

**Rage in Royalty- 'Bad Blood'.
(Book Two of 'Gugulethu-My Husband's Wife')**

Delight Mikateko Ngobeni.

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Prologue

Funerals are never an easy thing to deal with. Their main objective is always weighing down heavily on the atmosphere in which they take place. Eyes occasionally meeting and somehow looking for answers in one another. Young or old, the long and short of funerals is always that, a loss of any loved one is never easy to accept.

Muzi sits on the porch of the royal house and downs his shot of whiskey, with his head tilted against the wall. The funeral was made sure to exude all versions of majestic. Accepting it? Not so decorous.

Energy cannot be created nor destroyed. It can only be transformed from one form, to another. A mantra by science. So, it is correct that ashes do go back to ashes and dust, to dust. A body needs to decompose to become one with the earth once the soul decides to depart from the body.

The dynamics around this are debated on a daily in one (or more) part(s) of the world if not the other. Some do believe that the soul and the body are separate entities with one temporarily inhabiting the other. Whereas some, some lean towards the belief that life is just a mass of cells that live in cooperation just far as they're supposed to. Either way, it is none of anybody's business what a random stranger somewhere on this planet thinks about the intricate details around life and death. Even if it is not a stranger but a neighbour, the business still maintains its position as not being anybody else's but the thought-hoarder's. Unless if they're forcing it down your throat. Then it becomes your business to either ignore them or put them in line with an aggressive "Voetsek" over the fence. Your choice.

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"Mind doing my homework for me?", Mxo says with his back against the bed and his thumbs raised off his phone screen. Lwandile laughs.

"Forget it. I have to do all the thinking and also write TWICE? You're even lazy to copy? COPY Mxo. COPY?!", he exclaims.

"Come on. I'm busy", Mxolisi begs.

"Busy with what?", Lwandile straightens his back, stops writing and thins his eyes at him.

"See the hun that just got to school on transfer?", he says and gives out a sneaky smile.

"Haibo Mxo. What about uSne?", Lwandile is obvious in his concern.

"The more the merrier", Mxolisi shrugs and Lwandile throws the whole exercise book at him, then laughs at his idiot of a duplicate.

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[AT THE MALOCON OFFICES]

Bongiwe mindlessly spun her chair sideways as she got lost in her own thoughts. They'd consumed her so much that she did not hear her sister walk into her office. Lindelwa noticed this and saw the perfect opportunity to scare the crap out of her like she always did when she was a kid. The clown in her couldn't resist making a brief "Ho!" sound and enjoying every second of it when Bongi almost rocketed out of her chair in shock, almost spilling the coffee that was placed in front her waiting to be drunk.

"Dammit how many times am I supposed to tell you to stop doing that?!", she scolds as she tried to wipe off the droplets that landed on her peach top with handkerchief that her eyes landed upon when she was looking for something to rescue her shirt from stain. Lindi was laughing hysterically.

"No. Wait. That belongs to a man...", Lindi pointed at the handkerchief in suspicion before she could lift off her crossbody bag and dump herself on the leather chair opposite Bongi, separated by her desk. Bongi continued trying to get the handkerchief to suck out all the brown from the material that laid on the top of her breasts.

"Are you going to tell me or should I do my own research ", Lindi insisted on irritating her big sister.

"I don't even know who this belongs to. I see a lot of men in here every day", she defends without ceasing from trying to rescue her top. Lindi lets out a suspecting "Mmmm". Bongi shakes her head.

"Anyway, aren't you supposed to be at school?", she ensures changing the topic because she knew that Lindi, the provocateur was going to grill her without a streak of remorse had she told her who the handkerchief really belonged to.

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Muzi walked back into the house. To him, the crowd in the yard was beginning to feel like they were conversing on the top of his nerves. He made his way to the master bedroom and found the door closed. He knocked a couple of times before his mother could sluggishly come to open the door for him as he was about to walk away. He walked in and closed the door. They both approached the bed, then sat. They both released heavy, melancholic breaths almost at the same time.

Evelyn raised her head and gave an unstable smile to her son.

"Where's Thando?", she asked.

"I've no idea. She was in the kitchen the last time I saw her"

She then placed her chin on her shoulder and nodded. She tried to keep it together, but her emotions were determined to come out to play and embarrass her. Muzi shifted closer to her and gave her a hug. He was also falling apart on the inside but according to him, there was no time for that. His mother needed him, and he was determined to be strong for her, and everyone else that needed the pillar in him. There wasn't even a need for the effort of masking away his emotions. Only he knows when he's falling apart because it only happens on the inside, never on the outside unless if a particular, special woman is involved.

Chapter One

It is undoubtedly heart wrenching for any child, even the big ones to witness their mothers' fall apart in tears. Muzi tried all he could to comfort the aching heart of the woman who birthed him, and it bore no fruit.

When she finally calmed down, she asked be excused so she could take a nap. She then stuffed herself in between the sheets on her late husband's side of the bed, lazily, like bacon one would remember to add to sandwich only after adding everything else. Muzi stood up after a couple of dead brain seconds. He then pulled and fixed the comforter -if there's a pun here, excuse it- so it covers her well.

He had Manqoba on his mind when he went out of the room so that's who he was looking for. He asked around and nobody attested to having seen him. He takes out his phone from his pocket to call him, but it throws him straight to voicemail with no detours. Knowing his brother, he figures he should call Joe.

"JJ?"

"Yeah man?"

"Is he there?"

"He was by the bar area when I left. I'm not sure if he still is but he didn't look like anybody who was about to leave anytime soon", Joe states and Muzi thanks him, prior to driving himself there.

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He gets to Joe's place and finds it almost empty. It wasn't as packed as it usually is. People prefer staying indoors with their heaters and onesies under such a brutal weather. The sudden cold front was no surprise. Each time anybody dies in the Khumalo household, the weather makes no mistake in getting this point across. When it's a king, everybody knows not to leave their laundry outside at night. It rains cat, mice and dogs. It is that kind of weather that creates a dark and grey foggy atmosphere. One that drivers with faulty wiper blades don't like.

He placed his hand on his shoulder when he arrived and Manqoba did not raise his head from the counter. Muzi placed himself on the bar stool and the bartender asked what he could get him.

"Just a glass of water thanks", he replied. He'd had too much to drink for the day, according to him.

"Ufunani la Muzi"(What are you doing here?)

"You disappeared from the cemetery only to come here and drown yourself in alcohol?"

"I don't need a lecture from you", Manqoba dismissed him with his forehead still resting on his lower arms on the counter. The water arrived and Muzi fixed the glass on the coaster.

"Okay", Muzi said in defeat and just sat there.

"I am not ready to take over bro", Manqoba finally confessed.

"You'll never be", Muzi calmly said and took a sip on his water. Both their potent, yet very distinguished scents fought in the air, causing confusion to any pair of nostrils that passed by.

"Maybe I don't want to be. Why did they choose me? You'd do a better job than I would", he continues to vent.

"And why is that?"

"I am not made for such a huge task. My portion is IT and crime. Phelela lapho"(Ends there). Muzi takes a deep breath out. They were both hurting from the passing of their father but Manqoba was also stressing over it. His life was about to change, and he was nowhere near ready for that.

"I see you haven't been only drinking in this bar but you've been smoking something as well. You've known about this your whole life. Why is it only coming as a surprise now? Uyangidida manje mina"(Your actions are baffling to me), Muzi says and raises his hand to wave at the lady who was greeting him. She was no stranger. An old classmate. So old that it took him a while before he could put her face to her name. Manqoba was sinking in silence.

"Let's go home", Muzi adds.

"I didn't ask you if it was a good idea for me to come here why would you think I'd need your opinion to leave?", Manqoba let out. Muzi shook his head and stood up with the car keys, both his and Manqoba's.

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"Manqoba hasn't been inaugurated as chief kodwa already uzenzela umathanda emzini wam?!", Evelyn yells at Enhle who had moved a couple of vases around and changed the direction of the dinner table.

"It's not like that. I just thought..."

"There's no platform for you to think. This is my house. Stop being wayward and focus on how you're going to support your husband on this journey", Evelyn screams as she pushes the table back to its original position, in her long pyjamas and unfastened brown gown. The loose belt was even sweeping the floor. Enhle did not think of what she did as a big deal hence she rolled her eyes at what she perceived as Evelyn being nothing short of dramatic. Most of the family members had left.

Muzi walked in on this altercation and pinched his nose bridge in irritation.

"Now what the hell is going on?", he couldn't hide the level of his annoyance.

"Ask this 2-minute noodle queen over here!", Evelyn snapped before she could march back to her room in her messy hair and puffy, red eyes.

"Enhle kwenzakalan?"(What's going on?)

"I moved a couple things around and..."

"Why would you do that?", Muzi asked in a husk.

"I just thought they would look better that way"

"Look, I don't want to get involved in female squabbles but to avoid trouble, just leave everything as it", he said and dropped himself on the couch.

"Okay then. Where is my husband?"

"I have no idea", Muzi shamelessly lied, which wouldn't be the first time he did in a scenario like this.

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"Enter!", an emotional Thando yells from her bed when Muzi was knocking on her closed door.

"Baby girl!", he lowly said and approached her for a sitdown hug. She fell apart even further.

"I'm sorry", he whispered with his hand on her overly oily hair. She had overdosed on the hair food.

"I just... I just wish his death wasn't so unexpected and quick", she lets out in cuts and breaks. Her tears were suffocating her.

"What do you mean?", he asked in a voice full of comfort and concern.

"I don't know. I wish he fell sick for a while instead of being fine and dying from a heart attack the next day.

That way, I would've somehow acclimatized myself to the idea of him being possibly gone or something", she confessed and he pulled a deep breath out.

"I think that's a bit... selfish don't you think?", he cautiously says.

"It's kinda the same as a person who dies from suicide. Most times, we always expect people to keep alive or die according to our rules, not for theirs but for our sakes and our own selfish reasons", he explains and she shuts her eyes when it begins to make sense to her. She nods and tightens the hug around her brother, who then kisses her round but cold forehead.

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After Thando managed to slip and fall into deep sleep, Muzi tucked her in and walked outside to find his wife.

When he finally did, she was washing tripe and cow intestines in a bowl by herself.

"Look at you being a wife", he said with a smile and she laughed.

"Hey baby", she greeted, and he got to her to steal a kiss. She then angled her face up so he could kiss her properly.

"Hm awusanuki awusanuki yilo mogodu"(You smell terrible because of this tripe), he teased and she laughed even harder. He enjoys every second of her effortless giggles. Especially if he is the reason for them.

"Kodwa usangithanda"(but you still love me), she teases back with her tongue out.

"That'll never change. You look beautiful mama", he says and brushes the part of her weave that was flowing out of the brown and silk LV doek around her head.

"Thank you daddy", she shows her gratitude with a huge smile on her face but her hands continued with the work.

"Aren't you cold out here?", his concern pushed him to ask.

"Ngiyaqeda manje"(I'm almost done).

"Did you bring the spinach as I asked?", she asked with her eyes on the bowl.

"Ah ngikhohliwe mina"(I forgot)

"Ha-ana Muzi...", she slightly stomped her feet from the backless chair she was seated on. He laughed.

"I'm kidding. I'm kidding", he quickly said before she could throw her toys around any further.

"Mciim yaz wena", she said and shook her head.

"It's in the kitchen. How could I forget when I'm the one who asked for it?", he said and went down to wrap his hands around her waist.

"Kodwa uyangiphazamisa yaz"(You're interrupting me), she giggled throughout the wet neck kisses she was receiving.

"Am I?", he whispered as he nibbled on her soft neck. They rub noses lovingly before he could let out an exhausted breath out when they pulled apart. He wasn't quite himself. With good reason.

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They went back inside the house with Muzi carrying the bowls and the knife. He could've easily had the tripe at the back, but she offered to make it from scratch just how he likes- hoping to cheer him up. He added that she makes the 'gravy'-spinach she always makes, and she agreed. He even got a business idea when she introduced that type of spinach to him and said he's going to find ways to get it into supermarkets since it's not available as yet. The twins came down running on the stairs and she yelled "Hey! Hey! This is still a funeral! What's with the noise?"

"No, it's not", Mxo cheekily said.

"Excuse you?", Muzi said and he kept quiet. It didn't take long for them to be at it again.

"Boikanyo! Kopano! Fuseg man!", she sternly yelled. She had had enough of the delinquent rascals for one day. Muzi raised a face they both know too well, and it worked. They bent their lips and took the walk of shame back upstairs. Betso complained about how crazy they drive her sometimes and apologized for swearing because she knows how much he hates it. He pulled her for a hug, and she stood on her toes.

"It's okay. Sometimes you just need to keep quiet and look the other way. Their lucky packet energy quickly dies down when they don't get a verbal reaction", he suggests and places a kiss on her frustrated forehead.

Chapter Two

The royal house had quietened down a couple days after the funeral. A family meeting was requested by the elders for reasons known to them. When they first arrived in the house, Betso, Thando and Enhle were lounging in the TV room indolent with Thando still in her pyjamas. A luxury only she can afford amongst them three since she was under no expectation to keep up a certain impressive image. She ran up the stairs to go call her mother and brothers, following the order of bab'Mkhul'Sizwe, her father's youngest uncle.

Betso and Enhle straightened out their legs anxiously as they both still find this man with an intimidating stature uncomfortable to be around. He threw sharp one look towards the couch they were both seated and only then did they bump heads asking to be excused. According to bab'Sizwe, this is the very first thing they should've done at the sight of him. When everyone came down and greeted, only then did he take his seat. He then cleared his throat and put his hat on his knee.

"Nje ngoba sonke siyazi ukuthi isikhothamile indlalifa ka mfowethu, kufanele manje silungiselele inkosi yethu entsha, uManqoba,Nathisiyabusa, Khumalo. Akekho ongalazi loludaba. Manje ke..."(As we all know about the passing of the heir to my brother's throne, it's necessary now that we start preparing for the inauguration of our new chief, Manqoba Nathisiyabusa Khumalo. We've all been expecting this. So now...", an unsolicited entrance disrupted Sizwe from consummating his briefing. Evelyn irritably placed her palm on her face and looked away.

"Aningi ndlulise la, yifamily meeting enjan le la kushorta khona amalunga amanye womndeni?"(What kind of a family meeting is this that's held in the absentia of other family members?)

That would be Mbhekiseni Khumalo, the half-brother to the fallen chief.

"You're interrupting a very important meeting Mbhekisen", Evelyn reprimands from where she is seated.

"Mbhekiseni", Bab'Sizwe calmly calls out.

"Yebo bab'mncan"

"Wa nyamalala kangaka. Ubuyaphi?"(What yanked you out of your disappearance?)

"I'd also like to know", Evelyn adds to Sizwe's question. Mbhekiseni shot a slicing brief look at her.

"Where I've been has nothing to do with you,ice queen. You shouldn't even sit in on this. Go make us tea like the good makoti you should be", Mbhekiseni vomits out these words with zero uncertainty. Evelyn scoffs and Sizwe reprimands him to guard his mouth. Mbhekiseni, disregarding every presence in the room, takes out a small bottle of whiskey from the pocket of his grey blazer.

"Ku ngan ungazanga uzongcwaba umfowenu?"(Why didn't you come for your brother's burial?)

"Ey bengimatasa man nibongixolela"(I was busy please forgive me), he airily says and takes another sip of his intoxicating beverage.

"Kodwa ukwazile ukuveza ubuso kulo mhlngano ongak'funi ngalutho?"(But you managed to arrive to this meeting that has nothing to do with you), Sizwe shoots out. Muzi and Manqoba were both too tired and

hangover to argue, or even comment on anything. They went overboard last night with the indoor drinking.

"Angisayizwa kahle manje. UBab'mncan ukhuluma ngani ngoba yimina ofanele yile shlalo futhi ashade nalo ice queen"(I don't understand how this has nothing to do with me when I'm the one who's supposed to sit on this throne and also marry this ice queen), Mbhekiseni states his perspective. Everyone laughs. The laughter emanates from two possibilities--That he's either joking or that the alcohol got the better of important parts of his brain.

"I'm not joking", he says to Evelyn. The smile on her face abruptly disappears.

"Your blood is diluted, and you have the audacity to think you can marry me? Or even become a chief for that matter?", Evelyn blurts out and he stands to charge at her. Muzi was already shielding his mother before Mbhekiseni could get to her.

"My husband was 100 times more of a man than you could ever be. I don't appreciate you disrespecting him in this manner!", an emotional Evelyn insists on ripping her chest apart, regardless of how volatile Mbhekiseni is known to be.

"Makoti nawe musa!"(Stop talking!), Sizwe directs this to Evelyn. Muzi was holding tightly to Mbhekiseni's wrists with no effort at all.

"U lwa nami heh mfana?"(Are you fighting with me boy?), Mbhekiseni threatened through gritted teeth. Manqoba stood up and left.

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"This life ain't it bro I miss Joburg", Mxo complains to Melokuhle who was drowning in his own thoughts. With his back lazily sinking into the couch, in his room.

"Are you listening to me man?!", he hits him on the knee for attention.

"Hm?!", he quickly snapped out of it.

"I SAID... I am going insane. I miss Joburg", he says and dramatically pulls down his cheeks. Melo laughs.

"Ave une drama. What's in Joburg that you can't find here? I live here every single day and I'm never bored", Melo defends.

"Ey I ain't you bro you vibe to anything", Mxo's annoyed self continues to vent. Melo continues to laugh.

"Also, why would you choose KZN over JHB?"

"I dunno. There's peace here I guess", Melo explains.

"Really? So, it has nothing to do with living with my mom and shii?"

"Naahh. Your moms and I are cool", Melo corrects.

"Rea-LLY?"

"Yeah. I ain't picking sides"

"Neither am I"

"Anyway, what's up with Lwandile these days?", Melokuhle asks with a confused frown on his face.

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know. He's pulling back from everyone. Man, we used to video call at least twice a week. Not anymore.

I've only ever spoken to him once or twice since yall got here"

"I don't know what you're on about. Anyway, where are all the huns hiding at because ngibathe ngiyabheka nix!", Mxo says with eagerness and Melo shakes his head, stands up and laughs. Mxo follows out.

"Are you even hitting any?", he continues to be a pest as they walk downstairs.

"Awungiyeka"(Leave me alone), Melo says and walks into the man cave.

"You heard what dad and MQ said about this place yesterday",Mxo reminds.

"This is where they keep all the good stuff", Melo excitedly says and walks behind the bar.

"Come on man you'll get us in trouble again"

"Will you relax?"

"Look, old man is chilled but there's buttons I'm not going to willingly press. If they catch you in here, you're on your own", Mxo says,raises his hand in surrender and walks out in reverse.

"Okay okay. Sissy", Melo says and follows him out.

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Muzi walked the yard trying to get some of the freshest air that he so much and particularly loved being home for. His phone rang and he thought twice about answering it. He felt no desire to be discussing anything that had to do with work at that moment. The company could collapse at that moment and he'd certainly opt to see to it later.

"Bongiwe", he finally answered.

"Mr K Hi. I know you said no interruptions whatsoever but CleanIt is threatening to take us to court", she was panicked. Muzi exhaled.

"There was a slight mistake with the slogan..."

"Whatever it is, please fix it and make sure the company name stays out of it. When you approached me asking that I give you office space, you were professional. Everything about your proposal was impressive. That's why I even bought in and agreed we partner up. I deal with construction. I know nothing about advertising. Clean this mess", he sharply commanded and Bongiwe immediately said "Yessir". He switched off the phone and placed it in his pocket when he felt the stress was piling up.

Betso was in the kitchen preparing dinner for the family after stressful afternoon. She could cringe at the thought of the part 2 that is to take place the following day. Just like the kids, she was also desperate to go back to her own house. The school had been notified about the expected absence of the twins and there was an agreement for them to submit back all the work that got sent to them via email, so they don't get left behind. Ava now lives overseas and having all the kids there except her broke her heart. She gave a flimsy excuse about not being able to get away from work to attend the funeral. She doesn't come home much. Even when she is home, when her maternal grandmother speaks anything of visiting her mother in prison, she always finds an excuse not to.

"Pass me that strainer and get off from there!", she said to Mxo and took the rice off the stove. Mxo got off the counter and handed her the strainer.

"Where's your brother?", she asked.

"Which one? My brother-brother or my brother?", he teased and she laughed, hitting him with a dishcloth.

"Lwandile man"

"He's napping", he said and picked up a peeled carrot from one of the bowls.

"This is why I don't want you in the kitchen when I'm cooking. O shortisa di ingredients Kopano man", she scolded impatiently, and he laughed. His laughter began fading when he had a sweet voice knocking from the front door.

"Sanibonani", the young lady said.

"Yebo sawubona", Betso politely greeted back while straining the rice into the sink.

"Uma uthi ngimbongele kuwe for idoek"(My mom says I should thank you on her behalf for the headwrap), she said and extended her hand to Betso so she takes it. Betso signaled to Mxo that he takes it. His ears were evidently blocked.

"Zinjan iynwele?"(How's her hair?), Betso asked and sprinkled Mxo with some of the cold water off her fingers so he springs out of his daydreaming. He snapped out of it and realised what was being requested of him and took the doek. The corners of his lips were twitching from trying to conceal a smile. The girl shyly dropped her eyes to the floor and said "Ugundile"(She shaved them off). A brief laugh slipped from Betso's lips when she remembered the disastrous incident where the lady in question's silk doek caught fire when she was busy gossiping at a funeral.

"Shame man. Thanks for bringing it sweetie", Betso said and the girl said "Nisaleni kahle", with her one hand holding the other.

"Vala lo mlomo before you swallow a fly!", Betso said and checked on her steaming stew. Mxo laughed and attempted to walk out.

"Manje uyaphi weMbulazi?"(Where are you now going?)

He stood at the door in a daze with his hand scratching the back of his head.

"Ngisayobheka iynkomo nobaba ngale sbayeni"(I'm going to check on the cows with dad by the kraal), he blatantly lied and punctuated his failed deceit with a laugh he couldn't stop.

"Iynkomo ne?"(Cows hey?), Betso said and laced her sentence with sarcastic tone.

"Yebo mama"

"Did you sort your laundry just like I asked you to?", she asked and brought her hand to her lips so she tastes the stew on her palm.

"But ma. There's helps for that"

"Did you or did you not?"

"Not", he lowly confessed and sulked his way upstairs.

Chapter three

"Do you really have to go?", Mxo asked Melo who was now punctuating his final school look with a blue blazer. The red and white emblem on his left pocket stood out.

"Yeah. It's presentations today and if I miss them I'll have to do them when everyone has done theirs. Not happening buddy", Melo defends as he stuffs his books into his backpack.

"Come on. It's a Friday today and Lwa and I are going back home after the inauguration", Mxo sulks in his pyjamas, barefoot.

"I'll be back before school's out then. I promise", he affirms and they fist bump. At that very instant, his ride to school honks outside out of impatience. He walks out of his room and leaves Mxo there, rushing downstairs. Mxo walked out and went back to his room with Lwa. He found his twin staring out the window, obviously deep in thought. Could've easily mistaken for contemplating murder.

