like yeah, this is it, he's just like all other guys. And when Sindi saw you guys having lunch and she told me, I just flipped. I wanted to kick myself for having let my guard down. I was too hurt and angry, and...it was just too much for me and...and..." I found myself crying at this stage.

"Sorry hey, I'm so sorry."

"I should have given him a chance to explain, but I was just too determined not to let him get the chance to hurt me more or lie to me like the others, that I literally showed him the middle finger. He tried hard to explain, he called and called until I blocked his number. And because I feared he might come to my flat, I ran away to Durban. I knew if I just see him one more time, the way I was madly in love with him, I will succumb to his lies, or rather what I believe would be lies. **If only** I could turn back the clock, just get more chance to replay that moment with him, I promise I will just give him the extra minute to explain. Please tell him I'm so so very sorry, I regret all the hurt and pain I caused him".

"Don't worry; I will. I wish he were here to hear for himself. He probably would forgive you on the spot. He is that kind, and I know he loves you that much."

"You know what's worse? I literally brought hurt and pain to the only man in my life who has only brought me joy and peace, who has only shown me nothing but love. I gave too many chances to those who used them to hurt me even more, and him, well deserving of one more chance, I gave him none. That makes me a horrible person".

"Don't worry; we all make mistakes. Look, just leave it all in God's hands. If it's His will for your guys paths to cross again, then He will allow it to happen".

"I pray they do because hey, I messed up big time. Please ask him to forgive me. From the very bottom of my heart, tell him I'm dearly sorry hey".

"I will. I should be flying back to London in about two weeks. I just need to wrap up the failed merger report and will then join him on the new project. I like you. I see why my brother fell for you. You have an amazing personality."

"It's only half as his."

"You should come to visit us in London sometime".

"If he will be willing to be in the same room with me, then why not. Plus I do have a visa, and I often go there for projects. And my current boss is leaving our company to start work there very soon. Which reminds me, I gotta go write down a farewell speech because we are having his farewell party tomorrow".

We bid each other farewell, and I left. And for once since Sunday, I felt like I have just gotten a weight off my shoulders. It had been a refreshing evening, and even though I didn't get to see KP, I knew his sister would pass my apologies to him. And I hoped and prayed he calls because I wanted to apologise personally, and yes, to ask if it's possible for us to get back together.

Although I was still on leave, on the Thursday, I went to the office for a few minutes to attend Jackson's farewell party. Everyone was happy to see me. The entire staff gathered at the company lapa, which is where the party took place. Notably absent was Derrick, who I understood was still on suspension. I wondered what was going to happen to him, whether it will be a slap on the wrist or a real severe punishment to set a precedent. That was out of my control, and so I chose to leave it as such. I had a lot on my mind anyway. Jackson's family was also there, and I went over to spend a few minutes with them. For a while it felt like London was taking all my favourite people. First it was KP, and today it was Jackson and his family. "Who will be next?" I found myself pondering on that question.

I was one of the people who were to give a speech at Jackson's farewell. I had a lot to say about my most favourite mentor, but I was still not in the right frame of mind, and so I kept it short and brief.

We later spoke on the sidelines, reflecting on the great journey we had, and the mean team we were. "You know, I worked with so many people, but amongst them, you were the most teachable and the most passionate and hardworking individual I ever came across. I only hope this company doesn't let your talent go to waste".

"Well...eh..thank you Sir Jackson. Is that how the British will refer to you as?"

"Whatever! And should you ever need a reference for your resume, please make sure I'm on that list of references."

"You have always been there, although until now, I never needed to use the resume."

“You might need to use it soon. I heard that Rachel’s appointment is under scrutiny and may be rescinded”.

"Ah...I don't know. My passion is no longer there at this stage. Perhaps in a few weeks I might feel different, but right now, I feel like I'm happy where I am. I also don't want to thrive on Rachel's misfortunes. Granted I don't know how she got the position but hey, still."

"You know I must say, as your work parents, we raised you well. And if you ever find yourself in London, please do come to visit us".

"Most certainly, I will".

It was already after one in the afternoon when I left the office. I still had another week to go before my leave ended. But I hadn't decided what I wanted to do with it. One thing I knew was that, being away from the office was what I needed the most.

That evening I sat there looking at my phone, still hoping that maybe KP might call or WhatsApp, or send me a Facebook message but nothing. I was still reading the book titled "The Girl on the Beach". The book was mainly about a guy who decided to go all out to win his girlfriend; his story was quite inspiring. As I began to ponder on his actions, I found myself busy developing one of the craziest ideas in my mind.

To put that idea in motion, I will need Lerato's help. I hope she would understand. I still had her number, and within seconds I had her on the phone. We spoke briefly, and she kept on asking, are you for real? All I could say was, I don't want to look back at this experience and wish I had done something. I don't want to keep on pondering on the what if. I may not be able to undo my past actions, but I'm surely taking my present into my hands, and will hopefully in the process, positively impact my future as well.

After a few minutes of chit chat, Lerato eventually said what I was praying for, “Okay fine, let me see what I can do. I will call you in about an hour or two”. That was all I needed to hear.

Next I called Sindi and explained my plan to her. "Girl, you must be crazy you know that. But I like that. Gosh, this is so cute, it's like the stuff we only see in romantic movies". With Sindi onboard to help me, all I needed was the feedback from Lerato. It wasn't long before she called me back. "KP will be home this whole Saturday. I think there's something he's working on. But with him he's unpredictable, and so you will need to keep in touch with me, while I keep him tracked. I shall text you the address".

“Thank you so much for doing this. I owe you one”.

“Ag it’s nothing. I will do anything to see my brother happy again. I think you two deserve each other”.

As soon as we finished the conversation, I called a friend of mine who was a travel agent. I had already checked price tickets online and they were crazy expensive. I knew though she sometimes might have

tickets on standby, and that have not been bought, and since they come with airline discounts, I was counting on her. After a few minutes of chit chat and her checking online, she found me just the perfect ticket for me. All was set. I was on my way to the UK the following evening. Crazy I know, right? I was lucky that my visa for the UK was still valid for another six months. The thought of seeing KP again excited me the most. I only hoped he would be as excited to see me as I was to see him. There was only one way to find out. Off to the UK I was. I know many who have done crazy things for love, will understand me and what I was doing. When you really love someone, and I mean really love them, and they love you equally in return, you can do some of the most outrageous things for your love. And while we still on that, I took one look at the mirror and didn't like what I was seeing. My hair certainly needed some hairdo. I wanted to look stunning for this trip. So I called my saloon to make a morning appointment. With my flight only leaving 10 pm the following day, I had a bit of leeway to do many things prior. I started packing a few items before I eventually went to bed, happy about my day's accomplishments.

After a busier than usual morning, by 3 pm, I was finished packing and ready for Sindi to come to pick me up to the airport. Lerato had also decided to join in. How about that for girl power. The plan was for us to have supper together at the airport before my departure. For some strange reasons, I was suddenly becoming more nervous now that the moment of truth was fast approaching. All the enthusiasm from last night had slowly faded.

I needed something to keep me busy, help keep my mind away from thinking about my upcoming trip. Luckily Sindi arrived, and we were ready to pick up Lerato and go to the airport. When we got to her block of flats, she was already waiting for us outside. She quickly hopped in, and after some quick introductions between her and Sindi, we hit the road.

I was worried that the highway to the airport might be busy, but my fears were soon allayed when we found traffic flowing. We were still very early anyway, and so even if we had hit traffic, it wouldn't have been a train smash.

"I still can't believe you are doing this you know," said Sindi, breaking the silence as we cruised on the N3 to the airport.

"Me too, when she first told me, I thought she wasn't going to go through with the idea," Lerato chipped in.

"A girl gotta do what a girl gotta do, right? To be honest though, I also don't know what I'm doing. I pray it works out".

"So what are you gonna say when you see him vele?" asked Sindi

"I don't know. I'm just going to speak from my heart, I guess. I haven't worked out those details yet. I shall plan that during the 11-hour flight".

"Whatever happens, I will always be appreciative of you for having done this for my brother. I'm sure he will be happy to see you."

"I'm crossing my fingers he will be here. But well, whatever happens, happens".

The sound of aircraft signalled our arrival at OR Tambo International airport. I now knew it was real; it was happening. Having already done online check-in meant I only needed to drop in my bags and also print my boarding pass. COVID-19 regulations had added to flight requirements. These I finished within minutes, and we went for our girls only supper. Lerato took that opportunity to check in with KP. He was relaxing at home with no plans to go anywhere for the night. Our primary interest though was on the next day because that's when I will also be in London. With our countries having just one hour time difference, coordination was going to be smooth. Lerato will keep checking on KP, then update me. I will only leave my hotel to uber to his house when Lerato gives me the green light. All this was supposed to be done in secrecy. Whatever happens, KP shouldn't know until I was standing on his front door. I must admit, this was becoming fun. It was as if we were in this international covert operation, and I was loving it.

After a beautiful evening, it was time for us to part. I still needed to clear security and also undergo several screenings as part of the COVID-19 regulations. Having already flown several times since these were put in place, I already knew all the requirements. In no time, I was already waiting by the boarding gate. And soon we were cruising high up in the sky. With the trip being an overnight flight, we will be in London on the morning of the following day.

So there I was, after travelling thousands of kilometres, now standing and knocking by his front door. Having checked into my hotel earlier, I also had some time to freshen up, change and grab something to eat. Lerato had given me a go-ahead, and since my hotel was a mere 10 minutes from KP's apartment, I got here within minutes of getting Lerato's confirmation that KP was home and will be there for some time.

I wasn't sure how he was going to react, but that was the least of my worries. He had been nothing but good to me, and what did I do in return? Well, you already know the answer to that question. I knocked again, making sure louder this time. I heard footsteps and knew he was coming to the door. With my heart pounding heavily, I took two steps away from the door and waited with my already prepared speech. It didn't matter to me whether he was going to forgive me or not. The most important thing to me was that I had taken the step to be here, and was going to apologise and try to fix things between us. I loved him that much. Although I hadn't seen him for a mere two weeks, it still felt like a lifetime.

The front door opened and he stood there in disbelief. I on the other hand simply froze. The door opened up to a passage that led right through to the living room. I was about to start talking when I saw a young lady sitting on a couch in the living room. That threw me off. Was he seeing someone

else already? I could not put words together after that. It was too much for me to handle. Just the mere thought of losing him forever was too much to bear.

"Nkele, omigosh, what are you doing here?"

"Hi KP. Oh no, this is becoming harder than I thought."

"I can't believe you are standing here. It's like I'm dreaming. How did you even get here?"

I was about to carry on when the female companion, at the top of her voice, asked something, "Baby, do we have enough drinks for tonight? Did you add the extra juice? Otherwise we are going to run short." That got me off track a bit, but KP stood there looking at me and didn't even respond to the question posed.

"You were about to say?"

"Look KP; I just came here to apologise. To tell you how sorry I am. I shouldn't have accused you like that, and at the very least, should have given you a chance to explain, and for that I'm deeply sorry. The past week has been nothing but pain for me because I was hurt, thinking that you cheated, and I missed you at the same time. But when I got to realise how mistaken I was, that cut deep because I could only imagine the pain I caused you. I been there so many times before, where I was hurt by someone I truly loved, and it's not nice at all. I can only imagine how terrible it must be when you are falsely accused. By the time I realised and wanted to apologise, you were gone already. So I flew out here to come and tell you how sorry I am, and to plead with you to find it in your heart to forgive me".

"Wow, I ...I...I don't know what to say. So what else are you here in UK to do? Work? Holiday?"

"I came here only to come and apologise. I'm going back home the day after tomorrow. I gave myself two days in case you were harder to track".