"And then wena? Udliwa yin?"(What's bugging you?), Mxo said as he slipped back into the sheets. The cold morning breeze around the house demanded him to.

"Nothing", Lwa coldly stated and kept his eyes riveted outside.

"You've been behaving like a fresh widow all week. You and I both know this has nothing to do with umkhulu. Tell me what's going on because you're dampening my mood too, which is unfair. Mxolisi rants and Lwa lazily turns to look at him with grimace.

"What the fxck is eating you up? I can't help you if I don't know what it is", Mxo insists. Lwa huffs out a lightweight laugh.

"You sound like dad", he comments.

"Now tell me what's going on? We've been together since womb days you should be able to trust me by now"

"Womb days", Lwandile laughs at this statement.

"Yes. Gestational ride or dies", Mxo adds.

"Oh fxck you", Lwandile laughs even harder, then walks over to sit on the bed. It takes him a couple of minutes before letting his chest open. His impatient twin was looking at him with desperate, growing worrisome eyes.

"Mxo, I think... actually no. I've realized... Okay fxck this. I am gay", he confessed and turned to look for a reaction in his brother's blank eyes. Mxo opened his mouth to speak but shut it immediately afterwards.

"Wait... You mean...", Mxo said before he exploded in heart-piercing laughter till he fell on his side and ultimately his back on the bed.

"Mciim", Lwa irritably said and stood up to leave. Mxo quickly ran to the door, locked it and placed the key the pocket of his pyjama pants, still laughing.

"Wait wait wait. You mean to say that's the big spooky secret that's been keeping you awake all this while? Coming out to me actually gave you a headache? I've been told I'm special but this just thumps a stamp on it", he says and walks over to dump himself on the couch with an overly amused look on his face, leaving an irritated Lwa at the door.

"This is not funny", he says, still standing by the door.

Mxo tapped the side of the leather couch to indicate that he wants Lwa to sit next to him.

"I've known you for 16 years and you think.. bra you invaded MY womb space and I had to suck it up and live with it for 16 fxcking gravy years and you think this is news to me?!", Mxo rants and Lwa turns to him in surprise.

"You know?"

"I been knew! Dummy"

"How come you never said anything?"

"Your sexuality is none of anybody's business. Not even mine. You may have photocopied my identity but I have no business coming out on your behalf"

Lwandile laughs.

"Oh fxck you very much", he says to Mxo with a shy smile.

Mxo places his hand around his shoulder.

"I love you. Nothing is ever going to change that. Even if you wake up with an extra pair of eyes on your forehead I'll still love you the same. I'm not saying I'm not gonna laugh but I'd still love you the same", he confesses and they both burst in tear-filled laughter.

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Meanwhile in the one of the rooms in the royal house,

"Good morning sthandwasami", Muzi said to a thoughtful Betso who was already wide awake but far away. He wrapped his hands around stomach and asked "What's wrong?". She placed hers above his and shook her head.

"I can see that something is bothering you. Ikiphe lenyoka esetshanini udaddy ayibulale once"(Take out this snake in the grass so daddy can kill it), he says and Betso laughs.

"Cheesy", she remarks and he laughs as well, appreciating the smile on her face. Something he regards as an achievement.

"Tell your husband what's on your mind?", he whispers and pillows his chin against her shoulder. She takes a heavy breath out.

"I had a bad dream. That's all", she lets out.

"What was it about? Were you being chased by a screaming fork?", he asks and she laughs, slightly hitting him on the arm. When both their laughter dissipated into the air,

"I.. I dreamt I was pregnant", she says and the smile on her husband's face slowly disappears.

"I'm sorry...", he whispers in a throaty voice. She shrugged and pursed her widened lips together.

"I'm sorry I couldn't protect you that day", he adds.

"Don't. If I ever had to take a bullet for you ever again I'd do it. All over again and not think twice about it", she affirmed.

"That's the thing. I don't want you taking bullets for me. I'd rather die than lose you. You know this"

"I almost lost you once. I'm never putting myself through that pain again. Watching you hooked to hospital machines sucked out my heart Mbulazi", she counter argues.

"Why does this suddenly feel like a race of who is gonna lose who first?", he says and she drops her face back and smiles.

"No one is losing the other here. We're gonna grow old together and die at the same time, holding hands even in the afterlife", she says.

"Hamba Shakespeare", he teases and she laughs.

"Trust you to ruin a beautiful moment", she says and he pulls the sheets above his head, travelling to her navel. She couldn't contain the laughs as his touch on her stomach felt ticklish.

"Wenzan manje baby?"

"You said I've ruined a beautiful moment. Allow me to remake it?"

...

The noise encapsulated by the grey walls of Johannesburg prison was hurtful to the ears of those who have not been acclimatized to it. When their stomachs get full, the prisoners always think it's somehow a wise idea to burn off the calories by fighting one another, most of the time. If the warder is an ignorant or lazy one, blood is most likely to be spilt.

"Hey hey hey! Voetsek julle man!!", the warder intently broke off the fight between the two ladies while the others continued to cheer them on. He threatened the lot and they dispersed to their respective cells.

"I did not see you at lunch", Gugu's cellmate remarks and looks at her suspiciously as she sat on her lower bunk of the bed, reading a novel.

"I wasn't hungry", she replied without raising her eyes to make contact.

"Mmm. Thembi and Lorencia were at it again", she informs excitedly to no reply from Gugu.

"Arg how long are you planning on being miss goody two shoes in here huh? Jailbird slay queen?", she mocked and Gugu pounced on her in that very same breath. She pushed her to the wall and held a toothbrush with a burnt sharpened edge against her neck.

"Listen, I don't want trouble and you smell like one. I lived peacefully with my previous cell mate. If you're going to be any different from her then I'm sorry but I'm gonna have to end you", she hissed at her and the mate raised her hands in surrender. The warder hit the metal rails with a rod and asked what was going on. Gugu quickly hid the brush before they could be broken apart.

"Should I take you back to your old cell?", the warder threatened the new mate.

"But I'm not the one--"

"SHOULD I take you back BACK to your old cell?!", the warder reiterated. The mate instantly got the message. Gugu was evidently protected.

"No...", she lowly responded.

"What was that?", the female warder said, holding her ear out indicating that she wants to hear her properly.

"I said no. I'm fine here"

"Good. Behave", she warned and walked out. Pulling the rails so she closes them in. They challenged each other with a stare before Gugu could walk back to her bed and book.

...

The school siren went off and some were already at the gate ready to go home. Melo did not keep his forgotten promise to Mxo. He attended every class and session. Mxo should've known better than to try and convince a nerd at heart to bunk school. Jessica walked up to him as he was packing his books standing over his desk and hugged him from behind.

"H-hey. What's up?", he softly said and continued packing his books.

"Non' much really. Just wanted to thank you for the flowers and chocolates you sent to me when I was in hospital. Even when you were going through a rough patch yourself. I'm sorry about your granddad"

"Don't sweat it. That's what friends are for right? I wasn't even expecting you back so soon", Melo said and turned to sit on his desk and press his palms on the edges.

"I'm okay now. Friends? We're clearly not on the same page", Jess says and tucks her blonde hair behind her ear. Melo purses his lips with an interested naughty look on his face. She took his tie in between her fingers and flirtingly played with it. Mthokozisi, Melo's 'bestfriend turned archenemy' walked in and the first thing he said was "You're an a**hole Melokuhle!". Melo turned to face him with a frown on his face.

"And what the fxck is your problem?", he said to a furious Mthokozisi.

"Busi floods my phone with crying emojis every night. She even missed school because of yalls breakup. Hell her mom even put her through therapy and you outchea flirting with this Karxn?!", he shoots out and Jessica immediately takes offense.

"You're well versed in racism but trigonometry has your dumba** by the nuts!", she retaliated and Melokuhle laughed unintentionally.

"Yeah whatever. For what it's worth, what you're pulling is a real bxtch move Melo", Mthokozisi remarked and pulled his heavy backpack over his shoulder.

"Get over yourself. People break up all the time. And for what IT'S WORTH, bengiy'thanda leya ngan. Tell her to tell you the whole truth", Melo furiously says and zips up his bag.

"The only truth I know is that she's pregnant and it's your baby"

"What?", Melo lowly says and drops his shoulders. Mthokozisi instantly regrets his loose mouth and tries to respond but instead starts choking.

"Oh my God Mtho are you okay?!", Jessica rushes up to him when she notices his eyes rolling back. Melo runs to them and they get him gently to the floor. He begins having a seizure and has white foam coming out of his mouth.

"Kuhle call an ambulance OMG!", an emotional, panicked and teary plea comes from a kneeling Jessica.

Chapter four

An influx of more family members made it all feel real to the pending king. He was no longer in a daze about taking the reigns from his deceased father but ready was nowhere near the right word. The cows were already put to the slaughter and the traditional beer was waiting deliciously to be consumed. Even a blind man could sense how big the event was going to be.

If there's an English word for sphithiphithi please kindly insert it here. Betso bumped into Enhle at the top of the stairway carefully holding a black and white attire on her arm. It had just been ironed.

"Hey Queeeen", she said to Enhle in a teasing tone. Enhle laughed and acknowledged the form of address.

"I haven't seen you all day", Enhle remarked.

"Ma made me manager of the pots of the back", she replies and airily rolled her eyes.

"Okay. Are they still in a meeting? It's been 2 hours now are they discussing a national heist yin?", Enhle questioned. Betso shrugged, placed both hands in her apron and made a quick trip down the stairs.

...

The elders stood up patiently when the meeting was adjourned. Muzi and Manqoba remained seated around the dining table. The shut doors were successful in keeping all types of noises outside. Evelyn kept expecting Mbhekiseni to show up to no avail. She had a feeling he would pounce on her like the wild animal he is. She derived this derogative from how he always smells like a wet dog. According to her. She doesn't mind him, just as long as he's at least 3 meters away from her and keeps his mouth shut. Mbhekiseni was the type of person who got magnetized to you just by the hatred you displayed for him.

Bab'Sizwe placed his affirmative hand on Manqoba's shoulder.

"Ngine sqiniseko sokuthi U bab'wakho uyaziqhenya ngawe la elele khona ngale squmo os'thathile ndodana"(I'm pretty sure your father is proud of you for the decision you took son), he stated and patted him twice on the shoulder and squeezed.

"We're here to guide and show you the way. Ungakhathazeki kakhulu"(Don't worry much), he added and Muzi nodded on MQ's behalf. The other elders had walked out and left the door open. An avalanche of noise was pouring in. Paroxysms of loud laughs coming from the ladies in the kitchen. Bab'Sizwe also eventually left.

"You've got this", Muzi reassured and put out his fist so they can bump. Manqoba gave a halfhearted smile and they fist bumped.

"Anyway, let me go find my wife", Manqoba said and screeched the tile with his chair so he can stand.

"Olyt", Muzi said as he unlocked his phone.

"Wait...", Manqoba turned towards Muzi before he can walk any further and Muzi bent his neck back to 'see' what he had to say.

"Did you finish the recent bottle of cognac all by yourself? Wakanda stress do you have?", Manqoba said and

Muzi briefly stared at him like he was trying to figure out why he had suddenly grown horns. It then hit the both of them, at the same time.

"Ayayaya!", they both exclaimed in exasperation and Muzi stood up so they could find the boys.

...

"Sit!", Manqoba said to all three after they pushed them into the dark study, after they found them sleeping.

Melokuhle placed his fingers on his throbbing temples. Mxolisi snorted his way to the couch.

"I don't even know what I'm doing here", Lwandile said. Completely sober. Muzi opened the drawer to the desk that used to belong to his father and took out an object. The two rascals were already at the door preparing to run only to find the door locked.

"So you're drunk enough to lazy around but sober enough to run?", he said as he switched the device on.

Lwandile was just standing there waiting to be sentenced for innocence.

"I said sit!", Manqoba said and went to sit on the edge of the desk.

They came back.

"Is that a taser?", Melokuhle nervously asked.

"The fact that you think that tells me that you're too drunk", Muzi said and held it to his mouth.

"A breathalyzer?", Lwandile commented.

"I don't have to tell you what to do...", Muzi said as he waited for Melo to breathe into the object.

"Dad come on", Mxolisi begged.

"How many times did we specifically tell you to stay out of the man cave?", Manqoba interrogated.

"We never went..."

"BREATHE!", Muzi was getting impatient.

"I promise we're not drunk. See, the thing with these things is that they can easily give you false results. We see it all the time in the physics lab", Melo defended.

"Exactly. Also, we had cranberry juice. Cranberry, carbon dioxide and ions create alcohol in the blood dad come on?", Mxolisi added to the defense.

"HUH?!", Muzi and Manqoba both looked at him incredulously. Lwandile internalized a laughter.

"I don't think that science is correct. Breathe dammit", Muzi commanded.

"And why are you standing that far?", Manqoba directed this at Lwandile.

"You know I don't drink", he said with certainty. Manqoba looked at him dubiously before he went "Mmm".

Deep down, he knew he was telling the truth. The two finally gave in and exhaled into the breathalyzer sequentially. They both tested insanely positive. Muzi dropped the hand with the breathalyzer in defeat, with a look that was borderline disappointed and speechless.

"Ngitheni ngotshwala ku nina nobabili?" (What did I say about alcohol to you two?), he questioned, and they darted their eyes around. Sucking onto their bent lips.

"Can I go?", Lwandile asked. Muzi insisted he also gets checked. He captured his breath and that put him in the

clear. Manqoba threw Lwandile the keys and he left.

"I'll deal with them", Muzi said and Manqoba threw a half-open eye to the two and told them they're now under heavy surveillance.

"Your stupid legs must be wobbly. Sit", he instructed and they scurried to the couch. He wheeled the leather chair that was in front of the mahogany desk and sat in front of them. He then took out his phone, turned on the flashlight and inspected both their eyes. They sharply squinted and frowned throughout all of this.

"Exactly how much did you drink?", he shot out with intense curiosity.

"Not that much. You couldn't even tell we were drunk", Melokuhle continued to defend.

"Which we are not", Mxolisi, the paralegal, footed in. Muzi exhaled heavily.

"Boys, this is not a joke. I don't want you drinking. Not like this", he gravely stated.

"But you drink all the time and you never do anything silly"

"I can't be your parent and your age mate at the same time. Listen, alcohol is not going anywhere. Give it two more years. I'm asking for just two sober years from the two of you", he said and they both looked down.

"Where's your car Melokuhle?", he asked, and Melo cleared his throat.

"At the scrapyard"

"When were you planning to tell me this awusho?"

"That wasn't because of booze. AND I wasn't the one driving it", his words faded the more he spoke in shame.

"Who was?"

"That's a long story?"

"U tshela mina nge long story? Did you win that car in a bet somewhere?"

"No. You bought it"

"This is new", Mxolisi said as his eyes moves from his dad and his brother as they conversed.

"Awuthule wena madakweni"(Shut up, alcoholic), Muzi shot out from taxed patience.

"Okur"(Okay), Mxolisi sheepishly said and sunk further into the couch on his back.

...

"Baby!", Manqoba yelled to Enhle who was making shuffling sounds in the ensuite.

"Yes love?", her disembodied voice responded to the call. Manqoba kept quiet. She appeared with a towel around her body and dripping wet hair.

"This is not the shirt I picked out", he said with his brow raised.

"Uhm... I know but I felt like..."

"Hayi man Enhle. Angiyona ingan'. I specifically told you that I want to wear the black shirt for tonight", he calmly stated.

"This one matches your sneakers perfectly. They're both white", she tried to make him see her reason.

"Why do you always want to control me with every single thing? Thembalami please, for the love of oMbulazi, stop micromanaging me", he emphasized multiple times with the blade of his right hand on his left palm.

"Ah you should've ironed it yourself then!", she said and stuffed her hands under her armpits.

"Angizwanga?"(Please repeat that?), he sneered. He turned to walk back into the ensuite.

"You will not walk away from me while I'm talking to you Mbalenhle", he rigidly stated and she stopped on her tracks. She clenched her fists to control the anger that was towering down on her hot head. She turned back slowly and faced him.

"Manqoba", she said lowly, so much that he almost didn't hear her.

"I do everything for you and I never complain. You could've said a simple "Thank you" that I ironed it for you but instead you're here making noise about how it's the wrong one. Is not going to fit?!", she irritably lashed out.

"You want me to thank you for your insisting on treating me like a child?"

"For Pete's sake it is just a shirt!", she yelled and stomped her feet. He slowly walked until he was standing in front of her.

"Ngithe, lahla lo mkhuba wakho woku khuluma nami ngathi u dilika eshlahleni"(I told you to stop speaking to me like you're falling off a tree), he threatened looking over her relatively shorter self.

"I am not your maid, Manqoba"

"That's correct. You're my wife", he argued.

"Tell that to your side chicks. I'm done with you patronizing me!", she took off her ring and threw it at him. She tried to walk away, and he caught her wrist. Her other hand came flying to slap him but he caught it as well, crossing his arms.

"Ungenelwe yini ngempela wena?! (What on earth is wrong with you?!", his appalled self-interrogated.

"You can't fight me Enhle. If I fight back, you'll end up in ICU. Don't start what you will not be able to finish baby"

"So you'd hit me?!", she asked in disbelief

"You would've started it. Isn't that so?"

"Just... Awungiyeka"(Let go of me), she said breathlessly. She fought hard to escape his grip, but he just watched like she was making a spectacle of herself.

"Are you angry that my children are coming with their mothers? I can't have this ceremony without them, and I knew they were gonna give hassles had I disputed to them bringing the kids themselves", he explained, and she still fought off his restraining grip on her.

"Okay. Okay", he eventually surrendered and left the room. She then collapsed on the floor and manufactured tears enough to fill a pool.

...

"What did dad say?", Lwandile asked when he walked into the room snacking on braai meat he got outside. He closed the door with his foot since both his hands were occupied with the plate and the wors in the other.

"You already know", Mxolisi said and pulled his t-shirt over the rest of his torso. He had just taken a shower to sober up. He grabbed some meat off the plate without considering permission.

"If bad manners were a person", Lwandile said and sat on the bed with him. Mxolisi laughed.

"Anyway, your girlfriend is here", Lwandile informed and kept chewing.

"My girlfriend?"

"Yeah. The one mom cxxckblocked you from the other day in the kitchen", he said and laughed.

"How did you see all that because the last time I checked you were sleeping?"

"I was about to come down the stairs so I just decided to watch", he continued to laugh.

"Anyway, forget that. Ukuphi?"(Where is she?), he excitedly said like a predator on a hunt at the sight of vulnerable prey.

"At the back. By the fire. She came with her mom though I must warn", Lwandile says and searches for the remote.

"Where's the remote", he asked and Mxolisi said "Here", placing the meat in his hand. Lwandile pursed his lips and gave a bored stare to his brother who was now frantic looking for his cologne.

"Is this t-shirt fine?", he asked and pinched it off his chest.

"Arg nevermind", he took it off when Lwandile was taking too long to respond.

"Since when do you even try to impress a girl wena? Besides, I don't think she'll mind your outfit she's...", he stopped.

"She's...", Mxolisi repeated with broadened eyes.

"I don't know. Simple and rural?"

"And gorgeous. Thunder thighs mfana! Say it. Why are you giving incomplete descriptions?", he said with a cxxcky smile. Lwandile rolled his eyes.

"Ngeke ikuqome leya ngan. Sit your plank azz down"

"Why are you so sure?"

"I know she won't. She'll just tell you that you look like a player aphume uit uit kuwe"

"Wanna bet?"

"Spare her. She doesn't look like she knows much. You just want to phula her nhliziyu ngoba uyinja"(You just want to break her heart because you're a dog). A trembling laugh escaped Mxolisi's lips as he spritzed on his cologne onto his neck and his fresh t-shirt.

...

"Are we taking your car or mine?", Muzi asked Manqoba as they walked down the stairs to stock up on booze for the night.

"Anything with wheels man", an irritated Manqoba groaned as he lead the way down.

"How long are you planning on keeping up this bad mood for?"

"Arg it's not that", he nonchalantly said and opened the door. The yard was fairly full and merry. The chief strongly believed in feeding the community properly each time something was going on in the royal house.

"Then what is it?", Muzi asked and Manqoba stopped walking. He exhaled before he could speak.

"Women can be--"

"Hold that thought", Muzi said as he attended to his ringing phone.

"Muzikayise here?", he answered.

"I thought I'd told you never to call me anymore?", he raised his nose at the irritation the call was flaking off of him.

"There's no we. Lento ka us ayisekho", he insisted. Meanwhile, Manqoba's eye was captured by the lady who was delivering food to the elders under the tree. She handed them their plates and the old men were chatting her up. Her smile and distant, courteous laughter lit up the entire yard and a portion of the street. Muzi's voice was slowly fading in his ears along with the indistinct chatterings in the background.

"Don't do it", Muzi said after hitting him on his chest.

"Hawu. What did I do?"

"I know that look. Don't do it"

"Suka. Who is she anyway?", he asked as they both hopped into Manqoba's car that was parked outside.

"You don't remember Sphehile?"

Manqoba's eyes were still fixed outside.

Chapter Five

Most times, people hold on to people even when it hurts — for the simple reason that they think it will hurt more should they let go.

Enhle finally got up from the floor and wiped her red and flushed cheeks. Her skin was beginning to feel dry, exclaiming the fact that she hadn't moisturized. The evening breeze also sent shudders that travelled through her body hairs. She dumped her whole weight on the bed and pressed onto the edge hoping to draw some strength from there.

"Pull yourself together Mbalenhle. Changing men because they cheat is no different to jumping from a pan and into a fire", the words her late mother used to say to her each time she went home crying resounded in her head. "Doesn't he take care of you? Isn't he there for the kids? What are you wearing? What's that monstrosity you drive? Do you think he would be doing all this for you if he didn't love you? His only job is to provide. Indoda ngeke ihlale umini wonke ibukana nawe emehlweni. Kodwa into emqoka ukuthi ibuya kubani mase lishonile ilanga. Are you not the one he comes home to everyday?" (Your man will never be able to sit all day looking looking at you in your eyes. What's important is who he comes to when the day ends), they went on, and on, and on. She raised her face and it met the full body mirror which contrasted poorly against the paint since they were both white.

"You're a big girl now Enhle, a wife. A home is not a tuck shop. Kuyimanje ngisahleli no baba wakho ngoba azanka ngam'vumela omunye umfazi ukuthi a dlalele phez'kwe khanda lami. Yenza ngok'fanayo ukhombise ukuthi uzalwa uban habe" (I've never allowed another woman to play on the top of my head. Do likewise and be your mother's daughter), the voice again. It was louder and insistent this time. The phone ringing plunged her out of the deep, dreadful waters of her mind.

She stood up and searched through the messy sheets to find it. Her heart sank into her stomach. She felt the coldness of it against her intestines when she realized how much strength she needed to put up pretense for this call. Strength she did not have.

"Daddy", she lowly forced the word out her larynx and out through her teeth.