"Clearly I need to work on my hiding skills because it looks like you found me on the first day." We laughed at that. "So you mean you came out here, specially to come and apologise?"

"I did you wrong KP. And I believe I caused you hurt and pain, while you had been nothing but good to me. You were and still are the best man I ever came across in my life, and so I knew I at least owe you that much. I had to come here to make sure I try to correct my wrongs. I'm not perfect. I make mistakes, and when I do, I acknowledge them, and I own up to them, and when it's for someone who means a lot you, someone you care much about, then this was more than worth it". My eyes were teary at this stage.

"Wow, eh, I don't know what to say. The apology is accepted maybe?"

"Yes thank you, now if you will excuse me, let me allow you to get back to your daily activities." I turned and began to walk away.

“Nkele wait, is that all you came out here to say?”

Remember how I said I wanted to see if I could get us back together again? Well, that part I threw out the window upon seeing her female companion. I didn't want to make things awkward or cause any problems for KP, and so I was okay with just the apology. Not exactly what I wanted, but under the circumstances, I had to settle for that. But now KP had asked a question, and I couldn't exactly lie.

With full-blown tears, "I turned around and I just let my heart spoke. "No KP, that's not all. I missed you, I love you, and my world without you has this void that I don't think anyone else can fill. You were and still are the perfect piece to complete the puzzle in my life. So in addition, I came out here to ask whether you can find it somewhere in your heart to welcome me back into your life again. Whether we can be an item again, because KP I love you, I really do and..."

I was still talking and wasn't looking at him; I was also shaking from the cold because I hadn't packed the perfect attire for the cold London weather. I didn't realise him moving from where he was standing towards me. I only felt him put his jacket on me and hugging me. The smell of his cologne engulfed me, oh how I had missed this smell.

"For a girl who manages to follow me so many thousands of kilometres away, I will be a fool to say no to reconciliation, especially when I still love her so much and miss her too. Just on one condition, promise me you will never give me such a scare again, a scare of losing you because I'm not sure if my heart will be able to handle such pain again."

"I won't. I don't want to have that pain either. I was so scared; I thought I lost you forever."

"I love you Nkele, thank you for coming all the way here."

He looked into my eyes and gosh, just looking into his beautiful eyes once again. It made my trip to London all worth it. And then he started kissing me. We got lost in that moment until we heard someone coughing behind us. We both turned towards the door to find a lady and a gentleman standing there.

“Oh guys, eh, this is Nkele. Nkele, this is Liz and her husband Tom Watford, my friends here in the UK”.

The name Tom Watford sounded familiar, but I couldn't tell where I heard it from.

“Wait, thee Nkele? Oh my word, this is unbelievable, so sweet. How did she get here? How did she find you?” asked Liz.

"Yeah, how did you find me? You never answered that question."

"Well, al little bit of help from your sister Lerato."

"No wonder she been acting weird lately, always checking on me every hour, wanting to know where I was, what I was doing. I'm going to get her for this. It's getting cold out here. You wanna come inside for some hot chocolate?"

"Yeah, I'd love to. Your weather here is not friendly at all. I thought Cape Town weather was bad, but this, this is terrible."

"Hey, I got an idea. Do we have space for one more person tonight?" asked KP as we walked into the house. "Nkele should come along."

"Oh yes, of course for Nkele we do. But on one condition though", answered Liz.

"And what condition is that?" asked KP

"She must come as Miss Party."

"It's my birthday today, and they are throwing me a party. Are you free to join us?"

"Oh, how did I not know that? I would have bought you a gift. Happy birthday"

"Don't worry, your being here is the best gift already."

"Where's your luggage Nkele?" asked Tom once we were in the house.

"It's at the hotel where I'm staying."

"Wait, you staying at a hotel? No ways, you must come to join us here. There's another guest room right Kopano? Nkele must come to join us here," said Liz.

"No, it's okay I don't wanna impose. Besides, I have already paid for the booking and is non-refundable. I don't wanna waste money."

"Which hotel did you book at?" asked Tom

"I'm staying at the Hilton."

"Ah, the Hilton. Don't worry, give me your reservation number and I will get the booking cancelled, and you get your refund. I deal with them all the time, giving them lots of business. Just let me know which branch and I will get you sorted. Then you can come to join us here," responded Tom.

We spend the remainder of the afternoon chit-chatting. KP drove me to fetch my luggage so that I can be able to change for the party tonight. Tom took care of the reservation, and I was the happiest. On our way back, we passed by some boutique clothing store where KP was picking up his suit for the evening. As we walked in, some old lady came to attend to us. She greeted us before asking KP whether he was there to pick up his suit, to which he replied yes.

"And who's the young lady you with?"

"This Nkele, my date for tonight. Nkele this Mrs. River, she's my mother here in the UK. And she takes good care of me every time I'm in the UK. Mrs River also owns this store, one of my favourites when I'm this side of the world."

"Nice to meet you, Nkele. But Kopano, you said you didn't have a date for tonight?"

"I didn't know until about two hours ago. She arrived to surprise me."

Mrs. River looked at me from head to toe and then said, "I like her. We need to get her a dress to match your suit. And I think I know just which one. Wait here for me." At that, she went to the back of the store. Only to return with the most gorgeous dress I have ever seen. Here, try this one; a client ordered it for the Emmy awards night, but they were cancelled, and she never came to collect it. If it fits, it's all yours.

I couldn't believe it. I went to fit it, and it was just perfect. I took a few seconds to do a prayer of thanksgiving because wow, God had just flipped my life from the terrible state I was in just a few days earlier, to a fairytale life I was living now.

We collected our outfits and left to go and get ready for the evening.

It was around 6 pm when we left the house to head to the hotel where the party was taking place. I had already contacted Lerato to thank her and to tell her things were going well. She was excited to hear that and was sad that she was going to miss the party. Nevertheless, she was just happy that everything went fine, and that I will be Ms. Party tonight.

Final preparations were underway as we arrived. Guests hadn't started showing up yet. We were escorted to our table to sit down while Tom walked around to check everything was on track for the evening. There was a jazz band on stage, busy doing their final soundcheck, while the catering crew was taking last orders on how they were going to take care of the guests. There was also a big screen on stage, and the tech crew was running their final checks.

Around 6h30, guests began arriving. Everyone was dressed magnificently so. It was like an awards evening if you ask me. I was just happy with my dress because it made me stand out, just like a real Ms Party should...hahahaha.

Tom came back to join us on the table, and our conversation continued. He got a message on his phone, and he stood up to look around the building. He then waved and said something that left me startled a bit.

"Mr Jackson, over here."

I turned around to see Jackson and his wife and kids walk in. I was in awe, ecstatic, over the moon, I think that's the word. I couldn't contain myself. I quickly stood up and shouted Mami, Jackson, as I ran to them. They were surprised to see me, but happy too. Everyone on the table was also confused

about how we knew each other. I will later find out that Jackson had worked with Tom and that Tom had been instrumental in getting him to come over. Either way, I thought to myself, oh wow, what a small world.

The rest of the evening was terrific. The highlight for me though, came during speeches. While speaker after speaker went forward to speak, there was one speaker who was not in the room. She joined via video link, and when her face beamed on the screen, I recognised her immediately. It was Lerato. She spoke fondly of her brother and then towards the end said, "once again I'm sorry I couldn't be there with you, but I sent you a gift that I understand you have received. I didn't do it alone though; I was assisted by my new friend here, Sindi". She joined her on the video, waving at us. I immediately knew where this was going. I wanted to hide under the table because wow.

She carried on, "We felt it wouldn't be appropriate for my brother to not have a Ms. Party, and so we send him one. Nkele, where are you. Please stand up so that these people don't think we are lying." I stood up to the applause of everyone in the room. "Oh girl, you look finer than the way we wrapped you up at the airport last night. We hope you got there safely, and everything went well". They blew kisses, and I responded similarly before I shyly sat down.

The rest of the evening was all about food, music and dance. It must have been after midnight when we eventually left the venue—marking the completion of one of the best days of my life yet.

Chapter 9

Waking up the next day was the hardest. I think jetlag had finally kicked in. I finally found some strength to get out of bed though, had a quick shower, and went downstairs. I thought everyone would be awake already, but I only found KP. "Morning, babe," I greeted him as I walked over to kiss him.

"Morning babes, why are you awake so early? You must still be tired from the travel and party last night?"

"I know. I just couldn't sleep anymore. I still feel tired, but..."

"Or maybe you were just missing me that much?"

"Hahahahaha...maybe"

"So you are going back tomorrow. When am I going to see you again?"

"I don't know. You said you have a new project here?"

"Yes, I signed up for this new merger here. It's in the initial stage, and it's big. It might take us close to eighteen months to complete it."

"That sucks hey. I'm going to miss you so much."

"I know, me too. I had already planned on staying in South Africa, but when I thought I lost you, I didn't want to be there anymore. And I knew about this project, so I quickly signed up for it. I mean, I can request to be excused, but that will be a bit too much backpedalling, given how I requested something similar in SA, and then changed my mind afterwards. I know they probably would allow me, but I also don't wanna come out like I'm just doing as I please, so I'd rather just see this one through."

"I understand, hey. Let's just trust in God. He will make a way".

"Yep, got that right."

We were still chatting when my phone rang. It was Jackson's wife.

"Hello Mami"

"Hi, baby girl. I was afraid you might still be asleep, but I'm glad you are awake. How are you doing this morning?"

"I'm okay, and how are you?"

"I'm also good. I'm calling you on behalf of Jackson. We had this crazy idea, and he said he doesn't think you will like it, but I told him he should rather let you be the decision-maker on that".

"Hi Mami, interesting, what idea is that?"

"We don't like how you were snubbed at TGI. Clearly, they failed to realise the gem that you are. But Andra Consulting thinks differently. How does the idea of working here in London sound to you? They are looking for a director of sales Southern Africa, and they would like to interview you if you might be interested".

I couldn't believe what I just heard. It was too much to digest. KP was going to be based here in London for a while. I wanted to be next to him. This could be an opportunity to achieve that, I thought to myself.

"I think I would love to explore that."

"Yes, I told you she might be interested," I could hear Jackson's wife, clearly talking to Jackson. "Let me give you to Jackson. He will fill you in the details".

"Hey. It's Jackson. Look, there's a new position on my structure, and I figured you might be the best person to fill it, that is if you qualify. Since you are interested, I will submit your resume, and maybe you can come by tomorrow morning before you leave? Just a quick interview and will see how it all goes. What do you think?"

"I will definitely like that. Just send me the details, and I will be there."

"Okay, sounds great. I will do it, and we will see you tomorrow then. Look, there are no guarantees here. If they like you, they still need to check if they can get you a work permit and all. So there are lots of hoops to jump, but..."

"It's worth a try, and it doesn't matter if it doesn't go my way, as long as I gave it a try and gave it my best."

"Yes mentee, I see you haven't forgotten the mantra. Must mean I taught you well."

"Well, I will see you tomorrow. Say hello to everyone there."

"Will sure do, Bye for now."

When I told KP what just happened, he was equally happy.

"That's the best news baby. Let's hope it all goes well. Will you really move here?"

"Of course, I will. For you I will. I have already crossed the ocean for you mos you know."

"Hahahahaha, that's whose song again?"

“By Monica. From the album ‘The boy is mine’”.

"Oh yes, I remember. Hang on, are we that old?"

"Who's what old?" asked Tom, who came out of nowhere.

"Hey, Tom, where's your wife? Breakfast is ready for you guys."

"She's coming, plus I' starving. Where are we going to church today? We are going to church, right?"

"Yes, we are. Plus I have lots of thanksgiving to offer", said KP, turning to look at me with a smile. I shyly looked away.