"Mbali ka baba. Kunjani nono?", her father adoringly said. He sure took his time to finish a single sentence. Old age had taken its toll on his vocal cords.

"Ngiyaphila bab'... baba!", her facade was falling through the cracks of her words but she managed to yank it up with enthusiasm. So she thought. She forgot one thing.

"What's wrong?", he took on a firm tone and relinquished the old and easily relaxed one. She took a deep breath and let it slowly. What she had forgotten was, nobody knew her like her father. Nobody knew her like the man whose lap used to be everyday seat.

"Nothing I'm just tired. It's been a long day and it's gonna be a long night. Plus, the ceremony tomorrow. I need some rest", she lied through her teeth.

"Sure nono?", his voice was full of comforting adoration that insisted on teasing her tears, but she wasn't about to cry. The old woman in her head would yank her eyes out from the inside. She nodded to agree.

"Nono?"

"Yes I'm sure daddy. I'm just tired I keep dozing off"

"You should get some rest then. I don't want you collapsing in front of people tomorrow", she nodded again, forgetting that she wasn't on a video call.

"Babà?", she called out quickly before he could cut the call.

"Yes nono?"

She rummaged for the correct wording in her head.

"I'm reading this other book here..."

"Uh-huh?"

"It... it says, something along the lines of... true love can withstand any storm. Do you agree with this statement?", she asked and puckered her face because she was feeling silly. Her father took moment before he could reply.

"What's the name of the book?", he questioned and panicking sirens went berserk in her head. She had to think fast.

"Love and war?", the shadow of Tamar Braxton that's been hiding somewhere between the folds of her memory came to her rescue.

"Well, I don't know anything about love my child. I have sinned against those I claimed to love at some point or the other if not more than twice. It's not as straightforward as mathematics. Love is a conforming science mntwanam. It takes the shape of your heart and your mental form. Only you know how you need to be loved", he states his thought and his daughter silently wells up in tears. She swallowed the slimy lump that was blocking her throat.

"And... how do I know for sure if I'm not being loved correctly?"

"I said it's a science. I did not say it's mathematics. There's no straight answer to that because a lot has to be considered when two different people are involved. How-EVER, if it doesn't feel right, then it probably isn't", he says and silence travels the line.

"Okay. I'll read with an open mind. Thanks daddy"

"You're welcome. And hey, tell that boy I'm going to crush his nxts with pliers when I see him", he commanded and a quick laugh escaped her lips.

"Daddy!"

"Enjoy your book", he intentionally draped the word 'book' in sarcasm. Enhle continued to laugh when they cut the call.

...

Mxolisi barged into Melokuhle's room while putting on his watch at the same time.

"Your knuckles are not going to fall off if you knock. You know that right?", Melokuhle stated in muffled annoyance. He was lying on his stomach with his head submerged into his pillow.

"Awukahle. I need your help", Mxolisi stated and wheeled the chair out of the study table so he could sit and

face Melo who was on the bed. Melokuhle never replied.

"What's up with you?", Mxo asked in concern when he realised that Melo wasn't exactly in the best shape of himself.

"I fxcked up", Melokuhle confessed.

"You've been fxcking up. What's special about this case?"

Melo sat up straight and ran his palm across his face.

"It's Busi"

"She dumped you?", Mxolisi punctuated his question with a laugh.

"She's pregnant", he immediately said before Mxo could irritate him any further. The laughing smile on Mxo's face immediately vanished like it had never been there.

"Hol' up. What?"

"I-yuuup", Melo said and fell on his back on the bed.

"Should I get you a gun, a rope or you'll overdose?", Mxolisi asked and Melo sent a cushion flying to his face. Mxo caught it and stood up to go sit on the bed with him.

"Okay on a serious note now, (How does ma do this advise thing? He thought to himself) Okay let's start here, does she want this baby?", he asked and Melo pasted his eyes to the roof.

"I don't know. She's not taking my calls"

"Manje you saw it fit ukuthi uhlale la ukhamise?"(... that you sit here and do absolutely nothing?)

Melo sat up straight again.

"What do you want me to do?"

"Do you love this chick?", Mxolisi questioned with his brows pinched together.

"You know I do"

"I'm not convinced"

"WHAT DO YOU WANT ME TO DO MXOLISI?!"

"I've never been pregnant, thank God I don't have a womb-", he said and made an imaginary cross from his forehead and chest then clapped his hands once in grateful prayer.

"But, I can imagine how confused and distraught she must be feeling. She needs you bra. That's a no brainer"

"If she needed me she would've picked up my calls and answered the thousand messages I've sent to her"

"Chicks BE LIKE THAT we batata!"

"Listen I don't like guessing games. If you feel red don't communicate blue to me because I'll take blue as the final word", a frustrated Melo said and Mxo threw his palm to his face.

"Women don't operate like that. Get your azz in the car and go talk to her. If you show up on her doorstep and show her you mean business she'll have no choice but to speak to you. Otherwise, an abortion will be the baby's fate, unless if that's what you want", Mxo said and Melo raised his face.

"That look on your face tells me you want her to keep it right?", Mxo prodded.

"I don't bra. Raising a human being from scratch is not a joke"

"From scratch? Where would you prefer to start? When they're what? Twelve?"

"You know what I mean"

"No I don't. Look, go and talk to the girl you'll cross other bridges when you get to them"

"I no longer have a car remember?",Melo said wistfully.

"You know what? Let me go speak to MY potential baby momma maybe I'll come back with a solution"

"Potential baby momma?", Melo asked, boggled.

"Scratch that. Insert wife", Mxolisi pulled the reverse Michael Jackson walk in excitement while continuously sticking his tongue in and out of his mouth. Melo laughed at what this signified.

"Ukhohlakele"(You're so evil). Mxo laughed too and closed the door.

...

Nighttime had fallen upon their part of the earth but that did not deter him from trying to find her in the dark. He scanned the women from a distance by the fire, laughing in between the sounds that the big lids were making when sliding on their rightful black pots. He noticed Tumi was sitting right there chatting up a storm with one of the ladies but his mother was no where in sight

"I need a favour", he texted his favourite uncle. He watched as Tumi put down his glass on the brown, soiled ground and took out his phone from his pocket.

Tumi: What kind?

Mxo: Firstly, where's my mom?

Tumi: Disappeared with your dad. Don't ask me questions.

Mxo: Arg TMI. The lady in a red dress. Can you ask her where her kid went? Don't be awkward.

Tumi: There's no way that can never be weird. Anyway, she got sent home. She left about an 30 mins ago when I arrived

Mxo: Is she coming back?

Tumi: Dunno. Didn't look like it tho'

Tumi: Can't you call her like a normal person?

Mxo: That's the thing. I don't have her number.

Tumi: How desperately do you need it?

Mxo: R200

Tumi: R700

Mxo: R450

Tumi: I'll make a plan.

Mxo laughed and threw his fist in the air. He was also laughing at the fact that Tumi uses every chance he gets to squeeze money out of anybody. He never does anything for free. No matter how small. He went back into the house and bumped into one of his twin big sisters.

"Hey sis I need a favour. It's actually Melo who.. look, can I borrow your car for a minute?", he asked and she

laughed.

"Not until you tell me what's going on? Is Melo alright?"

"Everything's fine really. We just have a little emergency to deal with", he illustrated with his fingers to show how tiny the "emergency" was. Intentionally undermining it rather. She looked at him suspiciously before she could give in to his convincing smile.

"Why not ask dad or uncle MK?"

"Those two will give me the third degree only to say no. I haven't eaten yet I don't have the energy for that. Plus, you're already parked outside so it'll be easier"

"Kahle kahle niyaphi?"(Where exactly are you going?), she asked as she pulled out a bottle of water from the fridge.

"But you always it's important that siblings have each other's back?", he cornered and she laughed.

"Relevance?"

"Why are you now forcing me to break a code?"

"Okay okay! Just don't scratch it. The keys are in the bedroom on the pedestal"

"And you wonder why I love you?"

"Ha suka!", she said and shuffled her slippers outside while laughing.

...

Lindelwa walked in to find her sister sitting on the couch in man's shirt, having a generous glass of red wine while watching TV low on volume.

"Hey sis"

"Hey baby", Bongiwe greeted back.

"I used my key. I didn't think you'd be home"

Bongiwe laughed lightly and told her it's okay.

"You're not working late today?", Lindi asked as she scanned the wide open fridge for something to eat.

"No I'm tired. Don't tell me you don't have food at res I sent you money 2 days ago?"

"Yyy-eah-hh, about that...", she slowly winced her way into an explanation.

"Lindelwa!", Bongiwe scolded and approached her in the kitchen area

"I needed a textbook come on?", she said as drank orange juice from the bottle and shrugge with her eyes wide open. Bongiwe angrily placed a glass on the kitchen counter and forced Lindi to pour into it.

"You bought all your textbooks at the beginning of the semester ", she said and put her one hand on the counter, the other on her waist.

"I meant a study guide", she lied and darted her eyes around.

"What study guide costs R2000?"

"The one I use"

"Your smart mouth is going to be the reason you starve till month end", Bongiwe threatened with her index finger pointed her. She then exhaled in defeat and gently pulled her little sister to the living room to sit.

"Look, you need to start managing your funds correctly. I can't always be bailing your out. Trust me I don't mind taking care of you but you need to be responsible", she guided and Lindi nodded.

"Also, I am still waiting for your academic record for last semester"

"Ah-"

"Don't say ah. Your fees are too expensive for me not to-"

"Sis I am doing fine. You need to loosen up! You're too serious. Always about work school work school WHEEENN are you burning this shirt and getting a man?!", Lindi said and hit the tough collar of the shirt that used to belong to Mangaliso, Bongiwe's ex. Bongiwe folded her hands and slumped on her back on the couch when she felt attacked.

"Move on. He already has. There's a lot of men who would appreciate you wearing THEIR shirts. That hunk at your office, whatshisface?", Lindelwa snapped her fingers trying to prompt Bongiwe to catch who she's talking about.

"Who? Muzi?"

"Yes!"

Bongiwe laughed.

"Ha that's my boss Lindi! AND, he was married to my best friend. Matter of fact he is still very much married"

"So what?"

"Didn't ma teach you anything"

"Nope. I only took away aunt Gertrude's teachings because they made sense"

Bongiwe couldn't stop laughing at her silly little sister.

"Uzothakatha nje ngaye"(You'll end up a witch just like her)

"Oksalayo", Lindelwa held steadfast to her opinion while circling the edge of the glass with her tongue.

...

Mxolisi barged into Melo's room and threw car keys at him that spiked his bare back.

"Ouch!", he yelled and turned his back to look at Mxolisi.

"Go fix the aftermath of your poor pull-out game", he remarked before closing the door. He then took out his phone to attend to the message that demanded his attention with a beep.

"She doesn't have a phone. You know my banking details"-Tumi. He read the message and jerked the phone in his hands so much it almost fell in frustration.

...

Melokuhle parked outside of the Busi's homestead. He called her and she declined the call. The hope of her coming out dwindle with each rejected call.

"I'm outside. If you don't come out then I'm coming in", he opted for a text. His patience was now running thin.

"I'd love to see my dad fxck you up"

"Baby your dad takes instructions from me. Not the other way around", his arrogant self replied.

"You're an a**hole", she sent back.

"I've been told. Now come out"

It took her 10 minutes to reveal her face. It was clear that she went out of the house without permission from how she kept looking back nervously. He unlocked the car so she could get in. She did and pull the rest of her loosely hanging night gown in so she can close the door. She intently kept her eyes on the windshield to avoid looking at him. His eyes were on her the whole time.

"How does it make sense to you that I should find out that you're pregnant from another man?"

She clutched onto her silence.

"Ngikhuluma nawe Busisiwe", he insisted. A tear dropped from her eye.

"Tears are not going to save you. Answer my question!"

"Is that all you care about?!", she exploded. He pinched nose bridge in annoyance.

"You dumped me like I was nothing. I accepted it and now you're here annoying me as if you want this baby"

"I borrowed your my car out of love and you gave it to Mthokozisi. When I told you that he crashed on purpose you defended him!"

"He had to rush his mom to the hospital there's no way he could've...!"

"Do you have any proof of that besides the lies he told you?", he asked and she looked away.

"So you're defending him based on his word? Only his word?", he pressed on.

"Yes"

"But when it comes to me, I need to provide all kinds of affidavits and lab samples to prove my mere whereabouts?", he bit his lower lip. She dropped her tight chest and allowed it to untangle from all the angry knots. She then wiped her tears with the back of her hands. He exhaled heavily before walking out the car. She watched him disappear into the dark. He then came back minutes later and opened the door to the passenger seat. He signalled with his head that she should step out. She did and attempted to walk away. He caught her wrist and pulled her into a hug. She immediately broke down in tears. He pushed her head to his chest and clawed his fingers into her hair.

"I'm not ready for a baby Kuhle", she confessed emotionally.

"Sshh. We'll figure it out", he whispered in uncertainty.

"How far along are you?"

"4 weeks. We still have time", she sniffed.

"What do you mean?", he enquired lowly. She shrugged

"I don't know Cakes. I don't think I can be able to live with that. Besides, my dad would kill me"

"People abort all the time. He'll kill you either way"

"It's not other people's kid you're carrying in there. He won't. He's obviously not gonna be happy but he can't be furious forever. When the kid is born all the anger will subside", he assured with uncertainty, biting his upper lip.

"The kid will only be born if MY parents don't kill me", she grimaced.

"Don't worry about that", he said and kissed her forehead. In his head, somebody had to keep their calm even if he didn't know what he was he was going to do next.

...

Manqoba stood up from the fire where almost all his male relatives were seated around and reminiscing about things of the past, mindlessly rotating the beer in his hand. He then stood up without warning and left. He walked into the house and straight to his bedroom. The light was off and Enhle was sleeping. He could tell from how she was breathing. He sighed. He was hoping to find her awake. He then went over to her and kissed her exposed shoulder goodnight. She woke up when he was about to walk away.

"Baby?", her sleepy voice lazily called out.

"Go back to sleep. We'll talk in the morning", he softly said and she sat upright. He already knew she wasn't going to listen so he dropped his hands and went to sit beside her.

"Ngeke ngikwazi ukulala kyafana"(I won't be able to sleep anyway), she let out. He just nodded.

"I'm sorry about this afternoon", he was the first to go.

"No I'm sorry. I overreacted. I just.. You know how Diketso and Nokwanda like teaming up against me. I allowed my beef with them to blind me from how you much needed your kids here. I'm also sorry for trying to slap you. It'll never happen again. About the shirt also."

He took her hand in his and massaged the palm with his thumbs.

"We were doing great. For years now. I'd hate for all that progress to go down the drain. I'm sorry for upsetting you. I could've handled it a lot better than I did", he confessed and she smiled.

"I know something that you handle really really well...", she provoked him flirtatiously as she straddled him in her too short of a nightie. He looked away briefly and smiled, exposing the full gold tooth that that fit perfectly over his incisor next to his canine on his straight teeth. She doesn't think his smile would be quite the same without it.

Chapter six

His hands slowly travelled, patiently travelled to her soft love handles. He allowed his fingers to study her bare back under her nightie and she felt her temperature rising as his manhood came to life under his jeans. The heat explored every channel on her body. His soft, black lips dropped to her neck. She threw her head back to receive the unrushed wet kisses. He kicked his shoes off as she unbuckled his belt. His hand grabbed onto her naked butt and grabbed so much she felt her pussy lips spread. In that very moment, she realized how wet she was. She had unbuttoned his jeans when a steady knock interrupted the rhythm. She rolled her eyes and Manqoba dropped his forehead on her shoulder.

"Let's ignore them", Enhle said and allowed her lips to travel his neck. The knocking stopped.

She unbuttoned his shirt, placed her hands on his chest and pushed him to the bed with the naughtiest smile on her face.

She pulled the pants down and off. She then knelt on the carpet and took two knee steps to get closer to his stone hard dick.

She wrapped her fingers around the shaft and placed her slightly parted, pouted lips on the head.

"Uhhh...", he gave a rough throated moan when he felt the cold of her tongue on his glans. She proceeded to spit and grab his dick, massaging it with patience, up and down. He had his eyes shut to take in all the pleasure she was more than willing to deliver. She took the rod in her mouth and fucked his dick with her throat. Baby girl was gagging but as always, if she was to die, she was ready to turn his genital area into a crime scene. He placed his hand on her head and fucked her mouth.

"Fuck I'm cumming!", he whimpered in pleasure. He pulled out of her mouth and she finished the job with her hand. The knock sounded again. They both ignored. Quick seconds later, she felt a hot viscous liquid pour onto the skin covering her thumb and index finger. His dick was spasming but she didn't let go. He strongly restrained her hand as he laid on his back on the bed trying to catch his breath.

"Are you trying to kill me?", he asked and she laughed. She got up from the floor and went to lock the door. He was standing when she got back. He grabbed the remote and played a song he'd been meaning to fuck her too. She smiled before he could grabbed her by her waist and drowned her lips in the deepest and most sincere of kisses while 'Between us' by DVSN ft. Snoh Aalegra played in the background, set on repeat.

He was out of breath but he picked her up and placed her on the pedestal. He spread her legs and squatted on the floor so his face can level with her pussy. He ran his finger from her pulsating clit till it gently soothed into her dripping wet coochie. He kept his eyes on her so he can enjoy the view of her shutting her eyes and biting on her lower lip.

He planted kisses from in between her flaming hot inner thighs. He then licked her dripping juices and used them as direction into pink of her hole. He drank some more before he could suck on her clit. It was demanding his attention and it was as if he could hear it. He French kissed on the bean until she was hissing his name. His finger was working her entrance.

"Daddy... shiiiiit", she lowly moaned when she couldn't take it anymore.

"Hm?", he gave a muffled answer to the call since his lips were occupied.

"Mm!", she shot out breathlessly.

"Ngiyasabela phela mina mengibizwa?", he said with a growing smile before he could separate her pussy lips with his tongue.

"I want you in me...mm!!", she confessed when she felt the big O building up.

"Not yet", he whispered before he could suck on her labia and penetrated her with tongue. He was having a slow conversation with her pussy. She knew she had to keep out of it. She always feels like he eats her out for his own satisfaction. Hers is just a guaranteed by-product.

The strong muscle in his mouth was twisting and travelling the pink canal from all directions.

"Baby fuuuck!!!!", she shot out and jerked up her back in an arch. Her entire body was vibrating and her mouth was wide open. If he didn't stop then she was certainly going to sustain a seizure.

He inserted his arm under her arched back, picked her up and allowed her to wrap her legs around his waist. He held her by her thighs and moved his waist to direct his ready shaft into her hole. She hadn't recovered from her last orgasm. He pushed himself in and felt his hard muscle rubbing against her soft flesh. She had her hands wrapped around his neck.

He began thrusting in and out, relying entirely on the rhythmic movement of his waist, hitting it from all directions you can find on a compass. All she could do is breathe out heavily. Her eyelids were flickering as she continued flooding down there. Manqoba lost himself in the warmth of her meaty folds. He shot his cum into her after she came. Every last drop.

He pecked her lips once and went in again to devour her lips. She then quickly got down from his grips and her transparent nude nightie flowed down to cover three quarters of her butt.

"What's wrong?", he asked when he detected the panic on her face. He cupped her chin and kissed her some more.

"Hm?", he insisted as he grabbed his black briefs from the floor.

"Were we supposed to do this before the inauguration? Won't it cause problems for the ceremony with Ngema this morning?", she enquired and a brief laugh escaped his lips before he could pull the elastic up. He gently placed his hands on the sides of her face and looked her sincerely in the eye.

"The only thing it'll cause is I'll be thrice as tired as I should've been if we hadn't done it. It would've been a

problem if you were a sidechick", he assured and kissed her forehead before he could walk to the bathroom. The music was still playing in the background.

"Take a shower while you're in there!", Enhle yelled out for precautionary measure and MQ laughed.

"Ngiyezwa nkosikazi"(I hear you wife).

After a couple of minutes, he came out of the shower with a towel around his waist. Enhle was in bed. She turned to look at him.

"Aren't you going to join us for the night?", he asked as he lotioned his arms.

"Nah. Ngikhathele from all the ups and downs I've been doing all day. I'll wake up at 3 when Ngema is here", she yawned and pulled the sheets. He went over to her and kissed her hair.

"Okay. Sleep well then", her said adoringly and she smiled while rubbing his arm. He got dressed and left.

He bumped into Muzi when he was about to turn a corner in the kitchen they almost crashed heads.

"Uphumaphi?!"(Where have you been?), Muzi asked as he was wondering where Manqoba had disappeared to.

"Since when do you bath twice in one day?", he said before MQ could respond. He laughed.

"On second thought, I don't need the answer to that. Tebogo and the gents are here", he informed and pleasant surprise curtained over Manqoba's face.

"I haven't seen them in a while. It's been a minute", he states as they walk out the house to go join the men.

...

Tebogo requested to speak to Manqoba in private after they've been chilling and laughing over the open fire with a large group of other men, enjoying the traditional liquid delicacy that one can never miss at any event that has to do with the ancestors. Some had their commercial beer whereas others enjoyed the refreshment of cold ciders. Manqoba got up and led him into the house then straight to the study. He closed the door and led him to the couch.

"Kusha kuphi?"(What's up?), he asked when they finally settled on the couch. Tebogo took a deep breath out.

"I know you said you're retiring from this business but things are falling apart man. I can't do this on my own", he confessed. Manqoba had his hands clasped together. He didn't reply for a moment.

"I don't know what you want me to tell you really. I'm not changing my mind. You can always call me should you need help but I've got bigger things to worry about. I'm not fully for this chieftaincy life but it's my birthright and I can't run away from it"

"You can be a chief and continue operating. You're the one with the connections. Your people trust YOU. Regardless of the reference I have from you. This is a delicate business and trust is not transferred in our world. You know this", Tebogo pressed on and Manqoba laid his back on the couch, allowing his head to fall back on it.

"Is this about the heist that went wrong in Middleburg?", Manqoba asked with his eyes glued to the roof.

Tebogo stood up and went to balance himself against the desk. He couldn't sit still.

"The police are looking for me MQ. I won't get off without you. I need your help. You need to come back. And don't take this the wrong way I'm not gonna throw you under the bus I'm not blackmailing yo-", he rambled.

"Tebogo! Relax man your jittering is working on my nerves", MQ shot out. Tebogo swallowed.

"All these years working side by side with me and you haven't learnt a thing?", he asked.

"I learnt everything. Your people just don't trust me hence they screwed me over!", Tebogo snapped angrily.

"Sit down", MQ commanded. Tebogo threw his eyes to the side before he could exhale and sit.

"I am not coming back but what I can promise you is that, I'll get to the bottom of this. Okay?"

"Fix it MQ. You have to!"

"Didn't I just say I will?", MQ impatiently snapped back and Tebogo shook his head repeatedly. "I am not going to jail" was ringing loudly in his head.

...