“We must go to your church Kopano, plus I haven’t seen your pastor in a while.”

"Yes, we must just make sure we don't miss our flight back to Manchester. Tomorrow is back to work for some of us."

“Don’t remind me. Can’t this weekend just continue? We are having so much fun. Good morning everyone”, said Liz, who had just joined us at the table.

The rest of the day was just as beautiful. We went to church, then KP took us sightseeing, showing us the rest of London, including taking us to the palace. We couldn't go in, but we joined a drove of other visitors who were taking photos around the area. As evening approached, took both Tom and Liz to the airport, bid them farewell before we headed for supper at some restaurant that KP said was his favourite. We eventually retired back to KP's house.

Monday morning I woke up and got ready to go to the Andra Consulting offices. I had an 11h30am appointment, and didn't know what to expect. KP has chosen to work from home and was going to escort me to their offices, then we go for lunch, and after that, we come back, and I start packing for my flight that evening. I was happy but nervous at the same time. I hadn't done interviews since I stayed with one company for my entire career thus far. So I spend some time online, trying to read interview tips and all. I later realised I shouldn't have.

We got to Andra Consulting offices at about 11 am. We were hoping to use the extra thirty minutes to relax a bit, but upon hearing that I was there already, they immediately called me in. There was a total of eight people in the boardroom as I entered. That made me even more nervous. They all introduced themselves, and what followed was more of just a conversation more than an interview. Jackson was also part of the session, but he said very little.

In the end, the chairperson concluded, "Look, Nkele, we know you, and we know your work and your customers. We interviewed many of them, and everyone gave you flying colours. We checked your resume and spoke to your references, and we were more than happy, especially with additional

information that Jackson here provided us. Today we only wanted to meet you in person, to assess your personality and all. And we are still happy.

“I believe you will need to serve a thirty days notice at your current employer?”

"Yes mam, I do."

"Okay, great. We are looking for women like you to join our team to diversify our team, but we never compromise on competency, and you ticked all those boxes. Our HR will work to see if we can secure you a work permit to join us. If you do, then you will probably start here with us in three months."

“Thank you so much. That will be an honour.”

And that was the end of the session. I had the job, subject to me getting a work permit. I thought of the training I did in London when I first entered the workplace after graduation, and although the weather was still bad back then, yet I enjoyed the experience, and now to do it with KP, I was just too happy to. I crossed my fingers that everything works out fine. I left it all in God's hands. And that evening, I bid KP farewell as I flew back to South Africa from Heathrow Airport. We held onto each other for more than a minute, kissed, and promised each other that one thing we will do is keep in touch, and to keep praying that the job at Andra Consulting pulls through so that we can be reunited in London.

The End



Meeting the Author

Well, let me take this opportunity to thank you for having downloaded this book and hopefully read it. Before I tell you more about me, please allow me to talk a little bit about the book. It's a fiction story—everything in it I made it up. The characters don't exist in real life, and the names I chose at random. None of the events relates to anything I witnessed in real life. If any such match, then it will be a matter of pure co-incidence. I also extended my writing leeway a bit more. Some of the situations or narrations may seem unrealistic. That's because I made them all up. I love this page because I can put all disclaimers here. It's all about fun, entertainment and inspiration. I'm a sucker for love, and hence most of my writing is about love. I'm also a Christian, and that you may also pick from my book. I love God; I love Jesus. I use my writing to address various life issues like abuse, social ills, crime and so forth. So now let me delve a bit into who I am and my background. I hope you don't find it boring...lol

My full names are Segodi Stephen Leshalabe. I'm currently 44, turning 45 in September of this year 2020. Or unless we don't count 2020 because of COVID-19?lol. I was born and bred in Limpopo, at a small village called Phokoane. I grew up tending livestock in Greenside, another even smaller village. I got two brothers and four sisters, and well, I'm the last one, but don't any ideas hey...lol. I lost my dad when I was about 12 years old. My mom, I lost her about three years ago (*I'm still sad on that and have dedicated this book to her, she was a very special lady in my life, and still is. The sweetest woman anyone could ever have come across*). I also had another older brother, who passed on a few years ago too. That's it about me and my family. For any other information, we can catch up on my social media handles where I will be taking questions around this book and myself continuously. You can join me on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Youtube, My blog website or just email me.. 😊

Growing up I loved reading a lot, and have always excelled in writing too. I did win some writing contests, the biggest one being when I won a combi for my school during my matric year. I went on to study Computer Science at Wits University, and have worked in IT since. But my love for writing never stopped. I wrote several mini-stories on my Facebook page, and when the community grew to over 6000 people, everyone asked me to at least turn one story into a book. And here we are. I also decided to give away this one for free. But if you wish to donate to my writing ministry, then please feel free to do so. You will find details on my website, or you can DM me on my social media handles.

I am also working on another book and which will be for sale. I reckon it will be released anytime between December 2020 and February 2021. If you enjoyed this one, then hopefully you will enjoy that one too. But to give you an idea, I have included a sample chapter from it below. It's titled: **Every Woman has Something She Wishes to Forget**. Please do check it out. I'm also planning on releasing another free ebook before that. I'm not sure when though, maybe August. If you have downloaded this book on my website, then it means I have your email and I will let you know as soon as that one is out. If not, then please do go to my website and subscribe so that I can have you on my mailing list.

Please do feel free to share the book with others, but please don't give them a copy, but give them a link. I wanna keep track of the number of people who were impacted by my writing. If you want me to sign it for someone, let me know, and I will make a special electronically signed copy and sent it to them. If you wanna give me feedback, positive or negative, please drop me an email. I promise you I will reply. Lastly, please do keep me in your prayers and thank you so much for picking this book. I hope you were blessed by it and enjoyed reading it. If not, then I'm genuinely sorry. Keep well, and stay blessed - *Segodi*

*Every Woman
Has Something*



That She Wishes To Forget

SEGODI LESHALABE

Chapter 1

Sitting in front of the dressing table, she looked intently at her image in the mirror. With tears flowing continuously down her cheeks, she remained convinced that suicide was her only solution. The floor was covered with wet tissues. She had been crying long enough. Still the well of tears did not run dry. She continued sobbing uncontrollably as she sat there, thinking of what a disappointment her parents perceived her to have become. They had made many sacrifices for her. Their last savings were spent on sending her to varsity. Despite all their efforts, still she had become nothing but a total failure. That is how she saw herself. Her parents have never called her such. They didn't say anything when she returned from the Eastern Cape. The pain and disappointment was however clearly visible in their eyes. Despite their having assured her all the support she may need, she still couldn't bear to face the pain she had brought to them because of her life's choices.

"If only I could turn back the hands of time," she thought to herself.

"If only I could have listened to the advice of those around me, this wouldn't have happened. Nevertheless, that won't matter anymore once I have ended my life. Yes, they will endure some pain, but after mourning for a few days, it will be all over and everyone would forget and carry on with their lives", she continued with her thoughts.

She was wrong, very wrong. But then she was clouded by emotions and her desire to escape rather than face the reality ahead of her. There will be many who will line up at her door to deliver the "I told you so" message. She couldn't stand all that. Death seemed the best choice for her at this stage. They were all adding to the internal pain and heartache she already was carrying inside. Her warm little heart had been bruised and torn to pieces.

"There is only so much any human being can take", she continued with her thoughts, "at some stage it has to end".

This was her end, she had concluded.

All the pain had become unbearable for her. It was time to end it all. She had decided a few days earlier. She took another look at her most favourite picture that she had in her hand. The more she looked at it, the more she cried.

"Lord, what I did I do to deserve this?" she cried. "I have always tried to be a good girl, why me? Why now?"

At 27 she was supposed to be at the peak of her career, but she was not. She had a tertiary qualification yes, but without proper experience, she felt that her future looked bleak.

"Nobody will hire me", she had said to herself.

Depression had slowly entered her life, and a few days earlier, she had gone to see a doctor. This was not any other visit. It was part of her bigger plan. She had explained to the doctor of her depression

and lack of sleep. After examining her, the doctor gave her a prescription just as she had hoped. Picking up the pills at the counter, she breathed a sigh of relief that part one of her plan had worked out fine. She had spent the next few days putting her life affairs in order; organising everything to make sure that once she's gone, those left behind would not struggle as they prepare to lay her to rest.

All that remained was the suicide note. That she had left till today. She waited till Tracy, her old friend and the only one who accepted her back without any judgments or "I told you so" comments, had left for work. Today was the perfect day. Tracy was having a meeting after hours and so would not be back until much later. By the time she comes back, it will be all over. Tracy owned a townhouse in Milky way Golf Estate where she stayed alone. She had a steady boyfriend, and the two were planning to get married sometime in the New Year. She had a spare room in her house and was more than willing to accommodate an extra occupant, especially when it's an old friend. This was despite their numerous disagreements in the past. All those were forgotten "when a friend in need" came calling. She was even willing to help provide for her until she got back on her feet again.

The suicide note was very short and addressed only to her parents and to Tracy. She asked her parents to forgive her for having let them down the way she did.

"I wish there was another way I could undo everything and live my life in a way that will make you proud. I'm sorry".

What she didn't know was that that was going to cause them more pain than she could have imagined. To Tracy, it was a simple thank you message.

"Thank you for having been there for me when no one else was. Thank you for not judging me and even though I went against your advices. Thank you for not having judged me or reminded me of them, when I came back running. May you remain the beautiful soul that you are, even to others."

Tracy had been the sweetest angel, unlike the rest. She had always said to her, chomi, I do not approve of what you are doing, but if you feel it's right, then I will support you. As long as you don't do anything against God's word. And she lived up to that. When she came back crying, there was no "I told you so". All she got was a hug and "don't worry, everything is going to be all right. God will see you through".

With the suicide note complete, she proceeded to sign it—Lerato. Her name meant love, and she had always tried to live up to that, loving all those around her even if it meant lots of pain for her at times. She said a short prayer before swallowing the entire bottle of the sleeping tablets she had.

If there was one thing that Tracy hated, it was being late for a meeting. She was very picky when it comes to time. Hence she was very irritated when she discovered that she had left her iPad at home. She needed this for her meeting after work. While she could manage to do all her work functions during the day, the meeting after work required a presentation that was done on the iPad. Having to go past home to collect it meant that she would be late because of the afternoon traffic, something

she didn't want to see happen at all. "I never forgot my iPad at home before. Why today when I'm certainly going to need it?" she thought to herself.

She could call Lerato to bring it, but it might be too much to ask. She toyed with the idea for a while until it was time for her to leave the office. She then decided that she would ask Lerato to meet her at the mall for drinks, and bring the iPad as well. It sounded like a good idea, particularly because Lerato needed an outing after all that she had just been through. She dialled her several times but received no reply. Then she became a little slightly worried. However, she convinced herself that maybe Lerato was asleep or was in the shower. Either way, she had no other choice but to go home to collect her iPad. Realising that time was not on her side, she packed and headed home.

It was still around 3 pm, just about an hour earlier before the afternoon traffic rush. She had decided to leave this early to beat the traffic. She was right; it was a smooth drive, except for one non-working traffic light that caused her a slight delay. "It's gonna get worse with traffic unless they bring in points men to come direct traffic", she thought to herself, and immediately decided to use an alternate route when going to the meeting.