The laughter from the teenage boys sitting outside in the street was the evidence of their joy and them being completely carefree in that moment of mocking one another. The boys were chilling with others from the community, including Melokuhle's friends. New friendships were forming in Melo's absence. When he finally came back, he parked before them and they began making fun of him before he could step out of the car. He huffed out a halfhearted laugh since he did not have the energy to entertain any of his brothers, neighbors or friends. He imagined his bed and the peace he would find from it. Only, he couldn't sleep then because it was already 2am and the slaughtering ceremony would begin in an hour.

He got out of the car and greeted those he hadn't seen. They fist bumped and he informed that he needed a young nap. Lwandile could read right through him. The young gents just said "Ola" cheerfully to his facade. They took his word as it is. Lwandile tried to get up from the ground to follow him. Mxolisi grabbed his wrist and shook his head to indicate that he shouldn't. He listened and sat down. Some were standing leaning against their cars including Bernard, a friend to Melo from school. Mxolisi teased him about how he shouldn't call animal services when he sees that animals were slaughtered since white people are notorious for this. Bernard laughed and said "The deliciousness of the meat made up for everything". He pretty much behaves like a black boy. Melo made sure to put him through initiation even though his parents don't approve of their friendship. Bernard's parents.

...

The hour that Manqoba was dreading finally arrived. 3 am hit and Bab'Ngema arrived. He actually arrived 15 minutes prior and asked that everyone evacuates the house so he could 'strengthen' it according to the specific ancestors that led the new chief. After he was done, He asked that Manqoba and the family follow him to the back of the house. Everyone else had to remain in the front and continue eating, drinking and whatever else they

were doing but he sternly commanded that the music be turned off. The guards made sure that nobody tried any funny stunts to disturb the ceremony in an attempt to see things they shouldn't see.

After the ritual to initiate the young chief was done, Bab'Ngema announced that his son went for training. He further went on to inform that his ancestors are calling his name and that the date has been set.

"Is he dying?", Enhle whispered to Betso who was sitting next to her on the group and Evelyn went "Shh" with a sharp frown on her face. Muzi's eyes travelled through all three of them before he could bring them back to bab'Ngema. Manqoba was in his jeans. He tried putting the t-shirt back on but Bab'Ngema immediately stopped him and explained that whatever he had sprinkled him had to dry first before he could bath or even wear anything. Whatever it was, it smelt horrible. This smell was most pungent to Melokuhle. It was as if his impatience for the whole thing exarcebated it.

...

Bab'Ngema announced that his job was done and that he is going back to his place. However, he did promise that he will be back after Manqoba had addressed his people and they left. It was standard procedure.

Betso's eyes were now stinging, burning and heavy. The sun was beginning to come out. Everyone went to where their heart desired and she yawned before she could get up. Muzi smiled at her as he helped her up, careful not to step on where the blood was spilt.

"Let's go get some sleep", he said and picked her up like a bride without warning. She shot out a laughter infused scream and asked him to put her down and that somebody might come and see them. He laughed as well as he placed her feet carefully on the ground. He hugged her from behind and kissed her neck then her hand.

"Baba? Do you notice how distant Melokuhle was?", she instigated the topic and he nodded over her should.

"I did. He'll talk when he's ready. I've learnt never to force anything out of him. It's useless because he always seems he can fix things without my help, even when he needs it"

"Is this about the car?", she asked and twisted her neck so she could look him in the eye.

"Not really. He's my son and ngiyamazi. He's been like this ever since he was a child. Forcing him to speak os futile"

"Hm. I wonder where he took it from", Betso says and laughs.

"We just look alike, but I am nothing like that hothead", Muzi defends and laughs, knowing that Betso was speaking the truth.

...

After his shower, Mxolisi stepped out of the house hoping to find the girl he had been dreaming about in his miniskirt of sleep. The yard was getting increasingly full and he was hoping that she would come. He then

noticed her mother fastening the cloth around her lower body and walking out the wide opened gate. He didn't think about it. He just went on and followed her, careful not to get caught. She walked a 10 minute distance from the royal house to her home. Mxo kept jumping in between trees to avoid being seen. She walked and closed the gate. He spotted a tuckshop not far from her house and went over to it to avoid being weird by standing in the middle of the street. He could have a clear view of the yard from the tuckshop. A man appeared from behind the rails and asked what he could get him.

Mxo got tongue tied. He didn't have any cash with him. Just his card because he keeps it in an adhering pouch at the back of his phone.

"Uhm.. sawubona baba", he greeted first. The man greeted back with a smile. He had to think fast.

"Niyas'phatha iSprite lesi se cucumber and lime?", he opted for that because from his observation, the other shops around did not have it. It wasn't as common as it was in the city.

"Yebo. 2 litre?", the man agreed and Mxo internally begged the earth to open up and swallow him whole. He took out his phone from his pocket and slid the card out.

"Niya swiper?"(Do you have a speed point?), he asked and the man immediately laughed.

"Ithi uyadlala"(Tell me you're joking), he continued crackling. Mxo bowed his head in defeat and laughed as well.

"You're making a fool of yourself", he whispered lowly to himself. The man eventually stopped laughing.

"Where are you from?", he asked in pleasantry. Mxo explained.

"No wonder", the man remarked and resumed his laugh.

"What are you doing here? I'm heading to your home in a few minutes", the man mentioned.

"I'm here to see someone"

"Intombi?", the man raised his brow and smiled. Mxo laughed.

"Eish. Angilali ngale ngan' baba"(I'm no longer sleeping well because of her).

"Ah-ha! Ngazile"(I knew it), the man said. Mxo laughed. The girl appeared from behind him and greeted both him and the shop owner formally. Mxo's heart was now beating out of order. He never expected to see her there. She did not even look like she took considerable notice of him. The man immediately got 4 from putting 2 and 2 together. She asked for white bread and R12 airtime. The man couldn't wipe the smile off his face. He enjoyed this sight. It reminded him of a lot of memories he holds dear to his heart. He gave her the bread and lied that the machine was giving him problems for the airtime. He unplugged the device and said he will be back.

The moment then became awkward. Mxo saw his chance and dived in on it. The girl's eyes were running all over the place except for where he was standing.

"Hi", he greeted, again. She shyly raised her hand and quickly put it back into the other one in front of her thighs.

"Unjan?", he asked with his trusted smile and bit his lower lip.

"Ngiyaphila"(I'm fine), she lowly replied and stretched out her neck to see if the man was coming back. There was no sight of him.

"I wanted to speak to you the other day at home but never found the chance to"

"At home?"

"Yeah, kwa Khumalo?", he said in an almost confused tone and she took 5 seconds to recall.

"Oh. I remember", she said, still shying away from looking at him directly in the eye. Mxo was now legit confused. No girl has ever forgotten about him after the first encounter, ever! They're usually the ones that follow his tail and do all the work for him. It took him a moment to get his sense in one box. His phone rang and the screen reported that his father was calling. He silenced the call and said, "Look, I need to go now but I really need to speak to you. Do you mind if I have your number? Even if you do mind let me have it you'll deal with the guilt later", he rambled and an innocent laugh escaped her lips. She bit her upper lip.

"Angina phone"(I don't have a phone), she said in a muffled tone.

"Have mine then I'll call you from it", he said and extended the hand which held the phone towards her. He didn't think this move through. She laughed.

"U ma uzothi ngiyithaphi iphone ebiza kanje?"(How will I explain this expensive phone to my mother?)

"What she doesn't see won't kill her. Uzoyifihla angithi na"(You'll hide it), he begged. The man came back and plugged the machine back. He processed the voucher and gave it to her. She placed the over rolled R100 on the counter and Mxo pushed it back to her.

"I'll pay. You can keep this one", he said and she doubtfully looked at him then at the money.

"Please...", he begged for her to take it. She did, thanked him with a smile and stepped off the 'stoep'.

"Wait...!", he shot out.

"Give me your mother's number then", he suggested and she shook her head vigorously to show that she wasn't going to budge. He saw that it was a fight he wasn't going to win.

"How am I supposed to get in contact with you then?", he asked in impatience. She shrugged.

"Can I come see you later?"

"My mom is going to kill me if she sees you"

"She doesn't have to"

"How?"

"I'll figure it out", he said and she bit her upper lip again. She then turned and left. That wasn't a no. Neither was it a yes. Mxo took a heavy breath out. He balanced his elbow against the counter in between the rails and placed his palm against his forehead in frustration.

...

It was around 12 in the afternoon when Bab'Sizwe had to officially ordain Manqoba as the new chief before the whole community. Manqoba wore a straight smile throughout all this when he was being seated on the high leopard printed chair, a chair that used to belong to his father. He didn't expect to be, but he was nervous, hence the straight smile. Ululations and clan praises broke out and roared from the crown when he officially took his seat. He felt a powerful aura surround him when he placed his head against the highchair. Like he was surrounded by an invisible, yet very powerful presence. His eyes fell on Sphesihle, who was walking a distance from everyone else looking like she was struggling to hear whoever was on the line. She had her finger blocking

one ear in an effort to strengthen the efficiency of the other. Enhle was looking at him the whole time, following his visual trail.

Chapter Seven

Enhle excused herself after Manqoba gave his speech and stormed into the house. Betso cheerfully stopped her in the kitchen, asking her to taste the sauce she had made since she went out of chicken spice she always uses. She had to improvise with beef stock as Tumi suggested. Tumi was sitting behind the table counter on his phone. He wasn't even paying attention to them. Enhle, in frustrated haste, rolled her eyes internally but still extended her hand so Betso places a bit of the sauce on her palm.

"Hayi cha. Niyawu pheka udoti nino mngan'wakho"(You and your friend cooked rubbish), she remarked before she could walk away and Betso gasped at her reaction. Tumi shot his eyes away from the screen to Enhle.

"Bxtch excuse me?!", he was ready to declare war.

"Are you okay Enhle?", Betso lowly asked in concern.

"Watch how you speak to me", Enhle threatened Tumi before she could handle the tail of her long dress to leave. Tumi scoffed when she went out of sight. Betso was genuinely concerned. Tumi held out his wrist to check his watch and said, "It hasn't even 30 minutes since she's been declared queen but she's already stripping on a high horse". He was in complete disbelief. Betso glanced outside to maybe get a clue of what might have upset her. She shook the worry off her face and went back to preparing the royal lunch. She put the sauce aside in hopes that Evelyn would walk in so she tastes it.

"This sauce is fine friend. Don't let Queen doti fxck with your head", Tumi assured as he tasted it for the third time now. Evelyn finally walked in laughing with Bab'Sizwe and Betso asked if she could steal her. She gladly obliged. Bab'Sizwe proceeded to the living room.

"Mm! This is nice. And different. The texture is impressive as well. It's... I don't know, not too thick but rich in taste", Evelyn remarked. Betso sighed from relief.

"See, I told you not to listen to ..."

"Thank you! Ma...", Betso said and prompted Evelyn to walk out with her hand behind the Evelyn's back, her thank you was loud enough to mute out the rest of Tumi's probably vile sentence. Evelyn smiled suspiciously and left.

...

The Khumalos sat around the lengthy table, enjoying their celebratory lunch and exchanging pleasantries. Manqoba was having a conversation with Bab'Bayede, one of his respected uncles. Mbhekiseni walked in, drunk beyond instant repair. The sound of the busy cutlery on the black porcelain plates came to a slow halt, amidst the fading laughs, fading due to curiosity.

"Niyajabula neah? Kumnandi uyihlephula kab'hlungu leyo nyama heh Sizwe?"(You all are evidently having fun. It's so nice that you're showing no mercy to that meat Sizwe), he stated before he could sip some more of his beverage from it's silver metallic container with his back and legs bent out of shape. He burped loudly,

almost throwing up and everyone couldn't hide the disgust on their faces. Mxolisi was entertained. He was looking at him with pinched eyebrows and a curious smile, waiting for him to say something else.

"Hlala phansi bakuphakele Mbhekiseni"(sit down so they can dish up for you),an obviously bored Bayede suggested, hoping to assuage to situation and extinguish it before it spread any further.

"Wee Evelyn, ngicela sithi ukujikela ngale sike sikhulume mina nawe lovey"(Let's excuse ourselves so we can talk), he said and looked at her straight in the eyes, blatantly ignoring the invite to the table. Evelyn exhaled from a place of exhaustion before she could push her chair out.

"You don't have to ma...", Muzi whispered from her side. She assured that it was okay, before walking out and leading Mbhekiseni to the TV room in her long, swaying dress. Bab'Sizwe was glaring at their backs suspiciously. They left an uneasy atmosphere behind them. Enhle had her eyes lodged on Manqoba as she took slow sips on her juice. He realized this and asked if she was okay. She ignored and picked up her utensils to slice her meat. Betso cleared her throat and asked if anybody would like a refill or seconds. Aunt Hlengiwe enthusiastically said "Yes please!", also hoping to diffuse the tension that was hellbent on breaking the legs of the table.

She later come back to the table and Mbhekiseni yelled his goodbyes to everyone and walked out. Mxolisi laughed into his glass of juice.

"Are you okay, Evelyn?", Bab'Bayede asked as she settled onto her chair and gulped down her juice.

"Hm? Yeah! I'm perfect", she pulled a facade of a smile and 'assured'.

"Okay. If you'll excuse me...", Bayede said and wiped the corner of his mouth with serviette before he could stand up to leave. The lunch was pretty much done and he did say that he had some other place to be before it commenced. Muzi's eyes were on Evelyn even when the awkwardness around the table had subsided and people went back to laughing and conversing, including the kids. Her mind was everywhere but in that house.

...

Everyone eventually dispersed whereas some were still idle reclining on their chairs due to full stomachs, including Muzi, Betso and some of the kids. Some went upstairs to the bedrooms. Texting around the table is prohibited so they obviously couldn't wait to go back to their own lives. Most of the community members had their take-aways in abundance and left for their respective homes. When the very last one made their exit, the guards pulled the gates closed, declaring normal, everyday proceedings.

One guard walked into the house, humbly greeted the royals and asked for MQ. Muzi gestured with his head to direct the guard to Manqoba who was now slowly walking down the stairs, paying attention to his phone screen. The guard took two steps to get closer to him, humbly greeted and reported that there's two men and a woman at the gate demanding to see the chief. Manqoba asked what it might be about and the guard uncomfortably stated that they are here to report a pregnancy. He added that the young girl was in the car. He went even further to

alert the chief on how furious the men appeared to be. Muzi's eyes fell on Betso, who was also anxiously looking at him for answers with her forehead furrowed. Manqoba thanked the guard, told him to let them in and looked at Muzi. Muzi exhaled deeply and told Lwandile to go call Melokuhle.

"Are you sure that the one you're sending away is innocent?", Manqoba asked.

"True. Melo might be staying here full time but these two also visit, a lot", Betso stated.

"Wanna bet?", Muzi said to the both of them with his eyebrows furiously raised. The look on Melo's face when he came down declared that Lwandile had already spilt the tea. Mxolisi was behind him. He finally reached the last step on the staircase and bit his lower lip.

"Are condoms a foreign concept to you?", Muzi sneered.

"Ha-ah baba you don't know for sure that--", Betso tried to defend.

"I was reckless. I'm sorry", Melokuhle confessed and Betso dropped back to her chair in defeat.

"That's all you have to say for yourself?", Manqoba calmly reproached.

"Why do you get high off being irresponsible?! Wena no Mxolisi ngathi--", Muzi lashed out and Mxo defended himself from his chair.

"Haibo! Ngimithise bani manje mina?!"(Now who did I impregnate?!)

"Nobody, yet!", Muzi shot out.

"Crucify me I am your messiah", he mumbled to himself and Betso stopped Muzi from lashing out some more by putting her palm on his chest. The guests walked in, led by the guard. They humbly greeted and Manqoba told the kids to scoot out. He instructed that they go find aunt Hlengiwe outside. The girl was timidly standing behind her mother, soaked in tears. Melo tried to comfort her but they all bit his head off.

...

16h43

Manqoba walked the guests out after they had come to a conclusion and reached common ground. When they left, Melo was called back into the living room. He dragged his flops till he was seated on the couch opposite that of Muzi. He avoided making eye contact with his father, whose eyes were not about to move from him anytime soon. Manqoba asked that everyone excuses the two and they abided. Muzi has never laid a hand on any of his kids before but Melo was somehow sure that he was going to get a beating from him.

"Was I talking to your shadow when I taught you how to use a condom a condom Makhosonke?", Muzi tried his best to keep his burning chest from erupting.

"I'm sorry", Melo whispered.

"Unless if your sorry can be used as a currency to raise the baby you made, please shut the fxck up!", he spat the worse without remorse. Melo bent his speechless lip and kept his eyes on the floor.

"I asked you a question!"

"No. You were not talking to my shadow"

"Were you listening?"

"Yes"

"What was the very first thing I said?", he asked and Melo swallowed before he could answer.

"You said... You said I shouldn't rip the wrapper with my teeth"

"Why is that?"

"You said it might damage it and I wouldn't see"

"So in your fear of damaging the wrapper, you decided not to touch it altogether?"

"Hayi baba", Melo impatiently fell back on the couch.

"How do you plan on raising this child?", Muzi questioned.

"It's not rocket science", Melo blurted out and Muzi scoffed.

"Okay Einstein. I hope the two of you are not planning something stupid like aborting the baby. I'd break your face uyangizwa?"

"Why would you think that dad? I'm not that careless. You taught me better than that!"

"Well I also taught you how to use protection but here we are now", Muzi said and Melo threw his tightened eyes to the side.

...

The sun was bidding goodbye when Mxolisi took another shower to go and attempt to win a heart that held his captive. The weather had gotten comfortable with being on the chilly side of things. He was already out of the house when he felt that he definitely needed to put on a warm hoodie. He used the backdoor to avoid being asked questions.

He almost got lost in the light darkness but quickly saw what way he used the last time. He had no idea how he was going to get her out of the house but his adavance propelled him forward. He had the cash that he promised to bring to the shop owner. The light emanating from the tuckshop lit up a large portion of the street. He got to the shop and found the man seated behind the bars reading a sports magazine. He stood up with a smile when he saw Mxo and they greeted one another before a friendly laugh.

"Hey uzimisele ne"(You're very determined), the man commented. Mxolisi laughed.

"No ngilethe leya mali"(I brought the money that I owe to you)

"That's all?", the man gave a suspicious smile as he took the hundred rand note and looked for change.

"Nah it's okay. You can keep the change", Mxo assured and the smile on the man's face grew wider.

"Your dad does the exact same thing whenever he passes here".

Mxolisi laughed shyly since he didn't know what to say.

"I have to go now", he said as he kept his eyes on the girl's yard.

"I hope you're not going where I think you are?", the man said. Mxo laughed once again.

"I'll just say I'm a friend when I get there"

"Akadlali loya mama. Uzophuma ugijima ngiyak'tshela"(That woman doesn't play. You'll come out of there running), the man warns in between laughs.

"Ngenze njan ke manje? (What am I supposed to do now?), frustration was speaking on Mxolisi's behalf.

"We've all been there. I know how you feel", the man said and laughed. There was poorly concealed disappointment in Mxolisi's eyes.

"Tell you what? Ithi ngizame something"(Let me try something), the man said and took out his phone. He was waiting for whoever to pick up.

"Uhm yebo Ceboo. Lalela, k'sasa kuna la ngiyakhona manje ngizovula late mangibuya. Ngilethe isinkwa or uNdalo uzos'landa"(Hi Cebo. Listen, I'm going somewhere tomorrow morning so I'm going to open up late when I come back. Should I bring the bread or you'll send Ndalo to fetch it?), he asked with his eyes on Mxo.

"Okay kulungile. Bengithi ngiyavala manje ngizom'linda"(I was about to close up so I'll wait for her). Mxolisi's eyes lit up when he heard that "Ndalo" was coming. He didn't even catch her name.

"Thank you so much! But... won't it come across as weird or suspicious to her mom?"

"Ungakhathazeki. I do this everytime I have to go somewhere in the morning because she needs the bread for breakfast before school", the man assures and Mxo sighs in relief. He began growing anxious when he saw her walk out the yard. She finally arrived and immediately laughed when she saw Mxo there. She was too smart to not piece things together so they make sense. The man's behavior was also suspicious to her.

"Sawubona Ndalo", the matchmaker greeted and handed her the bread. Ndalo greeted back. She couldn't stop laughing. Mxo just gave a gentle smile with his lower lip tucked in between his teeth. He took out an extra R200 from his backpocket and told him that it should cover the loss if he really is to close tomorrow morning. The man took it.

"Just don't keep her for too long", he said and Mxo agreed.

"And hey. I trust you because your dad was well mannered when he was your age", the man threatened with his index finger pointed out at him. Mxo laughed and nodded. He was laughing at all the stories he has heard about his dad in the streets about how familiar he was with the ladies. None of them spelt well-mannered, even when written backwards.

"Sawubona ntombenhle", he said and took the bread from her.

"Sawubona nawe", she greeted back and tried her best to conceal a blush.

"You're good?"

"I'm fine. How are you?"

"Angikho right. Uyayilimaza inhliziyi yami bo"(You're doing some serious damage to my heart). He confessed and she laughed.

"Haibo", her speechless self said.

"It's even worse because I can't talk to you when we're apart and I promised that I wouldn't keep you long. I don't want you getting into trouble", he gravely stated the status quo of his heart and mind.

"Uqinisile vele. Uzongifaka enkingen"(You're right. You are going to get me in trouble)

"Akusiyona inhloso yam leyo"(That's not my intention), he said and stopped walking. She stopped too but kept her eyes away from him. He took her hand in his and studied her face. He was thinking about how he'd never seen anybody that naturally gorgeous before.

"Hayi cha. Umuhle ngane yabantu abakuyeke"(You're gorgeous), he complimented and she placed the other free

hand on her blushing mouth.

"Ngibuke phela"(Look at me), he said and made sure that his eyes followed hers even she looked away.

"Uyak'thanda uMxolisi Ndalo"(Mxolisi loves you Ndalo)

"Kodwa awungazi nje"(But you don't know me), she said, still looking at her feet.

"That's what makes it worse. I'd love to get to know you. It drives me crazy not being able to reach you because you're all I think about"

"Kodwa angijoli mina"(I am not into dating)

"Okay bheka. Ngibuke emehlweni ungitshele ukuthi awungifuni. Ngiyak'thembisa, ngizok'yeka emva kwaloko"(Okay look, look me in the eye and tell me that you don't want me. I promise to leave you alone after that), he said and hoped for the best. She did not reply.

"Awungifuni?"(You don't want me?), he reiterated in a whisper. She bit her upper lip in a blush.

"Ngiphendule phela sthandwasami ngizokwazi, noma kungeke kube lula, ukuqhubeka ngempilo"(Answer me my love so I can, even though it's no going to be easy, to carry on with my life), he lied. He knew from the deepest wells of his heart that he wasn't going to be able to let go.

"Angazi", she quickly said and laughed. Mxolisi took out his phone and begged her to take it.

"Ngeke ngikwazi. Uzoy'bona umama le phone"(I can't take it. My mom will see it)

"Manje ngizoxhumana nawe kanjani ngoba angihlali la full time mina?"(How am I supposed to get in contact with you because I don't live here full time)

"Ukhona ku Facebook"(Are you on Facebook?), she asked. She was avoiding him asking for her mother's number.