The blue BMW One Series slowly pulled onto the driveway. The whole neighbourhood was still quiet, a clear indication that most were still at work. The front door was locked. Tracy reached quickly into her handbag to get her keys. She opened the door. Walking in, she felt as though something was amiss. She put her purse on the kitchen counter before grabbing a bottle of water from the fridge. While emptying the bottle of water into a glass, she called out to Lerato but there was no response. "She's probably taking an afternoon nap", she thought to herself. She had already decided on not bothering her by waking her up when another thought came to her mind-revenge. Lerato had specifically woken her up very early on Saturday morning, the only day Tracy wanted to sleep late. So she figured it's time to return the favour. She tiptoed onto the guest bedroom where Lerato was supposedly sleeping. Slowly she turned the handle and peeked in. The bed was still made and intact. No one was sleeping on it. She was still wondering where Lerato could have gone to when she saw her, lying on the floor. Her body was shaking uncontrollably, and she was struggling to breathe.

She rushed to her, wondering what could have happened because she seemed okay when she left her in the morning. Then the empty bottle of pills revealed what was going on. Still in a panic, she tried to keep her calm while she called their Estate emergency unit. They were available at the touch of a button, and upon hearing that this was a suspected suicide attempt using pills overdose, they dispatched their personnel with immediate effect. The estate had a special health care centre that dealt with minor incidents. They however also had trained staff and ambulances to deal with severe cases. They often will be referred to any nearest hospital once the patient had been stabilised.

With this having been a quiet afternoon, they arrived within a couple of minutes. Tracy was made to stand outside as the medical personnel tried hard to save her friend. They worked hard to resuscitate her. Soon she was carried to the ambulance waiting outside. They had to carry her there because this was more than just an ambulance; it was a fully fitted mobile unit that resembled a hospital intensive care unit. "We have to rush her to hospital urgently", was all they said to Tracy. She jumped into the

ambulance, forgetting entirely about the meeting she was supposed to attend. As she looked at her friend fighting for her life, she remained in shock and still horrified. She hadn't shown any signs of being suicidal and the past few days she seemed to have gotten herself together, working hard to organise her life and get everything in order. She had thought this was a sign of her old Lerato coming back to display her usual fighting spirit. But what she was witnessing now was more than a shocker. The ambulance rushed out of the complex with its sirens at their loudest. Traffic made way as the ambulance rushed to Baragwanath hospital. The medics meanwhile continued their work on Lerato, trying to ensure that she reaches the hospital still alive and not in a worse state. The hospital had already been notified of the incoming patient, and preparations were made for her arrival. Tracy called Lerato's parents to inform them of what was happening. They stayed far and would probably only reach the hospital after midnight. In the meantime, they depended entirely on her to keep them updated.

Dr Lucas had just finished his shift for the day and was on his way to the office when he decided to pass by the children's ward. Although he didn't have children of his own, he still loved children to bits and spent most of his time caring for them. It was almost as if he was a child specialist, which he was not. The children loved him too. He always had fun and cheering stories to tell, and that was why he remained their favourite. He stopped by little Lungile's bed. Lungile was admitted with multiple burns and was recovering well.

"How are you feeling today?" asked Dr Lucas.

"Feel like I'm on top of the world", she replied with a smile.

The phrase of course not being one of her own, it was coined by Dr Lucas, and all the kids had to respond that way if asked how they are doing.

"You are definitely on top of the world my dear", he said as he patted her on the head. She just smiled. He moved on to Peter. Peter had just had a plaster added to his arm after an injury at soccer. "Your team lost over the weekend Dr Lucas", Peter teased him as he approached. The previous weekend was the Soweto derby where two soccer giants of South African football faced off. Pirates were winners that weekend, beating Kaizer Chiefs by two goals to one. Dr Lucas raised his two fingers and said "love and peace buddy, love and peace. We will see you in the second round for our revenge". They both laughed and he examined his plaster carefully before saying, "well, looks like you will be back on the soccer field soon". They both smiled and as Dr Lucas was moving to his next stop, the intercom stopped him in his steps. "Attention: Calling Dr Lucas, calling Dr Lucas. Please report to the emergency ward immediately....Dr Lucas, Dr Lucas.....". He didn't have to hear it again. He immediately proceeded out of the children's ward while glancing at his watch. It confirmed that his shift had ended. But when duty calls, duty calls.

Dr Lucas was not only one of the best doctors at Baragwanath hospital, but he was also one of the most dedicated. He would often be called out even though his shift had ended, merely because of his

expertise. That the hospital was understaffed didn't offer much help either. Although still a junior, he nevertheless was gifted and one of the most sought after doctors. Having studied at Wits University before going on to complete his medical studies abroad, he was simply top of his game. Various private hospitals had already made him several offers, but he turned them all down. He was the most down to earth and humble individual. He loved helping the community and thus found fulfilment in working there. Most people were leaving government hospitals to either start their own private practices or work in the private sector, where the pay was good and hours less. He didn't care for all that. He just wanted to help people.

His father died in a government hospital when he was only 13. With proper treatment, it is believed he would have survived. But with no doctor on duty and the negligent nurses, his father didn't make it. Dr Lucas then made it his ambition to become a doctor and help those who couldn't afford the expensive private medical care. At times he would often also assist at private hospitals when time allowed, but his passion remained at the public sector facilities.

The patient was already being wheeled in when Dr Lucas was arriving at the emergency ward. She was having difficulty breathing.

"Female, late 20's, overdosed on tablets, suspected to be sleeping pills", the nurse briefed Dr Lucas as she gave him a file as they both rushed to the emergency ward. "Is she going to be okay?" Tracy screamed as soon as she saw a doctor on the scene. She was crying. "Mam, we will do the best that we can, just sit here and relax", the nurse assured her. Dr Lucas was already checking the patient's pulse and didn't have enough time to even respond to the screaming lady. The nurse was doing a great job on that front. He on the other hand had a much more pressing matter at hand, one of saving the young woman's life. The theatre doors swung open as she was wheeled in. He was already giving all sorts of instructions to the medical team. Everyone knew exactly what to do. Everything was happening lightning fast. The doors closed and Tracy stood behind, looking through the glass doors, wondering whether her friend was going to survive or not. "Don't worry mam, with Dr Lucas in charge; your friend is in perfect hands. He's one of the best this hospital has. His shift had already ended, but he still came in to assist. If I could recommend any doctor for your friend, that would be Dr Lucas", the nurse assured her before guiding her to a waiting area.