"Anginayo iaccount but I can always create it"

"Okay. Search Ndalo Angel Shezi"

"You don't have any weird spellings, right? Just as it is?", he asked, and she laughed.

"Yes. Just as it is"

"Ao. Ngiyabonga Sgananda", he smiled and addressed her with her clan name. She blushed even further and insisted that she really had to go. He kissed her forehead and she quickly left after that. He just stood in the middle of the road watching her walk away.

"Wadla Mbulazi!", he exclaimed in absolute excitement.

Chapter Eight

Mxolisi finally turned to walk back home when he saw that Ndalo was safely back in her yard. The shopkeeper had closed down and went back inside his house. All that was ringing in Mxolisi's head was Ndalo's laughter. He caught himself smiling like an idiot. His phone vibrated on his way home.

"Mom I'm on my way", he said when he answered the call.

"Where did you even disappear to?! Didn't I say I wanted all of us to eat together before we leave tomorrow? Kopano keng ka wena mara huh?!", she furiously scolded.

"Yehlis' umoya ma I'm 2 minutes away",

"You were not supposed to have left in the first place!"

"I know. I know. I'm sorry", he tried to pacify her. He could hear her breathing out heavily from exhaustion. She then cut the call.

"Ave ene drama umfazi ka Muzi"(Muzi's wife is dramatic), he mumbled to himself and continued walking.

When he finally arrived in the house, he found her dressing the salad.

"Buka awukaka qedi kodwa bengithethiswa"(Look, you're not even done yet but I was being shouted at), he said and Betso thinned her eyes at him. He got to her and kissed her on the cheek.

"Ngiyadlala. Waze wamuhle today"(You look beautiful today), he went on and laughter that she was trying her best to suppress tighly under her feet travelled up and out her mouth.

"Ketlo' betsa hlogonyana e yao tlhoka ditsebe. What are you saying about my looks on other days"(I'll beat this stubborn head of yours...), she threatened and placed her hands on the sides of the huge bowl. He laughed.

"Why do women insist on misunderstanding the things we say?", he said with his arm around her waist. Muzi walked in with a Heineken bottle in hand.

"You're disturbing my wife wena family meeting", Muzi said and Betso laughed at how he addressed him, from his 'Kopano' name. The alternative weaning of Kopano is meeting.

"Kesa flirt le mamaka"(I'm still flirting with my mother), he teased and Betso imitated a blushing smile to him.

"As always", Muzi remarked and opened the fridge. They then all laughed.

"Go call all your siblings tell them dinner is ready. I know they're going to be deliberately late", Betso instructed and Mxo did as requested.

...

He paced up the stairs and went around knocking in their individual rooms. Lwandile was already out.

"And?!", Lwandile asked enthusiastically, wanting Mxo to spill the tea about where he'd been. Mxo laughed and promised to tell him all about it after dinner. When he got to Melokuhle's room, he found him on the phone. As per usual, he didn't knock. Melo raised his face at Mxo and continued speaking on the phone.

"I know baby but it'll blow over. They'll get tired of breathing down your neck all the time. Also, stop overthinking so much. I am not gonna leave you"

"Never. So I can't see you today?"

He exhaled at whatever answer he was getting from the other end of the line.

"I understand. Try not to stress okay? If you can't do it for me then do it for our baby"

"Sharp there's a bug in my room. Let me squash it before it starts laying eggs", he informed with his eyes on his brother and Mxolisi laughed as he settled next to him on the bed.

"I'll call you before you sleep", he then cut the call, dropped his hands and kept his eyes on the screen.

"So... what's the way forward?", Mxolisi asked. Melokuhle exhaled through his nose.

"The usual. Damages and shii. AND, they're coming out of my own pocket", he explained and huffed out a laugh.

"Well at least he's not cutting your allowance", Mxo tries to console. Melokuhle bit the side of his lip in distress.

"It's not the money I'm worried about bruh. What if...", he suddenly went speechless.

"What if...?"

"I don't know. I'm already... a big part of me is already warming up to being a dad and shii. What if something goes wrong or I make a completely bad father?", he lowly confessed.

"Man stressing about the future is self-torture. Solve the problems that need your immediate attention. On being a bad father, I don't know man. I don't have any experience in that field but I was in your shoes I'd trust that the footsteps I'm walking in are enough to guide me", Mxo said. A smile emanated from the corner of Melo's lip.

"I guess. He's a cool guy", Melo said, referring to their father.

"Yeah. When he ain't mad", Mxo said and they laughed.

"I legit thought he was gonna punch my teeth out this afternoon"

"I don't think it'll ever get that far. What did he say anyway?"

"He made me revise the condom lessons", Melo said in embarrassment and Mxo exploded in laughter.

"Your dad is a colour film. Imagine studying for an exam you've already failed", Mxo mocked and Melo lightly hit his chest. They then stood up and headed downstairs with Mxo still laughing behind him while creating a Facebook account. When he was done, he just sent a straightforward "Future wife" text to Ndalo and hurried to the table before they could fry him and his phone.

...

After dinner, Mxolisi asked if he could speak to Muzi for a minute after almost everyone disappeared to the respective bedrooms. Muzi kissed Betso on the cheek and told her that he'll shortly follow her to the bedroom. Betso adoringly pulled Mxolisi's ear.

"Good night Koppie", she said with a smile and he laughed.

"Good night mom and stop calling me that", he stated, still laughing. Betso wrapped her arm around Lwandile's shoulders and they walked and talked.

When they were supposed to go their separate ways along the corridor, Lwandile stopped as he was about to open the door.

"Mom?"

"Hm?", Betso lazily said with her exhausted eyes dropped to her cheeks and her hand on her neck.

"Can we talk? It's important"

"1-10?", she gave him a scale to gauge the importance of the matter. All she was thinking about is a hot shower and her bed.

"9", he said and she tensed her brows at his facial expression.

"Mm-kay", she agreed in concern and they walked into his room.

She sat on the bed and watched him pace the room in front of her in confusion.

"What's wrong Kanyo?", she asked and he abruptly went to sit sit next to her on the bed.

"Bua le mama"(Talk to mommy), she said and ran her palm on his forehead.

"Okay. Here goes. I... I'm...", he struggled to put together a comprehensible sentence. He couldn't.

"I received an email from school. I've been selected amongst the 3 that will be going to Belgium for that accounting competition I told you about", he swerved from his original thoughts and decided to tell her something else, which he was also meaning to tell her.

"That's great news baby!", she exclaimed in excitement, pulling him by the head to her chest. He laughed nervously and sniffed. She kept his head there.

"When do you leave? And for how long? What are you gonna need?", she rambled.

"When school closes after prelims. For a week. I don't think I'm short of anything"

"You're gonna need warm clothes and---"

"I have more than enough clothes mama", he cuts her short.

"Still. I'm happy for you. Thank you for making me proud once again", she brushed his arm. He just nodded.

"But Kanyo?", she whispered.

"Hm?"

"I gave birth to you. I know you. That's not what you wanted to tell me. Out with it", she said. He tightly shut his eyes.

"Something is bothering you. It has been bothering you for days now. What is it?", she went on.

"Kanyo?"

"I'm gay mom!", he blurted out compelled by impatience. Silence. She finally exhaled.

"I guess, I'm finally disappointing you for the first time", he said and sobbed.

"Hey! Get that stupid thought out of your head. I am disappointed yes! Am I disappointed by your sexual orientation? No. I am disappointed by the fact that I failed you as a mother"

"No why would...", he raised his head trying to interject and she raised her hand so he stops talking.

"Boikanyo, if I was doing a great job as I thought I was you wouldn't have had a hard time telling me that you're queer. There is nothing wrong with you. Hell I have a homosexual bestfriend why did you think I was going to judge you baby?"

"I don't know. It's different when it's your own child"

"That would make me a hypocrite, don't you think?", she asked and he dropped his face. She then exhaled heavily and pulled his head back on her chest.

"You're still the Kanyo I gave birth to and raised. Your sexuality does not change your identity"

"My sexuality IS a part of my identity mom"

"It has always been. You didn't suddenly adopt this. You just happened to realize it. "

He kept quiet. So did she.

"Are you gonna tell dad?"

"Do you want me to?"

"I don't know"

"I'm not going to tell him but I'm willing to hold your hand when you finally decide to", she assured. He wrapped his hands tightly around her waist.

...

Meanwhile in the TV room...

Muzi settled down on the couch and Mxolisi did the same.

"What's up?", Muzi asked in a casual tone.

"I need your help"

"O-kay?"

"I've been playing around with this idea for a while now and I think it's time I put it in motion. I'mmm thinking of opening up a studio", he disclosed. Muzi nodded in a manner that suggested that he needed to hear more.

"You're taking this music thing seriously ne?", he remarked.

"Yeah dad. I mean, I'm already making music from the comfort of my own bedroom. Why not go for the whole thing and get rich while at it? I was born rich but you get what I'm saying."

Muzi laughed.

"Niyahlupha nina ma rich skrrpot"

"It's skrr skrr dad", Mxo corrected and laughed.

"Yona leyo...", Muzi said and laughed as well.

"So, you don't think it's a good idea?"

"Not at all. I've heard the kind of music you make. Plus that song you produced by...?", Muzi shrunk his face trying to remember the name.

"Ashanté?", Mxo came to his rescue.

"Yes. It went viral. I just didn't think you took it seriously because you never speak about it much. You weren't as excited as I expected you to be so I let you be"

A single breath escaped Mxo's lip in the form of a laugh.

"I'm not against it. On condition that you pull up your socks at school because you're slacking"

"School doesn't align with my brand MK"

"And what the fxck is that supposed to mean?"

"I hate it there. I count hours instead of numbers"

"But you used to be so good at maths. You loved it too. What went wrong?"

"I outgrew that shii"

"You outgrew school?", Muzi repeated out of confusion.

"Yeah. School is depressing. It demands a lot from me"

"Everyone needs something to fall back on. All this, could collapse tomorrow and you'll find yourself without a job because "daddy's" company wouldn't be there to save you anymore. Your shares mean nothing if there's no company. We don't know what tomorrow holds"

"We both know that will never happen. Not on your watch"

"I could die next week?", Muzi sternly stated. A sudden morose look occupied Mxolisi's face.

"Don't say that", he said and clenched his teeth. Muzi dropped his shoulders and pulled him by his shoulder so he hugs.

"I'm just saying. Life is very unpredictable mfan'wami. I want you to have the spirit of going for anything and everything you're capable of. Leave no stone unturned when it comes to opportunities. Remember how badly your mother struggled to find a perfect school for you?"

"Yeah", Melo reluctantly agreed. Still unsettled by the thought of Muzi dying.

"She did that because she wanted a school that was going cater for your each and every need but you're taking her efforts for granted. What happened to swimming? "

"I got sick of it. That's more of Lwandile's thing. I play soccer now"

"Do you like it at least or are you gonna drop it as well like you did in primary school?"

"You know I love it. We never miss a match"

"Watching and playing are two different things"

"I know. I won't ditch it. I promise"

"Lobu indecisive bakho buyangithusa. You need to learn how to be committed to one thing and stick to it"

"I'm still young dad. I'm bound to fxck up. It's the only way I'll find my feet", he said and Muzi nodded once after a moment.

"I guess you have a point"

"So, studio?", Mxo pressed and Muzi laughed then stood up. He took his phone from the coffee table and said, "Draw up a proper business plan, call my PA to schedule an appointment, wear a suit and come present your idea to me".

Mxolisi laughed. Muzi left.

"He's serious?", he questioned his meta self with his jaw dropping.

...

After picking up his jaw and scattered senses from the floor, Mxo picked up the remote and turned the TV on. He took out his phone to check with Ndalo had replied to his text on messenger. She hadn't. His heart dropped. He threw the chat head to the corner of his phone and browsed her pictures with closed smile on face. He came across a picture of her sitting on a black plastic chair with a fairly short yellow dress on, laughing in a carefree manner as the picture depicted, even though her hair was a complete mess. An "unexpected" as one would say. "The things I'd do to you baby gurl?!", he thought out loud. Melo appeared from behind the couch and caught a glimpse of her on Mxo's screen.

"I can bet--", Melo said and Mxolisi jumped.

"Tsek man baby daddy don't sneak up on me like that!"

Melokuhle laughed and took a handful of cereal out of the box and poured it all into his wide open mouth.

"I can bet with all my exes that you're never gonna get that chick", he said and went to sit on the couch with Mxo, who huffed out a cucky laugh.

"All your exes you say?"

Melo nodded and continued chewing.

"Wa khuluma ngath' awungazi?"(Why are you speaking as though you don't know me?), he asked with a challenging smile on his face.

"I do. But I also know that Shortstuff will never entertain you. Buza bonke labafana ba la esgodini. My self included"

"Ohhhh. I see. This is jealousy talking", Mxo said and began cracking in a mocking laughter.

"It's not. I'm just warning you so you know what you're up against. Izok'phula intliziyo leya ngane if you invest yourself in pursuing her"

"Wee investment, warn me to the moon and back. Unama rights",Mxo said and stuck his tongue out, dancing his way to his room. Melo shook his head while laughing and changed the channel.

Ndalo finally replied at 01h22. Mxo was still up, listening to music well in a dead quiet house and switching between social media apps. His heart almost jumped out of his chest when he realized that she had replied.

Mxolisi Kopano K: Future wife 😏

Ndalo Angel Shezi: Lol hi 😏

Mxo: You good?

Ndalo: Yea. Just cold. Wena?

Mxo: I'm not. Your scent is stuck on me. It's not making things any easier. 😏

Ndalo: Amanga 🙄(lies)

Mxo: Ngifunge ngani ukuk'tshengisa ukuthi I'm being honest? (What should I swear on to show you that I'm being honest)

Ndalo: Lol I don't know.

Mxo: I'm guessing this is the only time you can access her phone because she's sleeping. Correct?

Ndalo: Lol not really. She borrows it to me freely but I had to study. So, couldn't talk.

Mxo: Are you writing today? You should get some sleep if you are.

Ndalo: Lol yes dad.

Mxo: Mciim 😊 I wasn't trying to be your dad, BUT I could be your daddy? 😊

Ndalo: Goodnight Mxolisi 😊😊😊

Mxo: Wait...

Mxo: Where do you go to school?

Ndalo: Meadows Comprehensive High. Why?

Mxo: What time will you get off tomorrow?

Ndalo: 15h30. I have an extra class. Why? Are you planning on coming to my school? Please don't 😊

Mxo: Ulale kahle. I love you ❤️

Ndalo: Lol you keep saying that

Mxo: Because I don't doubt it.

Ndalo: 🙄

Ndalo: You never answered my question though.

Mxo: Get some rest.

Ndalo: Mxo!

Mxolisi: Goodnight Ndarly 😊 Or morning. Whichever one my lady prefers. I'm not going to respond to the next text you send. Just so you know. 😊

Ndalo: 🙄

[Seen]

Comprehensive school? This should make it easier to find their emblem. He thought to himself as he browsed the net. The brilliant idea at the back of his head was even making him anxious. He may have found a way to get Ndalo a phone, a phone that she can freely keep. He just, needed to fake a few things...

Chapter Nine

Save! Mxolisi exclaimed when he was finally done with the document and stored it in his stick. He was proud of himself for how he pulled it off. It looked and sounded professional when read.

"Dear parent

We hereby inform you of the new TechForLearner programme, brought to us by the Department of Education. Due to our excellent streak of outstanding annual results, Meadows Comprehensive High has received a sum of R50 000 that has been put to use provide deserving learners with digital devices that will assist them in any area of learning. The curriculum is forever evolving. By this, we hope to combat any challenges that might arise due to this fact. Our school is known for its attentive nature to individual learners, ensuring maximum performance at the end of each academic year.

Hopefully this finds you in order.

Regards,

[Signature]"

"Ha-haaa!!!", he celebrated and woke an already irritated Lwandile up.

"Do you mind? What are you even doing?", Lwandile asked with squinted eyes.

"I'm busy being a genius as always", he said and winked at Lwa. He had his back against the grey headboard.

"Are you writing the assignment? Without being forced?", Lwandile was genuinely surprised and he wasn't even trying to hide it.

"Assignment? Ain't nobody got time for that", Mxo said and kept his eyes on the screen. Lwandile took a deep breath out.

"Can you please be serious for once? Do you have any idea how badly you're going to fail if you carry on like this?"

"You stress too much"

"As I should! If you're not ready for the exams then it means I'll have to fail them too, deliberately!", Lwandile vents.

"No you don't"

"Of course I do. I can't be one class ahead of you. It'll fxck up all our life plans"

"I won't fail. Relax"

"You don't understand how serious this is do you? If you're not careful we'll end up going to different universities because of your mediocre results"

"Your problem is, you think with your emotions. Dude we're still in grade 11"

"Do you have to be a brick each time I try to make you unders--"

"Relax!", Mxolisi yelled.

"Seems I'm the only one concerned about us sticking together huh?"

"You know that's not true. We'll always be together. We can do different things but still see each other everyday, just we've ALWAYS done. We like completely different things. Why am I explaining this to you like it's something new?"

"Lemme shut the fxck up before you accuse me of being emotional"

"You can't force your interest down my throat. You should know this by now!"

"Fxck you and your throat!", Lwandile shot out of bed and left for God-knows-where in the house. Mxolisi shut the laptop closed and threw it to the side on top of the sheets. He wiped his face and balanced his frustrated face by his palm.

...

During breakfast, they sat across one another whereas they usually sit next to each other, each stubbornly focusing on their own toast.

"Are the two of you alright?", Manqoba asked.

"Perfectly fine!", they both shot out at the same time, still keeping their eyes on their plates. Manqoba's eyes danced between them suspiciously. He turned to look at Muzi and Muzi shook his head to indicate that he shouldn't press on the matter any further. The only time he gets in their business is if their issues last for more than 24 hours.

"Are you done packing, we're leaving in a few hours?", Betso asked the two.

"Packing doesn't take the whole day mom", Mxolisi said.

"Say that again and the toast you're chewing will spray out of your nose", Betso threatened and pointed her index finger at him.

"I'm sorry", he apologized with remorse. Betso dropped her high chest and sharply threw her eyes to the wall. Melo looked at his watch and announced that he was getting late for school whereas he wasn't. He stood to go fetch his bag and blazer but immediately placed his hand on his inflated mouth with his eyes popped. He ran upstairs to go vomit.

"Are you okay Kuhle?", Betso questioned and removed the white napkin on her thighs to run after him. The eyes around the table were looking for answers in one another.

She found the door to his room wide open along with that of the bathroom. He was kneeling on the toilet vomiting his guts out. It then hit Betso that he might be going through a sympathetic pregnancy. She squatted next to him and placed her hand on his shoulder. Muzi walked in.

"Boy, what's wrong?"

Melo placed his arm on his tummy and squeezed painfully as he continued to throw up. A look of concern grew on Betso's face.

"Melo?", she lowly called out.

"Ngilunywa yisusu ma", he cried out in pain.

"I think he's having morning sickness", Betso said to Muzi who was standing by the door.

"Should I get you some water?", Muzi asked. Melo shook his head rapidly and continued balancing his head on the arm that he'd laid on the toilet seat. The vomiting had stopped. When they were sure that he was fine, he went back to worshipping the porcelain god. Muzi shrunk his face in concern. Betso placed her fingers on his forehead.

"Baba he's burning up!", she said and immediately stood up. She turned on the tap on the basin, grabbed one of the brown towels outside of his shower and submerged it in the warm water. She then twisted most of the water out, folded it and placed it on his forehead. He had stopped vomiting. She loosened the striped tie around his neck and undid the first button.

"How long is it going to last for?", Muzi asked his wife. Betso was about to reply when Melo abruptly threw up again.

"That's it. I'm taking you to the hospital. Can I have the car keys baby? ", she said and stood up. Her last sentence was directed to Muzi. Melo took the damp towel and wiped his mouth.

"There's really no need for that. I'm fine", he insisted with a throaty voice. He could still feel and taste the vomit grains at the very back of his tongue.

"The doctor will tell me that", she stated and walked out to go find him something warm to wear. Melo weakly stood up from the floor.

"Tell her I'm fine MK", he said with slight frown. He wasn't looking forward to the chakalaka smell of medication at the hospital. That usually makes him even more sick.

...

Betso led the way down the stairs in her long, 'floor-sweeping' black dress.

"I'm taking Melo to the hospital. Nina, behave yourselves while I'm away. And pack also!", she pointed them with the car key in her command. Muzi was already out of the house.

"What's wrong you?", Mxolisi asked Melokuhle casually. Melo lazily rolled his eyes Betso and Mxo laughed with his thumbs on his screen, still seated at the table. He understood what he meant. The gesture meant that Betso was making a mountain out of mole hill as usual. He still had stomach cramps but he decided to push the pain at the back of his head. He was hopeful that it will eventually go away if he didn't pay any attention to it. Lwandile had gone back to his room and locked it. Mxolisi stood up and went to the study to speak to Manqoba. He had initially planned to disappear but he decided against it when he saw his parents leave.

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The door was open and he could see Manqoba in the balcony with the glass door open behind him, facing the sun and speaking on the phone. Manqoba turned, saw and gestured with his hand that he should come in.

"How long are you planning on giving me the silent treatment for? I woke up and ubungekho embheden.

Thembalami, please answer the phone so we can talk about what is bothering you? Ngiyak'cela", he wrapped up his voicemail and placed the phone back in his pocket.

"Ja mfan", he said to Mxolisi and brushed his face. Mxolisi laughed and tried to duck his hand but it was too late.

"Don't get married boy uyangizwa? Women are walking, talking and moody headaches with long lashes and manicures"(...do you hear me?...), he said to Mxolisi jokingly and they both laughed. He placed his hand on Mxolisi's far shoulder and they slowly walked to the couch.

"That's actually the reason why I'm here", Mxolisi confessed.

"Weeeee", Manqoba exclaimed and Mxolisi laughed even harder. They sat down.

"Who is she?", Manqoba asked. Mxolisi raised his face with a slight smile on the corner of his lip and said, "Her name is Ndalo. Shezi. "

"Umntwana ka Nomcebo Shezi?!", Manqoba exclaimed with high pitched laughter. Mxolisi bit his upper lip and nodded, suppressing a laughter.

"Why are you so brave?", Manqoba asked and continued laughing, laying his back on the couch.

"Kant wenzan lomama?"(What kind of a person is she?)

"If stop-nonsense was a person", Manqoba said.

"Kodwa ngiyayithanda lengane MQ", he confesses.

"Uyithanda impela or you want somebody to add to your hit list?"

Mxolisi laughed

"I don't have a hit list"

"I've been 16 before Mxo. Ne behavior yakho gives a lot away", MQ says and Mxolisi snorts and looks away with an embarrassed smile on his face.

"But the fact that you're talking to me about her means she's something special", Nqoba says and digs deep into Mxo's eyes with his.