As Tracy slumped onto the chair, it was only then that she remembered she had a meeting to attend. Everything has happened so fast she totally forgot about it. She took out her phone, and there were several missed calls. She attended to all of them, including sending an apology to her pending meeting. She also called Lerato's parents to give them an update. They were already on their way. They thanked her for all she had done and promised to see her later. She also offered to accommodate them at her house while in town. They wanted to book into a hotel, but she would hear none of it. They thanked her once more for her selflessness, even remarking how she and Lerato are so much alike.

An hour passed with no word from the doctors or the nurses. It was one of the most prolonged hours Tracy had ever endured. Eventually after another long wait, a visibly exhausted but relieved doctor

Lucas appeared from the emergency ward. Tracy was already waiting, still crossing fingers. The nurse pointed out Tracy to Dr Lucas who then proceeded to her.

“Hi I’m Dr Lucas”.

“Tracy, my name is Tracy...how is she? Is she okay?”

“Yes, she is fine. Are you a member of her family?”

“No, just a friend, a very close friend. I’m the one who found her”.

"She is still unconscious, but she's going to be fine. She just needs lots of rest now. She was fortunate because it looks like you found her soon after swallowing the pills. The team that brought her here also did a great job".

"That's a relief; her parents are on the way. They will probably be here just after midnight. They stay out of town. I will call them and tell them the good news. Can I see her?"

"Look, normally at this stage, only family members are allowed to see her. But you saved her life, so I will allow you just a few minutes with her. As I said, she's still unconscious, so it will only be a minute or two for you. Come follow me".

She indeed looked much better than the Lerato who was rushed into the hospital a few hours earlier. She still had all sorts of machines connected to her, but she seemed relaxed and okay.

“Thank you doctor for all the work you did. I know you went beyond your work hours to do this. And for that, we greatly appreciate”, said Tracy.

“Who told you about my shift?”

“The nurse who calmed me down when I was screaming and shouting”, they both laughed. “She also told me that you are one of the best here and that really calmed me down”.

“I wonder what else this nurse told you”, as he smiled, “it’s part of our job, nothing beats seeing a patient smile and say thanks after you have helped restore their health. It’s those looks that keep bringing me here every day”, replied Dr Lucas.

“Let me not keep you. I’m going to wait for Lerato’s parents to arrive before we head back home.”

“They will arrive after midnight you said?”

"A little earlier, apparently the roads are clear and so they should be here maybe an hour earlier than anticipated."

“Well, I’m going to go home soon, but I still want to ask you a few questions about Lerato. I also want to grab a cup of coffee and from the look on your face, it looks like you can do with one too. So if you care to join me”.

At that, the two headed to the tea area where an unexpected conversation awaited Tracy.

Lerato was still asleep when her parents arrived. They were allowed to see her for a brief moment but were asked to go home after being assured that their daughter will be fine. Her mom wanted to spend the night by her bedside, but the nurses convinced her to go home to rest and come back the following day when her daughter will be awake as well.

They drove together with Tracy to her house as previously arranged. The drive home was a very smooth one as the roads were clear. Tracy however remained in deep thoughts after her chat with Dr Lucas. It was unbelievable what she heard. She couldn't wait for Lerato to wake up because as soon as she was okay, she had several questions for her to ascertain the information that Dr Lucas mentioned.

Soon they were at Tracy's house, and she took them to their guest room to put their luggage. At their request, she took them to the room where she found Lerato. The police had also been alerted and they came to get the statement and also inspect the room to ensure there was no foul play. It was during this time that the signed suicide note was also found. The tissues still lay strewn across the floor, telling the story of what happened before the suicide attempt. They told the story of a deeply hurt young woman, who had clearly shed so many tears in her pain.

It was almost in four in the morning when everything was cleared and everyone could go to bed. Tracy still continued pondering on what Dr Lucas had said and couldn't help but wonder what are the odds...

Dr Lucas continued reading the patient's file and also taking readings from the life support machine, completely unaware that the patient behind him had just woken up. While he was well known to go an extra mile in his job of taking care of his patients, he seemed to have taken an even keener interest in ensuring Lerato's well being. Finally, he completed the file inspection, signed it and inserted it back in the file holder before turning around to take another last look at his patient before leaving. Their eyes locked and for a while, he stood frozen. He hadn't expected her to be awake. "You are awake, that's good. How are you feeling today, Lerato? You don't mind me calling you Lerato, do you?" he decided to break the silence. She still felt weak and had difficulty speaking. She continued looking at him. There was something about him that just made him look familiar. She even began to wonder whether she was having a dream or if this was real.

"Are you okay? He asked again with a smile.

"Yes, yes, I'm fine. Where am I? What's going on here?" she battled to utter those words.

"Relax Lerato; you need as much rest as you can get. You are recovering quite well too".

At that, he raised his two hands before proceeding, "besides, you are still in good hands. These hands won't let your heart break....remember that?"

She looked at him like a total stranger. "You have no idea who am I do you?" he asked with a sign of disappointment on his face. She was about to shake her head with a no sign when a loud intercom interrupted their conversation. "Calling Dr Lucas, calling Dr Lucas, please report to the emergency ward immediately." With one finger raised, he said, "Hold that thought. I gotta go, we will chat some more later." At that, he rushed out of the ward. Left alone the words "Calling Dr Lucas, calling Dr Lucas" continued ringing in her head. Who is Dr Lucas? She grappled with that thought. Then it struck her. Dr Lucas....her heart sank. A small tear ran down her cheek as she finally remembered who Dr Lucas was. She wanted to call him back and say how sorry she was, but he was gone. He'll probably be back, she said to herself. She sincerely hoped he would be back this time.

It all began at Wits University back in 2008....

The End