"Angazi. Maybe. She's... different"

"Different you say?", Manqoba says with his brow raised and a curious smile on his face.

"Awusho, what's so different about this young lady? Yena muhle ngiyavuma but same goes for all the other ones I've caught you with", he adds. Mxo releases a single snorty laugh.

"Angazi man. She's just...", the picture of Ndalo's face in his head rendered him speechless.

"Let me rephrase. How did you realize that she's "special" as you say?", Mxo kept silent for a moment and raised his eyes to look at MQ.

"She just makes me feel some typha way"

"Hm?!", Manqoba exclaimed with fascination. Mxolisi laughed out loud.

"So here's the thing, I need you to borrow me your car today"

"I thought you were leaving today"

"We are but I can't leave without doing this"

"How would you have achieved this if Makhosonke didn't get sick?"

"I was gonna make a plan. You know I think about crossing bridges only when I get to them"

"What if they come back before you do? You know how your mom can get"

"That's another bridge", he said impatiently and Manqoba laughed.

"Haiy ezakho zangihlula k'daloo. The keys are somewhere in the living room. If they ask, I'm gonna say you stole the car. AND drive safely"(I've learnt not to involve myself in your shenanigans), Manqoba emphasized.

"Your car is gonna come back in one piece. I promise"

"It's not the car I'm worried about. I can always get another one but there's only one you", he said and brushed the top Mxo's hair in adoration.

"Technically, that's biologically incorrect", Mxo teased and they laughed.

"Speaking of which, what was happening with you two this morning?"

"I'd rather not talk about that. I'll see you later ayt?", Mxo said and Manqoba shook his head as they fist bumped.

...

Bongiwe sat by her sickly father's hospital bed and sobbed as she watched how his health had deteriorated in a matter of hours. He gave her a languid smile and tried to squeeze her hand. An emotional Lindelwa walked out as she couldn't take it anymore.

"Nobody is immortal my kids...", he finally said as he coughed weakly with his mouth closed.

"Kodwa bewungcono last week baba?", she said in a breaking voice. Aunt Gertrude walked in with her shiny yet ravaged bag hanging from the inside of her elbow.

"Such is life. You kept stalling when I wanted grandkids buka manje sengiphelelwe yiskhathi"(...I've ran out of time). Bongwiwe bit the inner part of her upper lip trying not to fall apart. Her father's statement took her back to the time where Mangaliso left her right after she had gotten a miscarriage.

"M'tshele bhuti. K'dala ngisho mina ngithi akazitholele indoda ngoba ayabola amaqanda ngala"(Tell her brother. I've been saying that she must find a man because her eggs are rotting in here), she said and poked Bongwiwe thrice on her abdomen. Bongwiwe rolled her teary, fuming eyes and looked away.

"Uziphetha nje ngendoda. Ungayiqoqa yonke imali yalo mhlaba kodwa um'ungenayo indoda nabantwana kuyafana sesi", aunt Gertrude went on. She tried to touch Bongwiwe's weave and Bongwiwe jerked away. Her father tried to get to shut up but he couldn't stop coughing.

"KUYAFANA!", she reiterated maliciously.

...

Mxolisi went to his room to get his wallet and the memory stick but found it locked. He knocked politely to no avail until he got irritated.

"Open this door Lwandile man!", he shot out and banged on it. He pinched the bridge of his nose before he could bang on it again.

"Okay fine. Give me my memory stick and my wallet then I'll be out of your hair", he said and waited. No answer.

"I'm giving you exactly 2 minutes to open this door. You're gonna pay for it if I break it", he threatened. Lwandile opened it and handed him his things. Mxolisi looked at him in the face before his hands could drop to his spread out hand. He shook his head in disapproval before snatching them from him, resulting in him dropping the stick that it slid down the corridor. Lwandile's face was straight and emotionless. He then closed the door and locked it again. Mxolisi picked up the memory stick and left.

...

After purchasing the phone, Mxolisi trusted the GPS to get him to Ndalo's school, hoping that he wouldn't get there when lunch was already over. He parked by the gate, a small distance from the security check office and walked towards the window. He greeted and the security guard greeted back while wiping her hands with a Shoprite promotions paper, trying to remove the oil from the vetkoeks she was eating.

"What are you here for?", she asked as she grabbed the big book from behind her, notifying that the one in front of Mxo was full.

"I'm here to see my sister. What time is lunch?", he said and kept a straight face, hoping it's convincing enough. The security guard checked her watch and said about 6 minutes from now.

"Do you have your I.D with you?", she asked and he reached for his wallet in his back pocket. He then handed the smart card to her. She took it and filled in the row. She then turned the book in his direction and asked him to sign on the last cell of the row.

"Mara o cute wena yong", she complimented and he laughed shyly. He never expected anything of that sort to come out of her mouth. He was in fact anticipating something rude or anything along those lines from how her face looked when he first arrived.

"Ngiyabonga", he said and pushed the book towards her. She then pressed a button and the gate unlocked. She sat back on her chair and asked him to push it further because 'break' was just a few minutes away anymore. He did as instructed and the siren went off, causing the learners to pour of the classrooms. He then remembered that he didn't know which grade Ndalo was actually in. He walked on anyway. He asked a random learner if she knew Ndalo and she said no. He thanked her and walked away. He was about to ask another learner when he saw Sbusiso, one of the boys he was chilling with outside of the yard on the eve of the inauguration. Sbu also took notice of him.

"Ey man! Ufunan' wena la?"(What are tou doing here?), he said in excitement and they bumped shoulders, followed by a 'thumb-snap' hand greeting.

"Eish bra. I'm glad I bumped into you. Ngifunana no Ndalo mfeth"(I'm looking for Ndalo)

"Um'uthi Ndalo, usho uNdalo Ndalo Ndalo? Angel? Shezi?", the guy exclaimed, a brink away from laughing.

"Yena loyo"(That one), Mxo said and the guy chortled.

"If I were you I'd go back home. Akunkani akunkani laphaya? Even a donkey is better"(You won't be able to conquer her stubbornness), he said and Mxo laughed.

"Yekel' ukungibhedela and go find her. I'll owe you one"

"You probably have the cash now so pay and I'll bring her to you?", he negotiated and Mxo continued to laugh in defeat.

"Find her first", he said and they struck a deal. Mxo stood against the tree and took out his phone. He noticed a figure standing in front of him and he raised his face.

"OMG and it's really you?!", she said in excitement.

"Uhm... hello", Mxo said with a curious, awkward smile.

"I'm sorry but I just had to. I follow you religiously on Instagram. I was at your house yesterday but I only saw your brother", she rambled on. Mxo huffed out a laugh, with his thumbs over his screen.

"Melo obviously. I wouldn't been able to tell the difference if I'd seen the one you usually post", she said and Mxo looked down briefly and laughed. When he raised his face, Ndalo was walking with Sbusiso towards them. She was laughing from a distance but it all faded when she arrived.

"It was nice seeing you", Mxo said when he picked up the vibes he was getting from Ndalo although she tried hard to act normal.

"Cool. Reply to my DMs phela nawe", the girl said and Mxo gave half nod.

"Khokha ke sbali", Sbu said and Mxo laughed, taking out a R100 note from his wallet.

"Tsii!", Sbu celebrated and left.

"Hi", he softly said to her. She had her hands crossed on her chest.

"Hi", she greeted back.

"Unjan?"

"What are you doing here?"

"I'm here to deliver 16 bags of cement", he said and puckered his lips, trying to suppress a laughter. He could see that she was not happy with him.

"Mciim", she replied and looked away.

"Ngiyadlala. I'm here to see you haw"

"Me? It didn't look like it", she said and kept her eyes away. Her face was clean of any emotion.

"Is she the reason you--? She just came up to me and started chatting me up. I'm sorry", he pleaded with her.

The jealousy she was trying to hard to hide was amusing to him.

"Please walk me out?", he added when he realized she wasn't about reply to her. She glanced at him and saw the smile he was trying to tuck away into his lips. She laughed and began walking.

"Exactly how much are you willing to go around spending to get people to call me for you?", she asked and he laughed.

"Ngivumele ukuthi ngibe isoka lakho before you start seeing my face on I Blew It", he says and she shoots out a laugh. They walked towards the car and the eyes she was seeing and sensing around her made her uncomfortable.

He reached for the McD paper bag at the backseat and handed it to her.

"Mi, I brought you lunch", he said and placed it on her thighs before she could dispute. She rolled her eyes in an

attempt to dissolve the shy look on her face and said, "Thanks", placing the small bag on the dashboard.

"I wanna play you a song", he said while trying to connect his phone to bluetooth. Liquideep's fairytale began playing in the car. He started dancing, mostly with his shoulders to the beat. She didn't know how to react. All she could do is laugh, blush and smile when he began singing along.

"Can I be your fairytale? Promise I will love you well?", he continued singing and jamming to the beat. He laughed it off when she was looking out the window.

"Can I?", he asked in a serious tone. She shrugged. He could see the smile from her cheeks even though she was facing away.

"I'm not ready", she finally said.

"Ready for what?", he gently took the hand she was holding against her mouth in a fist, in both of his.

"The drama that will come with being a relationship with you. I've already gotten a feel of it moments ago", she confessed, still looking away. He patiently rubbed the top of her hand with his thumb.

"Ndalo, ngine nhliziyo eyodwa. Noma kthiwa ngiyafisa, angeke ngikwazi ukuthanda wena ngiphinde ngithande nabanye futhi"(I only have one heart. Even if I did wish to, it won't be able to love you and others at the same time), he said and brought her hand to his lips. He bent all four fingers and kissed their top surface.

"Ungisaban ngempela?"(Why are you so afraid of me?), he asked and waited to see if she'll turn towards him.

"Uban othe ngiyak'saba?"(Who said I'm afraid of you?), she forced herself to look him the eye to prove her point. Her eyes began glistening up, but she wasn't about to back down.

"You tense up when I'm around you", he said and she laughed. 'Fairytale' began playing, but the reprise version this time.

"No I don't"

"If you continue saying no I'm gonna have to prove it to you"

"Angikusabi Mxolisi", she was adamant. He reclined her chair without any warning and she gasped. He then slowly and gently climbed on top of her. He could see that she was holding in all of her breath behind her tightly shut eyes.

"I want you Ndalo. I love you. With all the nerve endings in my brain and every muscle in my heart. Qoma phela ntombi iyagodola inhliziyu ka Zikode?", he whispered very closely to her ear so much she felt like the individual words swung down the nerves on her spinal cord.

"Please be mine?", he insisted. She nodded.

"Ubong'buka phela meng'khuluma nawe"(Look at me when I'm speaking to you?)

The song continued to softly play in the background.

Ndalo just laughed but kept her eyes closed. She could feel his face approaching hers. He dropped a light kiss on her lips. She slightly parted them in a gasp. He watched her crumbling underneath him with a smile. He then got off her when he felt like she couldn't take the pressure anymore. He dropped back on his seat and took out the blue Labello stick from his pocket and moisturized his lips. She finally opened her eyes, failing dismally to contain her laughter.

Her grabbed the box that contained her phone and handed it to her, in the small plastic bag it came in.

"I told you my mom--",

"Just open it", he said and waited for her to take it.

"I really can't"

Mxolisi looked into the white bag and took out the letter he had printed out in colour and folded in half.

"What's that?"

"Read it"

She took it and read it with patience. She laughed in disbelief.

"Mxo!"

"You have no excuses now", he said and handed her the box.

"You could get arrested for this. You can't fake somebody's signature. How did you even--", she rambled, still in disbelief.

"Your principal is a famous woman. It wasn't that hard", he said and opened the box to set the phone up since he felt she was wasting time.

Chapter Ten

After he was done setting up the device, Mxo handed it to her. She was still in disbelief that he'd go to such lengths just to speak to her on a daily basis. She took it and admired it from front to back.

"Ngiyabonga", she said through a blush. The manner in which she said it made him feel proud of himself. Her tone was full of innocent appreciation. It exacerbated the already existing urge in him to take care of her.

"Do you like it?"

"I love it"

"Mission accomplished then", he said and kissed the back of her hand. She blushed and checked for time on the pink watch belted on her wrist.

"You should eat before the siren goes off", he suggested. She was reluctant.

"Only if you're eating with me", she said and he laughed.

"There's only one of everything in there", he said and gave a side eye to his vibrating phone he had placed next to the gear control. Ndalo dropped her eyes onto the screen and gathered that a "Sne" was calling. He glanced at her before he could answer.

"Hey", he answered. She stole a very brief look at him and took the bag. She peeped inside and her sight fell on fries, a big mac and a fizzy drink.

"Nah I'm not home yet", he said and Ndalo took out the chips and pretended not be listening.

"You always do this when he fucks up. Why?"

"That's not what we--", he said and abruptly cut his sentence short, then exhaled.

"Look I can't talk right now. We'll talk when I get home"

"Don't be like that"

"Okay I'm hanging up", he stated and cut the call.

She kept her eyes to the dimmed window and while she chewed.

"Don't tell me you're a slow eater?", he mocked, and she kept quiet.

"Are you okay?", he asked as he put the phone back down.

"Was that your girlfriend?", she enquired, still looking away. He exhaled.

"We had something going on but she's not my girlfriend", he explained. She kept quiet. He tried to take her hand again, but she pulled away.

"Are we honestly going to fight about things that happened in my life before you came in it?"

"They're obviously still going on"

"Akulona iqiniso lelo"(That's not true)

"If it's not then why is she calling?"

"She's calling because I haven't told her about you yet. She's not my girlfriend. She has somebody else. She and I mean nothing", he pleaded.

"She is dating you both?", she said in shock.

"We are not in a relationship. We never were"

"Then what do you call whatever it is that's going on between the two of you?"

"No strings attached"

"I don't engage in such things"

"I made myself clear from the get go about what I want with you. Why are you now deliberately confusing yourself?"

"Our lives are completely different. I love you too, but I can't allow myself to get hurt", she confessed and he only caught three words from all she said.

"You what?", he asked with a closed-lip smile and a satisfied look in his eyes. She shrugged off her shoulder and looked away with a frown on her face. He leaned in closer and cupped her chin, turning her to face him.

"Give me the benefit of the doubt. That's all I ask from you. One thing I'm not gonna do is to watch you punish and walk away from me for things that occurred before I knew you", he said in a low, raspy voice. Ndalo's eyes fell to her exposed thighs. Her skirt was not short, but it didn't go below her knees. The manner in which she was seated caused it to go up even further up.

"Look at me?", he said, and she didn't.

"I know the type of girls you love and I'm not--"

"Wazelaphi?"(How do you know?), he cut in between her statement before she could finish.

"Ndalo, I don't have any intention of playing games with you, so I'd appreciate if you didn't play games with me too. Uyangfunu noma cha?"(Do you want me or not?), he asked with both his hands on her cheeks. She pouted.

"I don't have all day. Neither do you. Manje ngicela ungiphendule ntombenhle?"(So answer me pretty lady)

"I do", she lowly said.

"What is it that you do?", he asked, and she laughed. A smile grew on his face.

"Ngiyak'thanda nami Mxolisi", she laid her heart bare and his skipped two beats. He shut his eyes and dropped his head.

"Mara ungenzan Ndalo ungishayisa ngovalo kangaka sthandwasami?"(What is that you're doing to me my love?), he asked, and she laughed through a blush. He raised his face and looked her in the eye. She tried to look away, but he said, "Don't". She soldiered on and braved the stare.

"Angeke ngikulume if you don't want me to"(I won't bite you ..), he assured, and she laughed.

"Why would I want you to bite me?"

"I don't have quite the answer to that. I'd rather show you?", he whispered and insisted on keeping his eyes locked in hers. She ran speechless. He then leaned in slowly towards her trembling lips.

"Relax", he said in a rough whisper. He then planted a kiss on her lips and she put her hands on his chest.

"Mxo wait. I've never--"

"I know. Relax and I'll lead. Okay?"

She nodded. He went in again and began working her lower lip with his, both their eyes were closed. He eased her into it until she started reciprocating. His hands travelled down her waist as their continued smooching one another. She got lost in it and he smiled in between the kiss. She smiled back. He kissed her cheek and pushed her braids back. She had tied them at the top of her head, but their length was a disturbance to his mission. He

travelled to almost the back of her neck in kisses and she started breathing heavily. He got there and began sucking and bursting a few of her capillaries with his lips. She was now hyperventilating. He left 2 red marks there and went back to kissing her patiently and passionately on the lips with his hand on her neck. His forehead met hers and he said, "See why you'd want me to bite you?", he asked in a whisper. She laughed shyly.

"How did it feel?"

"Kubhlungu kodwa kumnandi at the same time", she punctuated with a laugh.

"Make sure your mom doesn't see them"

"Doesn't see what?"

"Just keep your braids like that till they disappear", he laughed.

"What did you do to me?", she laughed as well.

"If a nigga approaches you today, show him those marks and tell him who left them there", he said and she laughed.

"This is just a very thin tip of an iceberg by the way", he whispered in her ear and violent butterflies erupted in her belly. The siren went off.

"Sengiyahamba manje. We'll talk on the phone. Send me a message whenever you can talk and I'll call, okay?", he said and she nodded. He gently pulled her by the back of her head and kissed her one last time. He planted a cold kiss on her forehead and they said their goodbyes. The learners were pouring back into the school.

"You haven't left yet kodwa seng' ngiyak'khumbula"(But I already miss you", he said to her and she pursed her lips. She didn't want to go either.

"Ngiyak'thanda ngelosi yam"(I love you my Angel)

"I love you too", she said and opened the car door.

"Wait, let's take a selfie", he said and unlocked his phone.

"I'm gonna be late Mxo"

"It'll only take you a minute to get to the gate", he said as he looked outside and saw a few learners still coming from different directions. He took the paper bag and placed inside the plastic.

"Okay", she said and posed next to him. She smiled to the camera and he placed his lip on her cheek and closed his eyes. He took a shot of the picture using one of the volume buttons. He then looked at it and admired it.

"Nom' ungathini Ndalo, mina nawe siyafanela mama!", he exclaimed and she laughed as she ran out of the car with her phone and plastic bag. He started the car and drove off.

...

He could tell that his parents were not yet back when he drove in the yard. He got inside the house and placed the keys where he found them. He ran upstairs and found the door to their room open. He walked in and found Lwandile putting on shoes. The whole room smelt of his shower gel. When he looked over to the bed, he saw two zipped up suitcases.

"You packed for me?", he asked in surprise. If it was any other day it would've been perfectly normal for him to see this. But he thought things were tense when he left. Lwandile tightened the pace on his white sneaker and

exhaled.

"Did I have a choice?", he asked without raising his face and pulled the other shoe towards him so he can put it on.

"I'm sorry", Mxolisi said and sat on the bed.

"You're sitting on my sock?", Lwandile said and waited for him to stand up. Mxolisi did and he pulled the black discreet sock and put it on. Mxolisi sat down again.

"I shouldn't have spoken to you like I did this morning. I'm really sorry Lwa?", he pleaded.

"It's cool. Mom said she's still picking up a few things at the mall so she won't have to do it when we get home", he notified as continued pulling his laces. Mxolisi couldn't make out whether he had been truly forgiven or not.

"Okay", he said and Lwandile walked out when he was done.

...

Bongiwe and Lindelwa spent the night at the hospital. The doctor informed that he was seeing progress with the old man's health although they shouldn't be too hopeful. Their aunt went over to sleep at Bongiwe's house. Her reasons being that she wouldn't have survived her arthritis in the cold of the night. The two insisted on staying.

Gertrude woke up in the morning and made herself some tea. She explored the house and admired a few thing. She took her tea upstairs to do some more exploring. She only ever came there once and didn't have the time to. Now that was by herself, she abused the full liberty. She got in the walk-in closet and was immediately at awe at the number of shoes and handbags her niece had to her name. The red bottoms were carefully placed in their individual compartments. The bags too. One would swear she was in a designer shop had she taken a picture in there. Bongiwe had changed bags and left one on the make up chair. The bag caught Aunt Gertrude's eye. She loved it and thought it was more of her style. Her favourite part was how bloody expensive it looked. She knew the bag wasn't fronting. She picked it up and placed it on her bent hand and walked around with it.

"Uzongixolela uMabongi kodwa le, le ngibamba nayo shame. Sweety, uhamba nami wena"(Bongiwe will have to forgive me but I'm taking this one with me. Sweety, you're coming with me), she said, talking to the bag. She unzipped it on the outside and found four hundred rand notes and a nude lippie. She celebrated her way into the inner pocket, hoping to find more money. Her hand instead fell onto a cloth. She took it out and inspected it. It was navy, and folded. She immediately knew it belonged to a man. Women don't carry such, she thought to herself. She placed the bag down and unfolded the material. She smelt it. It indeed smelt like a man's cologne. Potently so.

"Awumithi ngani um'unayo indoda Mabongi?"(If you have a man, why are you not falling pregnant?), she questioned herself, puzzled.

"Nje ngoba ungakwazi ukugqina indoda, uzokusiza uAunty"(Since you can't keep a man, aunty will have to step in and help you), she said and shoved the handkerchief in the front pocket of her old, wrap-around skirt.

...

Betso and Muzi finally arrived back home. Melo was more lively than he was in the morning. They found Manqoba standing outside having a conversation with one of the guards with his thumbs in his front pockets. Muzi joined them. Betso walked into the house and instructed the boys to bring all suitcases including hers and her husband's. She gave Melo a long hug and gently pushed him away by his shoulders to look him in the eye. "I'm gonna miss you", Melo declared. Betso's heart blissfully bounced about.

"I'm gonna miss you. Angithi awufun' ukuza uzohlala nami"(Isn't you don't want to come stay with me?)"
He laughed.

"It's not that ma. I just like it here. My spirit is more at peace here than it is when I'm in Joburg"

"You sound like a chakra hun now", Betso said and they both laughed. The two came back, each carrying two cases. The bid Melo goodbye. When it was Mxo's turn, he whispered into Melo's ear and said "From today, phuma uit uit emabhozeni", he said and Melo wore a confused look on his face. Lwandile and his mother were already out the door. Mxo took out his phone and showed him his wallpaper.

"You lie!", Melo exclaimed with utter shock on his face.

"All the time but pictures don't"

"Put it here", Melo said and held out his fist. Mxo laughed and bumped his fist.

"This symbolizes your resignation from Bhozeni and partners", Mxo said and Melo laughed.

"Ukunya"(Nonsense), Melo replied.

"We'll talk when I get home. In the meantime, keep yourself busy with videos on how to change a diaper on Youtube", he said and ducked away from Melo's playful slap.

...

Enhle finally came back home. She walked into the bedroom and found Manqoba on his laptop, seated at a corner on a single couch. He raised his face and waited for her to speak.

"I'm back", she plainly said and her hands fell on her thighs.

"Welcome", he said, still waiting for her to explain herself. She just sat on the bed.

"Uqhamukaphi makaOluhle?(Where are you coming from?)"

"I went to get some fresh air"

"There's plenty of air in this yard"

"I said fresh", she bluntly expressed. Manqoba scoffed and stood up to go sit next to her. Holding the laptop in one hand, careful not to type gibberish. He placed it on the centre of the bed and went to squat next to her.

Barefoot and barechested.

"You still haven't shaved your hair", she remarked when she felt like he doesn't listen to her.

"My hair doesn't have to bother you this much. I will shave it when I get the time"

"I bet you didn't get eye checked as I suggested as well"

"My eye is fine now. I am not a child Mbalenhle. I'm old enough to know when I need a doctor", he states and she keeps quiet.

"Did you get it?", he asked with his hands hanging in between his open thighs.

"Get what?"

"Fresh air. Isn't it what you say you went out looking for as if this house is a chimney?", he said and Enhle threw her eyes to the door that permits entrance to the ensuite.

"You promised never to cheat on me again", she said without even trying to engage in any eye contact.

"When did I do that?"

"When I was pregnant with Oluhle"

"And when did I cheat?"

"You haven't yet but I know you will and I already know who she is"

"Thembalami what are you talking about?", he asked in a tone lathered in confusion.

"I saw you looking at her", she said and he immediately knew what she was talking about. He dropped his face and snorted.

"I've been meaning to talk to you about that", he said.

"About what? Her?", she said with attitude.

"Yes"

"I'm listening..."

He stood up and went to sit next to her. He exhaled. It took him a while to construct a sentence to the gentlest of his ability.

"I really don't know ukuthi nginga yiqala ngakuphi lendaba think I like her. I didn't want to speak to her without your permission mkami"(...where to start) he finally dropped the bomb. Enhle had her mouth opened. She finally scoffed it closed and stood up.

"So you're back to your old cheating ways?"

"I haven't cheated on you in 18 years. You know this because you police my phone and my movements"

"Manje yin loku?"(What's this then?)

"I wanna do things the right way. If I like her enough to marry her, I'm going to need your permission", he went and looked at her standing over him. She turned trying to walk away but her anger compelled her to slap him with the back of her hand. She immediately came back to her senses and placed both hands on her mouth in absolute remorse.

"Baby. Baby please ngiyaxolisa babakhe I honestly don't know what came over me"(I'm sorry), she tried to apologize. He had his palm against his burning cheek with his mouth slightly open from the shock that came down flushing his whole face. He stood up and she fell down on her knees and grabbed his leg, crying.

"Baby please. I didn't mean--", she begged and he tried to get his leg back.

"Ngiyeke ngihambe before I do something I know I will regret?", he calmly asked of her and she continued clutching onto his leg and shaking her head in emotional disapproval.

Chapter Eleven

Muzi and his family finally arrived home. The boys took their cases to their individual rooms and took their parents' suitcases with.

Muzi pulled Betso by the waist when she rambled about having to get started on making supper. She laughed as her hands fell on the top of his shoulders. His travelled down to her bxtt and grabbed on them. Betso placed her lips against his and they shared a slow, passionate kiss. The boys were watching with tons of fascination from the top of the staircase whereas the rents thought they had disappeared. Muzi cut the kiss and opened his eyes.

"Forget supper. Let's go to the bedroom"

"But baby the kids...", she couldn't contain her laughter when she failed to explain that she had to make food for the boys, and him.

"They'll order in", Muzi said, lowly and roughly.

"You know I don't like feeding them take-aways"

"Kodwa ngiqhanyelwe nje mina?"(But I'm horny?), Muzi begged with his eyes reduced in size. Betso laughed.

Muzi tightened his grab around her a**, making sure she felt that her man meant business.

"Ngicel' unakekele indoda yakho baby?"(Please take care of your man), he persuaded as he kissed on her neck.

"Ngiyak'cela, ma wey'ngane zami?"(Please, mother of my children?), he whispered into her ear and till today, this still sends shudders down her spine.

Mxolisi pulled Lwandile by the arm so they leave. They couldn't hear the conversation from up there but he knew that the party downstairs was going to come to an end if the parents saw them. The furthest Muzi ever takes with showing affection in front of them is kissing her with his hands on his waist. They disappeared, shaking their heads with wide smiles on their faces. Betso led Muzi up the stairs, holding on to his index finger with hers.

Muzi closed and locked the door behind him as they hungrily kissed one another. He unzipped her dress and she took off his top. She took out her hands from the long sleeves and allowed the dress to drop down to her ankles, exposing her matching red and lacy underwear. He picked her up immediately and resumed their impatient kissing. She wrapped her legs around his waist and placed her hand at the back of his head. His hands were on her curves as he placed her on the bed. They continued kissing while she unbuckled his belt and unbuttoned it. He unhooked her bra with one hand and had the other slide under her panties in order to grab her butt. The bra came off and he pulled the lacy number down and off her legs.

He took half a second to admire her toes that she'd recently painted blood red before grabbing onto both her boobs and devouring her lips. Betso pulled down his pants along with the briefs and he let himself out of both. she caressed his dick in an up and down movement. His one hand travelled to her throbbing and pulsating clit and he began gently massaging it with his middle finger. She placed her thumb on the head of his dick and felt his warm and slimy precum. She took her hand back and licked that thumb with a seductive grin on her face, letting it off slowly. Muzi smiled and whispered, "I forget that you're a freak". She unexpectedly turned, causing

both of them to roll over so she was on top. He rolled her back to her previous position and attacked her lips with his. This was one of those many days where he didn't want to be controlled.

His lips dropped to her neck and began planting wet kisses there as his index finger found it's way into her vagina, dripping her hot and lubricous juices. He finger fucked her and enjoyed the erotic sound that came from his finger going in and out of her hole. He travelled down to her boobs and took one into his mouth and began sucking. She shut her eyes, reflexively opened her mouth and spread her legs even wider. Muzi had every intention of leaving hickeys all over her breasts and he achieved that mission.

"Shhhhhhhhhhit!", she exclaimed in a whisper. He allowed her to have her orgasm and watched as she lost control of her own body, at his complete mercy.

He held her one leg up from under her thigh and inserted himself into her. The temperature in there felt like he'd inserted himself into a jar of lava if not a volcano itself.

"Mmm sthandwasami ushisa kamnandi"(I like how hot your thing is), he said as he slowly penetrated deeper into her, rubbing her hard flesh against her soft gripping tunnel. He pulled her towards him from under her back and got on the bed with her, crawling to the centre. Betso felt his full girth and every inch to his manhood in this position. He laid her down and began thrusting with his chest against her breast, kissing on her neck. Her receptors didn't know what to process between the rock hard penis going in and out of her and the skin above it that was stimulating her clitoris.

"Mmm just like that...", she said from under her breath. He moaned in her ear and this multiplied the pleasure she was receiving. He kept this pace for 5 minutes as his dick explored her vagina. Her pussy began contracting and he felt those consecutive cock pinches he likes.

"Ahh Khu..mmalo fu..uck!!", he drove her to the edge and she couldn't take it anymore. He increased his pace and fucked the shit out of her so much she felt his length in her womb. Her legs were still shaking from the last orgasm but he wasn't prepared to stop. He placed his hands on her sides and they gently travelled down to her waist, sending multiple ripples of electric shocks to every neurotic channel in her body that was ready to receive them.

"Mmm!!! Shit baby don't stop!!", she screamed as he pounded her pussy up. He toned the pace down and knelt on the bed. He pushed her legs up and separated them even wider. He began fucking her in that position while rubbing her clit. He placed it in between his index and middle finger and started moving the two up and down around it. She no longer knew what or where to touch. Her reflexes led her to fondling her own breasts while moaning his name. He made sure to hit every surface area deep in her, but intentionally avoiding her g-spot. This drove her crazy. She felt the pleasure building up but he was deliberately denying her body to unleash it. He knew exactly what he was doing. He took it up to one level below the maximum and kept it there. Tears began flowing out her eyes and she tightly placed her palm against her mouth. What she was feeling was too extreme and too much for her body to handle.

"I love you", he said to her as he tortured her with intent.

"Then let me cum", she begged.

"That's not for you to decide", he pulled out his dick, draped in an excess of her fluids. He then turned her so she lays on her stomach and she positioned her self, just how he taught her. "Chest flatly down and ass highly up". He separated her legs and her pussy lips with his thumbs. She was expecting to feel his dick sliding in but she instead received his tongue and she gasped as her cheek laid on the bed. He laid himself flat also and ate her out. He sucked on her once and she heard his lips snap from releasing her labia. The moans rolled off her tongue and she had zero control over them. He then shoved his tongue inside and rapidly took it and out.

"Ahhhhshiit", she lowly said as she laid the side of her head on the sheets. He was now moving his tongue as if licking a small and empty yogurt container. She began trembling from immense pleasure and grabbed on tightly to the sheets, pulling them towards her. He drank her juices clean and inserted himself into her. He placed his hands on her ass, separated the cheeks and fucked her brainless. He released every last one of his soldiers into her and she received his warmth. She then slipped into a coma and they cuddled on top of the sheets. He kissed her on the shoulder and wrapped his arms around her. Sleep located him as well, eventually.

...

Manqoba eventually walked out of the room and Enhle was left crying her lung out on the carpet. After a couple of hours, she ran out of the strength to continue crying. What remained was the pain behind her bloodshot eyes. Her nose was red. She laid her cheek on the floor and drifted into sleep. When she woke up, she was completely in the dark. The curtains were apart and the windows were still open. She checked her phone to see if she had any missed calls but nothing. She went out to the study to check if he was back. He wasn't there. Oluhle came up the stairs, jamming to a song she was listening to via airpods. She took an unexpected halt and slowly took them out in concern.

"Mom, are you okay?", she asked as she tried to turn off the music on her phone at the same time. Enhle faked a smile.

"Yeah I'm fine baby. Have you eaten?"

"Your eyes are swollen...", she remarked in suspicion. She wasn't even trying to hide the fact that she didn't believe her mother's lies.

"Let it go Luhle. Where's your father?"

"So you guys fought?"

Enhle exhaled from impatience

"I'm not gonna talk about my issues with my husband with you baby"

Luhle scoffed before she could answer.

"I last saw him at breakfast. Ngibuya manje min"(I just got back)

Enhle nodded and dragged her feet back to her bedroom. She switched on the light, closed the windows and threw herself in bed. Sphehile's face was rotating around her mind, till she fell asleep.

...

The sun rays were blinding to her half-asleep eyes when she opened them. She instantly realized that she forgot to close the curtains the last night. She checked her phone and still, nothing. Her irritated self threw it back under her pillow and she clutched onto it, the white pillow. She then grabbed the phone and dialled his number. "The subscriber you have dialled--"

She cut the automated voicemail and shot out of bed. She took off her clothes and took a very long hot shower mixed with her own tears. When she finally got a grip, she turned the faucet and the water went off. She grabbed one of the towels to dry herself and ultimately got dressed in just her underwear and his t-shirt. She ignored the knocks she kept hearing at inconsistent intervals on her door. She then took her phone and plugged onto the charger. She took the remote and turned the radio on so it could keep her company as she made the bed. She kept changing the channels to find one where there was less talking and more music. When she tuned in to Metro FM, Tony Braxton's 'Why won't you love me?' was coincidentally playing. She had the urge to keep switching the channels but the inner her felt the song. She put the remote down and began making the bed.

She felt her emotions slowly coming apart and hitting rock bottom. "Tell me whyyyy, why won't you love me the way I need to be loved. I keep trying. Why won't you love me the way I need to be loved?". She lost it and threw the phone, smashing it against the mirror and watched it breaking into a plethora of pieces. The breaking noise rang in her head as she watched the brown board that used to be a proper, full-sized mirror. Tony's voice was one of the noises that competed in her head as she tried to catch her breath.

...

Lwandile and Mxolisi ordered in when they realized that their parents were never going to come back downstairs. Lwandile was in his full set of pyjamas whereas Mxolisi was wearing military green cargo shorts. When the pizza arrived, they had it while watching TV. Lwandile had both his legs on top of Mxolisi's thighs. Mxolisi had his one leg raised and placed illegally on the coffee table. Both on their phones and occasionally raising their eyes to catch some scenes of the movie they were watching. Their issues were long behind them.

"It's mother's day tomorrow. Any ideas?", Lwandile asked as he drank his apple juice.

"Flip!!", Mxolisi exclaimed. Lwandile laughed.

"O lebetse?" (You forgot)

"Completely! Neke ithaa kere goiwa skolong kaosane" (I thought it was a school day tomorrow?), he said while laughing as well.

"Well...?"

"Ay mfethu. Angazi. How about a kitchen takeover?"

"Plus laundry?"

"Hayi lapho uwedwa" (Count me out there). He said and typed on his phone. Lwandile rolled his eyes and took a large bite of his pizza.

Meanwhile on Mxolisi's messenger.

Mxo: Ha ah baby ngeke ngikwazi. Ngiyabuya mina k'sasa 😞 (I'm struggling. I'm coming back tomorrow)

Ndalo: Lol you'd do that? 😂😂

Mxo: It's not just a possibility. It's a fact.

Ndalo: You're serious ain't you? 😏

Mxo: Ngiyadlala. Ungakaze upanic 😂 (Before you panic)

Ndalo: Lol I was gonna block you 😂

Mxo: I was gonna turn into your worst nightmare 👤

Ndalo: How? 😂

Mxo: I was gonna walk in your mother's house and demand to see my wife

Ndalo: I was gonna break up with you 😼

Mxo: I'd love to see you try 😼

Ndalo: Prince Mxolisi Iscefe Khumalo 👤 (Annoyance)

Mxolisi: If only you knew that you're stuck with me for life. 😏

Ndalo: Scefeza 😭

Mxo: I love you too 😏

He continued chatting to her on his way to his room. Lwandile was in the kitchen getting a glass of milk for the night.

He asked her to put her phone on silent so he can call her. She agreed and moved to the living room. It was a few minutes past midnight. He had left Nasteo Nev's "Take me all night"(ft. Donald Sheffey) playing on repeat in his room when he went out so it was still playing softly on the background.

"Lerato la pelo yaka", he greeted as he threw himself on his back on the bed. She laughed lightly, trying not to be loud.

"What does that mean?"

"It means, uyisthandwa senhliziyo yami"(You're the love of my life)

"Wow. You should speak sotho more often"

He let out a single breath laughter.

"It's Pedi. Or Tswana baby. Not Sotho. I don't know what they say in Sotho", he corrected with an evident smile in his voice.

"Ah konke kuzwakala kufana la kmina"(They all sound the same to me), she said and they laughed.

"I'll teach you. Udlile?"(Have you eaten?)

"Yeah wena?"

"I have. I miss you cute face angisakhoni"(I'm unable to handle it anymore). Her blushing forced a laugh through her mouth.

"I miss you too", she lowly said in a very shy tone.

"My mom is up", she alerted as she heard her urinating in the other room.

"Okay. Happy mothers' day baby", Mxo said. She shot out a laugh.

"But I'm not a mother Mxo"

"I can fix that?", he said and she laughed even harder.

Chapter Twelve

Sjava- Eweni(feat. Mzukulu & Anzo)

Manqoba sat on the bed in one of the rooms in the air BnB he had booked himself to. He sat and studied Sphe's picture thoughtfully on Instagram. He bit his lower lip in deep thought.

"Ukukuthanda kwami ngathi kuzongiholela ekufeni
Angisaboni noma konakala ngiwela eweni
Ukukuthanda kwami ngathi kuzongiholela ekufeni
Angisaboni noma konakala ngiwela eweni
Ngisho abafwethu (mabengibonisa ngawe)
Angibambeki, angikhuzeki
Ngisho ekhaya mabengibonisa ngawe
Angibambeki"

The song played at a moderate volume in the room as his thoughts alternated between the women in his heart. He was trying to negate how he actually felt about Sphe but somehow trying to find ways to get closer to her. He cringed at the remembrance of Enhle thrashing slap at him. It felt like he was reviving the sting and debasement. He didn't know where to direct his anger. To her or himself. He threw the phone on the bed and stood up to go pull the curtains apart. Muzi's call came through and he already knew what it was about.

"Mfa' kaBaba"(My father's son), he answered.

"Bayak'funa ekhaya"(Your wife needs you at home)

"Ngiyazi"(I know), he replied apathetically

"You know how much I hate it maning'faka ey'nkingen zenu. Nje ngoba wazi ukuthi uyak'funa pho uhlaleleni lapho?"(Since you know that she's looking for you why are you sitting over there?), Muzi asked from taxed impatience and Manqoba exhaled.

"There's a lot going on at the moment. U grand wena?"

"Umayelana noSphe lo lot going on angithi?"(This lot you're speaking of to everything to do with Sphe right?)

"Sort of"

"You're already sleeping with her?"

"No man. Look I'll let you in on everything later. I have to go now"

"Nqoba go home. She really didn't sound good. Sharp, sokhuluma"(We'll talk). Manqoba shortly took his car keys and drove home.

...

Muzi placed the phone back down and admired his wife still captured by deep sleep. He brushed her relaxed hair and combed it with his palm.

"God I love you woman", he whispered and continued feeding his eyes with the sight of her effortless beauty.

Meanwhile downstairs.

"First, we start with breakfast", Lwandile instructs enthusiastically to a dead but walking Mxolisi. He was still very much asleep. He wasn't expecting that Lwa would want the kitchen takeover to start at fresh bird-chirp hours. He dumped his weight on the bar stool and placed both his hands over his head as Lwa took out a bottle of milk and a carton of a dozen eggs, closing both doors to the fridge with his foot and back.

"What are we even making?", Mxolisi asked with squinted eyes.

"Cinnamon and choc chip cookies for breakfast. She's been craving them", Lwa informed as he bent to scout for more ingredients in the cupboards.

"Baking? As in oven, dough and the works?", Mxo asked anxiously.

"Have you ever fried cookies before?", Lwa sarcastically jabbed at him before he could turn dramatically back to his open cupboard.

"Why not pancakes?"

"There's not much effort there", Lwandile said and pulled out the flower.

"You know what? Let's just go out and get her some cake", Mxo suggested, already on his feet.

"It won't be the same man"

"They're all baked goods?"

"Made by other people?"

"What's the difference? Do you hands come with special ingredients?"

"EFFORT!"

"There's effort in driving from here to the complex?", Mxo defended his case adamantly.

"Stop being such a lazy fxck"

"It's hectically early for such hard labour Lwandile. I'm jet-lagged"

Mxo complained and Lwa dropped his eyes in disbelief

"Jet-lagged?"

"Don't look at it from a time zone typo view. Take it from distance. Ku kude e Natal mfeth"(KZN is far). They heard their parents laughing from behind them. Everyone in that house was still in the pyjamas except Muzi. He was just in his blue jeans. He was hugging Betso from behind with his chin stabilized on her shoulder.

"What's all this bickering about?", she asked.

"Ah ask your son!", Lwandile exclaimed from minor exasperation and marched up the stairs. Muzi tried to stop him but he was having none of it.

"Umenzan umfowenu kant Mxolisi?"(What is it that you're doing to your brother these days?), Muzi asked, now standing up straight.

"LUTHO! We just had a little disagreement. Manje ngoba uyamazi he exaggerated the whole thing", Mxo said

and followed after Lwa.

"Jaanong oya kae!"(Now where are you going?), Betso asked.

"To put out the fire!", Mxo informed from irritation. A subtle laugh escaped from Muzi's lips.

"This is not funny. I don't like how frequent their fights are these days", Betso let out.

"They'll be fine. Manqoba and I were exactly like this growing up", he assured and kissed her cheek.

"I think this is a surprise went wrong", he remarked from the ingredients he saw on the table.

"And your hooligan of a son ruined it", Betso said and they laughed.

"I've come to realize how sensitive Lwandile is compared to Mxo", Muzi mentions and Betso clears her throat.

"We got lucky. Imagine having two Mxolisi in the same house. One would've had to be given up for adoption", he said and laughed. Betso followed with an awkward laugh and said she needs to get started on breakfast.

"You're doing no such thing. The two rascals actually beat me to it. I was planning on spoiling you indoors today but I think it's better we just go out. Just the two of us", he suggested and nibbled on her ear. She moved her face like a content cat as he did this and smiled.

"I'm not feeling like the outdoors today", she gently turned him down.

"There goes my only escape from cooking", he playfully complained.

"I've got it. Don't worry", Betso laughed.

"I told you you're doing no such thing. Happy Mother's Day mkami. I can never thank you enough for my boys", he said and kissed her lips. She was smiling throughout all this. He then proceeded further into the kitchen to get started.

...

Muzi went all out for lunch. He cooked all his wife's favorite dishes as she sat outside with the boys on camp chairs. He was playing music from his car as they sat around and enjoyed their juice and him alcohol. He was the only one doing ups and downs, going in and out the house to check on his pots that weren't ready yet and chill with his family at the same time. Maxwell's 'Fortunate' one of the songs that were playing from the car as both the boys massaged their mother. Mxolisi was on the feet and Lwandile on her shoulders and scalp. She was enjoying this attention oozing from every direction.

After he had dished up, he took his and Betso's plate outside and got settled on his chair next to her, throwing off his slides off his feet.

"Hawu. Thina?"(What about us?), The two asked open-mouthed.

Muzi raised his brow and asked,"Are you mothers?".

Betso laughed as her spoon dug in her plate.

"Tjo!", Lwandile said and stood up to go fetch his plate. Mxolisi still had his hands on his waist, watching his father eat without a single care in the world.

"As I was saying baby...", he deliberately said to Betso, ignoring Mxolisi.

"Uh-huh?", Betso played along, trying too hard to keep the laughter tied to the roof of her mouth. Mxolisi

clapped once and left. The rents exploded in laughter after he disappeared into the house. They collected themselves when they saw them coming back with their plates. The twins settled down and began digging in, also trying to suppress their laughter.

"Lwandile, your mother tells me--", Muzi says and Lwandile chokes. Mxolisi turns to look at him with suspicion.

"Are you okay boy?", Muzi asked in concern and Betso tried too hard to reprimand him from ratting himself out through her eyes. Mxolisi lifted the juice glass he had placed in the holder of his chair. Lwandile took it, had a sip and handed it back to him.

"You ayt now?", Mxo asked as he doubtfully extended his hand so he takes it back. Lwandile nodded. His eyes were even teary from all the choking trauma he just went through.

"Yeah I'm fine", he said and kept his eyes on his plate.

"Eating is not athletics. Take your time", Betso said trying to diffuse the atmosphere. Muzi laughed and Mxo finally caught on. He laughed as well to help his mom clear the bad air. His father wanted to speak about the Belgium matter. That's what Betso had told him.

...

Night fell and they began packing up. Or rather the rents gave the kids the job of cleaning up and retired to their bedrooms. The twins didn't mind since they weren't the ones that had cooked. Lwandile stepped on the bin so it opens for him to get rid of the remnants on the plates including the bones. Mxolisi insisted on doing the dishes all by himself. Lwandile was both impressed and shocked by this gesture from his clone.

"Hm. What do you want?", he asked, suspiciously. A sudden laughter slipped from Mxolisi as he overdosed on the dishwashing liquid into the hot water.

"Hawu. Nothing heban", he said and pulled the long sleeves of his black t-shirt.

"Man just use the dishwasher", Lwandile said

"So you've resigned from being an advocate for "effort" ", Mxo said and punctuated in the air with his fingers. Lwandile laughed.

"Suit yourself", he said and opened the fridge to look for a snack.

"Lwa?", Mxolisi calmly called out.

"Hm?"

"Stop being so jumpy around him if you're not ready to tell him yet. He's not stupid", Mxo advised. Lwandile bit his lower lip anxiously.

"What if he disowns me or some shxt?", he asked and looked to see if Muzi wasn't near. Mxo stopped scrubbing the plate he had in hand.

"Then he will have to disown me too"

...

Muzi and Betso had yet another steamed session in the shower. When they were done, he wrapped her with a towel and did the same for his waist. She was drying her hair standing on the mat outside of the shower.

"Wait here...", Muzi said and disappeared into the room. Betso continued with what she was doing mindlessly. He came back with a small velvet box and handed it to her.

She laughed.

"You didn't have to baby. What's this?", she said as she took the box.

"Open it", he promptly. She slowly pulled it open and noticed two diamond stud earrings.

"I love them baby", she asked and smiled in excitement.

"I'm just making up for the one you lost in that changing room", he said and they laughed.

"That was all your fault!", she shot out. He led her out so they could lotion one another in the bedroom. She began complaining how she was not looking forward to work the next day.

"You don't have to go there if you don't want to", he said and shrugged.

"We have a lot of events lined up this week I have to go"

"Even if I convince you otherwise?", he said and put on his naughty boy smile and approached her. She laughed and ran to the other side of the bed.

"Please give me a break?", she begged and laughed at the same time. He was like a tiger waiting to pounce on prey. He ran after her and she had nowhere else to go.

"Muzi noo", she was now laughing hysterically as backed her on the bed and got onto of her to corner her. They were both laughing but hers was louder and piercing as she tried to get him off of her. He wasn't willing to obey. He pushed her hands above her head and pinned them there with one hand and had the one position her face so he forcefully takes his kiss. Her laughter was now trapped in her cheeks because she had her mouth tightly shut.

"Ngcicela iyshibo zami mama", Muzi said seductively while trying to get her to surrender. She couldn't resist. The manner in which he said it. The voice that delivered it. The tone.

She bit her lower lip in a blush and lowly said "Okay". He smiled back and placed a light kiss on her lip like a landing butterfly. He was in between her hanging legs. He pulled both of them and her knees directed to her chest. His hands caressed her thighs under the towel and groped on them as the kiss intensified.

"Wait"-Betso

He opened his eyes and tightened his jaws with a curious look on his face. Her hands were on his masculine neck.

She tried to get away from his grip, but he locked her in by placing his elbows on both sides of her.

"Give up cause angeke ngikudedele uhambe"(I won't let you go)

She laughed and said she's not trying to get away and that she had a surprise for him.

"And here I was thinking you're the done getting gifts today"

"Bengeke ngibe umama ngaphandle kwakho so..."

She said with a wide smile and he laughed.

"Okay. But can't I get this surprise after we're done here", he whispered and nibbled on her neck.

"It'll be too late", she said and he raised his face with a naughty smile and his brow raised.

"Okay?", he said and got off her, falling on his side. She laughed and got off the bed.

She turned to him briefly and laughed. He laughed as well and said, "Mm, I wonder yaz". Her laughter disappeared with her into the closet. She picked out the paper bag that she had hidden away and took out the black leather lingerie with excitement. The forestanding material was the leader but it had inner patches skimpy patches from maroon lace. She first lotioned her skin with perfumed lotion and put on the cologne that makes him notice her even when she's near but out of sight. She put on the enticing sexy number and along with the knee-high stockings. For the final touch up? Mascara and deep red lipstick.

"Baby?! Are you assembling a bomb in there?", he asked in impatience and she laughed. She then grabbed the matching maroon silk robe with black lacy details. She vigorously shook her head so the hair becomes messier to match the mood. She tied the robe loosely and walked out with his dark grey tie and handcuffs (also with leather details) in hand. He was on his phone with the towel still around his lower body, with his legs apart and elbows balancing on his knees.

"Bab' Khumalo? ", she said as she stood in a confident cross-legged posture about 8 steps away from him, with the robe loosened and exposing her entire front body. He raised his face and his jaw immediately fell to the floor in slow motion, his eyes popped out. His phone followed and fell screen down. She was pleased with his reaction. It meant a ton of a lot to her confidence.

"Sphakamile...?", he finally managed to let out.

"Baby?", she replied in a faked innocent tone.

"Ungenzan ngempela mommy?"(what are you doing to me?) he asked with his whole face covered in awe. He tried to stand but she said quickly said 'Don't', parading towards him. She pushed him back to the bed and and put her hands on his thighs. He was still in awe. The same way it hits him each time she appears in a different, new one. This is where her addiction from lingerie shopping was birthed. . She connected her phone to the bluetooth of the speakers embedded in the walls with every intention of playing 'When we' by Tank.

"Down tiger", she whispered before placing her lips on his and kissing him like she did after they exchanged vows. His hands found their way to her butt and she pushed them away and climbed on the bed. She grabbed both of them like a vexed policewoman carrying out an arrest and restrained him, throwing the tiny keys on the centre of the bed.

"Se ngiyaboshwa manje?"(Am I getting arrested now?), he asked in an impressed tone. She let herself out of the silk robe.

"I like it when you go there, I like the way you use it, I like that you don't play fair..." , she sang along to the song behind him with her one hand seductively travelling down his hard chest, another under his chin, gently pulling his face up. He laughed in a threatening manner. He knew she was challenging him. She got down and sat on him astride, straddling him. She began dancing to the rhythm Tank was setting in the room. His erect dick was fighting to break out of the towel as she danced in a dry-humping manner. He was at her complete mercy as she swayed her butt and hips on top of him, with her hands on his neck.

"Who came to make sweet love? Not me", her moving lips were in sync with the lyrics while her husband was getting weak.

"I can be a savage, I just need your blessing", she went on. She wrapped her legs tightly around his waist and allowed her upper body to head towards the floor. She placed her palms flat on the carpet and continued

working his rhythmically, mostly from her waist. He enjoyed the view till he couldn't anymore.

"Sthandwasami?"

"Hm?", she answered without allowing him to deter her from her mission of torturing him.

"You've made your point", he expressed in desperation. She didn't listen. She did a complete handstand softly and laid flatly with her chest on the floor and faced the other way. Her ass high up in the air, twerking to the beat with her legs kneeled apart.

"Baby?", he exclaimed. She ignored. She practiced hard for this. She usually dances for him but not in this hardcore manner. She quickly turned to lay on her back with her legs raised and continued moving her butt and waist with her eyes locked in his and her hands on her boobs.

"You're going to regret this?", he warned and bit his lower lip. She laughed and stood up. She paraded her nothingness of an outfit and bent over in front of him. He laid his forehead on her butt and begged her to uncuff him. She turned around and placed his head on her boobs, brushing his head while laughing at his desperate rant in between breast kisses. She grabbed the tie and blindfolded him. She then dropped to her knees and pulled the towel open. She got a hold of his shaft and he winced a bit. She angled her head and circled his glans with the tip of her tongue, licking all the oozing precum. He dropped his head back helplessly and enjoyed the fellatio. She continued to work on his dick, spitting, depthroating and gagging. She caught it in his reaction that he was about to cum. She let go.

"Don't do this", he begged through clenched teeth and tightened jaws. She just smiled and got on top of him. She didn't waste time. Her body was also betraying her. She pushed her underwear to the side, positioned herself, sat on it and slid down slowly, using his tired neck for balance.

"Ahh...", they both softly moaned, at the same time. She placed her hands on his chest and began fucking him. He was still restrained from taking over. She took advantage of his rod to her own pleasure, still to the rhythm of the music. She dropped her lips to his neck and planted wet kisses there as she destroyed him. He was now groaning out of control. She slid off. It was her turn to make him beg for an orgasm. His eyes were sunken from all the torture.

"Please uncuff me", he whispered.

"Promise to behave when I do", she teased. He dropped his head to her boobs.

"I can't promise you anything"

"Promise...?"

"Okay. Uncuff me now"

He said, and she crawled to the centre of the bed to fetch keys. His hand was already around her neck at the speed of lightning the moment she got him off. He pulled the blindfold off and smashed his lips against hers as he laid on top of her. He held onto the back of her head, twisted her hair around his hand and tightly grabbed her to his face. His other hand was groping onto her boob. She was running out of breath from the kiss. He pushed body towards hers so much that there was no space between them. He still felt like they weren't close enough.

He then pulled her left leg up and pushed it to her chest. He looked down to direct his dick into her pussy hands-free and shoved himself in, every bit of every inch.

"Ahhh!!!", she yelled from the painful pleasure. His jaws were clenched as he greased his way in and out, in and out. His hand was still in her hair when he attacked her with another breathtaking kiss and bit her lower lip. He was insanely fucking her inside out.

"Mmm Zikode!", she screamed in his mouth.

"Should I stop?"

"Don't you dare!", she moaned out and opened her legs wider as his girth exploded her walls and his tip rubbing on her pleasure spot.

"Oh shiit Mbulazi!"

"So tight... imnandi intoyakho sthandwasami", he groaned in her ear before he could shoot and release all of his warm load into her. He dropped to her shoulder trying to catch his breath, both panting heavily.

...

Mxolisi's phone beeped from his pocket as he was packing away the dishes. Lwandile was in the TV room having the time of his life watching anime. He wiped his hands clean with his shorts and took it out.

Ndalo: I need to get something off my chest before this goes far.

Mxo: Okay? ❤️

Ndalo: I know what you expect from me as a girlfriend but I can't give you everything. At least not now. I hope you catch my drift.

Mxo: How did we get here?

Ndalo: I was just saying.

Mxo: You should stop overthinking this. I never demanded anything from you and I'll never force you to do anything you're not comfortable with. Whatever stories you've heard about me, leave them in the bin when you finally take out the trash tonight.

Ndalo: Are you mad? 😞

Mxo: No baby. I just hate over-explaining myself. I'm not going to say I don't want sex from you because that will be a blatant lie. However, I am willing to wait. Sthandwasami I'm just here to love you and love you right.

That's my priority with you right now. You'll submit yourself eventually.

Ndalo: I wasn't expecting that 😞❤️

Mxo: Stop trying to cram me. You're going to fail. Dismally.

Ndalo: Scefeza 😞

Mxo: Continue calling me that and it'll be the reason why uzodliwa way lot sooner than you expect. 🤔

Another text came through after he pressed 'Send'.

Sne: So you gonn mize me now?

Mxo: Thought I pressed send. Sorry.

Sne: Why am I getting bad and weird vibes from you lately?

Mxo: I'm not the one whose vibes you're supposed to be studying.

Sne: TF?

Mxo: You become clingy when you're single and you know very well that I don't like it. I am not your boyfriend.

Sne: I wanna see if you'll be able to say all that shxt to my face

Mxo: Don't come here Sne. I'm tired. I had a long day. I'll see you tomorrow at school.

[Seen]

...

Manqoba walked into his house and found Enhle having lunch with Evelyn and the kids. Oluhle and Melo. They greeted him back and Enhle pulled a facade of a smile. A part of her was happy he came home and another wanted to throw the fork she was holding right into his eye. Evelyn pretended not to see shxt. He informed that he's going up to shower. Oluhle was showing Melo a YouTube video. That's what they were concentrating on. He questioned why they were allowed to bring phones to the table but did not pursue the matter even further. Some things are not worth saying, sometimes. The whole atmosphere was pale and tasteless. He paced up the stairs and Enhle wiped her mouth and asked to be excused. She followed him to the bedroom and found him taking off his t-shirt.

"Ubuyaphi?"(Where are you coming from?), she spat out. Manqoba just raised his brow and shot a look that she couldn't read as him being bored or mad.

"I asked you question Manqoba"

"Yindlela yoku khuluma ne ndodayakho leyo?"(Is that how you're supposed to speak to your husband), he asked and dropped the t-shirt on the bed. She scoffed and looked away. He walked towards the shower and she grabbed the t-shirt and sniffed it. He turned to look at her.

"And then?", he was puzzled. She tapped her foot on the floor numerous times when she didn't find what her nostrils were looking for.

"To put your mind at ease, I wasn't with anybody last night. Stop being so insecure", he said and walked on.

"I'm sorry", she lowly and emotionally apologized. He stopped walking but never turned his face to look at her.

When he finally did, he took a few steps towards her.

"What are you sorry for?"

"For disrespecting you"

"You've never respected me Mbalenhle"

"That's not true"

"You know it is. You wanna wear the pants in this union. What you did yesterday officializes this fact"

"No baby that's not true", she begged with tearful eyes and dropped to her knees.

"No get up", he tried to pull her up but she was stubborn. He gave up.

"What happened yesterday--, baby bekuyiphutha ngiyak'cela"(It was a mistake I'm begging you)

He looked away and exhaled. He then pulled his pants so he could squat down in front of her.

"Thembalami, I love you. So so much. I loved you from the very first moment I saw you. But right now, I regret that moment with everything in me", he went on and she shook her head in disagreement, tears streaming down her face.

"That's the very moment you thought you owned me. It was cute at first but now it's scary. You want to choose the clothes I wear, what I eat, when I drink, when I sleep. I. Am. Not. Your. Child. I've allowed you to get away with a lot of shxt but you insist, you insist on making this relationship hell for me. "

"Baby please! I don't want to control you. Everything I do for you is out of love", she begged and crawled towards him. She reached out with both hands but he held them and clasped them together in his.

"Yesterday was the last time you put your hands on me. I'm not weak or stupid for not putting you in your place. I just don't want to bury you. I still love you. That will never change. But I cannot do this anymore. You are a ticking time bomb", he spoke to her with his eyes dead set on hers.

Chapter Thirteen

Mxolisi's phone rang as he was trying to finish up his assignment. An assignment which took four mountains and half a cliff of convincing from Lwandile for him to get started on.

"Sne?"

"I'm outside"

"It's half past eleven?"

"Just come out before I press this intercom"

Her voice struggled to stay afloat in a pool of tears. He took a deep breath and out.

"Ngiyeza"(I'm coming), he said and slipped his feet into his slides. He threw the phone on the bed, grabbed a hoodie and headed out.

He got into her car and pulled her into a hug.

"What's went wrong?", he asked with his hand at the back of her head. She was sobbing like a fresh widow. She didn't answer. All he could do is offer a shoulder. Literally.

When she finally got a grip on her calm, she pulled back and took out a pocket tissue to wipe her messed up face.

"Talk to me", he said and leaned back on the passenger seat, waiting for her to speak with her hand in his.

"Did he cheat on you again?", he investigated. She nodded.

"I honestly don't understand why you insist with being with this mongrel. He always does the same shxt. Over and over again. Sne you're a very beautiful girl. Almost every guy at school ukhala ngawe. Move the fxck on you'll find somebody who will love you better"

A smile spread to the corner of her lips and stretched them.

"You really think so?"

"It's not about what I think. It's a fact"

"I'm done with him this time. For good"

"I've heard that before. Not once. Not even twice"

"I mean it. I was really stupid for choosing him over you Mxo"

She confessed.

"The heart wants what it wants. You were my very first heartbreak you know that?", he said and huffed out a laugh.

"You also cheated on me with Judith don't act like a saint"

"I started dating her after I realized that something was indeed going on between you and Kagiso whereas you thought I didn't know!"

He shot out and she dropped her face.

"But we can still make it work. Can't we?", she tried to take his hand and he pulled it away.

"You can't choose another nxgga over me and expect me to take you back just cause he's treating you like trash? I loved you Sne. You know this because I couldn't hide it, even through my actions"

"Loved? That's past tense", she said wistfully and waited for him to correct her.

"Your understanding of basic grammar is impressive", he said without a drop of remorse. She scoffed in disbelief.

"I can't really say I blame you though. But I do have a question"

"Khuluma ngilalele"(Speak I'm listening)

"Were you using me?", she asked and insisted on making eye contact.

"Using you?"

"Yeah. All the times when you've slept with me?"

He laughed.

"Are you on crack?", he asked sarcastically and looked at her as if waiting for an answer.

"Just answer me, Mxo!"

"After we broke up, was there ever a point where we did it at your house?"

"No. Why are you asking me that?"

"Was there ever a point where I called you wanting to fxck?"

He interrogated and she kept quiet.

"The answers to both these questions is no. Know why? You were always the one to initiate things. The same way you arrived here now when I specifically told you that you shouldn't", he sternly stated and she frowned as the heartbreak gained momentum, signalled by the cold in her chest.

"You're forcing me to hurt you when I don't want to Sne", he went on.

"Cool then. We don't have to... things don't have to go back to how they were initially. We can keep them just the way they were"

"What do you mean?"

"No strings", she suggested desperately.

He folded his upper lip towards his nostrils thoughtfully then released it.

"That's not gonna work"

"Why? It's been working perfectly fine"

"Because you had a boyfriend. The only reason you want us to carry on with this is because you enjoy the privileges of having me as a boyfriend without actually having me as your boyfriend"

"I'll do better this time I promise"

"Oh no don't get it twisted baby girl. I'm just saying that even if we're just fxcking, I can never treat you like trash. I'll still handle you with care and that's what you're addicted to because Kagiso can't give you that. You went for a playa with your eyes wide open and now you want me to help you pick up the pieces?"

"You speak as if the both of yall are different!", she shot out with disgust.

"Yeah well we might be coming from the same factory but we were definitely not cut from the same cloth", he jabbed back.

"Why are you playing hard to get? You're turning me off"

"Whether you're on or uyacisha Sne please get this into your head, we can't be together anymore"

"What has that bxtch fed you Mxolisi?"

He threw his hands in the air, dropped them and exhaled.

"Judith is a basic bxtch compared to me uzobuya and by then I'd have found somebody else"

"Hopefully he treats you right. I have an assignment to finish before I go to bed. Drive safely okay?", he said and pulled her by her neck so he kisses her forehead.

"Mxo...", she lowly called out.

He got out of the car and she did the same. She quickly went round it to go stand in front of him. He inserted his hands into his pockets and waited for her to speak.

"I can't lose you. Not again"

"You made that choice completely by yourself. Now you want somebody to share in on the repercussions?"

She wrapped her arms around his waist and snuggled her slender self into him. He maintained his posture.

"Your dad is gonna come here looking for you like last time and I'm gonna get in trouble with MK. Sne, please, go home I'll see you tomorrow at school"

"You mean you're gonna watch me fxck her up for the second time?"

"You will do no such thing"

"Watch me", she said and walked back to the driver's side.

"It's not her!", he confessed from a place of taxed impatience.

She stopped walking and turned back.

"I knew there was something going on between you and Charlotte"

"It's not her either. Just, give up. I'm done with you. With Judith. Charlotte. Neo and whoever else. Nonke nje. I am done"

"As much as I hate to admit it, anybody else apart from all four that you've mentioned who'd be a downgrade in that school"

He said and he huffed out a laugh.

"Mus you're going to die on the spot once you see her", he said cxckily and the arrogant smile disappeared from her face.

"Who is this girl Mxolisi?!"

"You have issues Sne. Umuhle. Kakhulu futhi. But there'll always be somebody better. Always. You should learn to live with this fact before it sends you to an early grave"

"Okay fine. I'm taking my L then. I don't mind being the side ke"

"You don't get it do you?"

His hands were still in his pockets.

She placed her cold hands on both his cheeks and said "Then make me", in a tone she thought will come across as cute and adorable. The tone she always uses to blackmail him emotionally. The tone that comes with a guarantee tag. He put his hands over her hands and placed his forehead on hers. She smiled and he scooped her up bride style and carried her to her drivers seat. She had left it open so he just got there, placed her in car and close the door. He signalled with his head that she should drive. She sucked her teeth and drove off.

...

[The next day]

Manqoba called bab'Sizwe to the royal house to discuss his intentions with Sphesihle. He explained that he saw a beautiful in the Nkosi garden and that he'd like to go pluck it out to so he can plant it afresh emagcekeni akwa Khumalo. Bab'Sizwe was impressed by how MQ wanted to do things by the book.

"Hayi iskhalo sakho ngisizwile ndodana. Ngizokhuluma no Bayede ngimuzwe ukuthi uthin yena then sizokwenza njalo"(I've heard your cry. I'll speak to Bayede and hear what he says then we'll do as per your request)

He then stood up and ironed his grey Brentwood with his palms, put on his hat and left. Manqoba sat thoughtfully on his chair, swinging it sideways lazily in his study, facing away from the door. A call from Tebogo came through and he picked up.

"Tebza"

"Did you resolve that issue?"

"I spoke to the detective that's handling your case. You can come out of hiding now. I just forgot to tell you I have a lot on my plate"

"Dankie skhulu. So, operations? Are we still on?"

"I'm telling you this for the last time--"

"Okay okay. We'll talk", Tebogo jumped in and cut his sentence short. They cut the call and Enhle cleared her throat at the door. In a long orange and red maxi red tied around her neck and a black silky doek on top of her blond weave. The colours accentuated her light skin tone. This made her puffy eyes and red nose almost impossible to hide. She stood against the door frame. Manqoba turned his chair and faced her.

"Was that bab'Sizwe I saw walking out?"

"If it was?"

She asked and he wheeled himself closer to the desk and pulled the laptop open. She walked in.

"What was he doing here?", she grabbed a seat across him.

He shot his brow up and she immediately looked down.

"I'm sorry..."-Enhle. He dropped his eyes back on the screen.

"You're going ahead with this aren't you?", she enquired dreadfully.

"With what?"

"I thought you said you needed my permission to marry that--", she stopped herself. "Sphesihle. I thought you said you needed my permission to marry her?"

"What I need from you is your signature on the divorce papers you're going to receive no later than Friday. Help with me with that and I'll forever be grateful to you", he stated and dropped his eyes back once again to the laptop. Her jaw fell.

"Manqoba!"

"Nge mpama eyodwa nje sufun' idivorce?"(You want a divorce because of a single clap?)

"Are you listening to yourself?", he calmly asked as he typed.

"I'd have forgiven you if tables were turned. Like I always do", she mumbled and shoved her fists into her armpits.

"Akasa ngideleli lomfazi uhlalisa isdakwa ethunen lika baba"(The disrespect has gone between infinite limits), he thought silently to himself as his own voice rang in his head.

"When have I ever laid a hand on you makaOluhle?", he raised his irritated face.

"You've never but--"

"You want to turn tables Enhle?"

She digested his question and didn't know how to turn answer.

"Let's turn tables then", he stood up and went to close the door and lock it.

"Wenzan' Manqoba?"(What are you doing?), a panicked Enhle asked as she stood up from her chair. He undid his cufflinks and inserted them in his pockets.

"Baby? Baba? Ngiyak'cela..."(I'm begging you)

He kept a straight face as he folded the sleeves to his sky blue shirt. He loosened his navy tie and went to close both glass doors leading to the balcony. At this point, she was already crying and rubbing her left hand with the thumb of her right.

He approached her and she backed away against the shiny drilled in mahogany desk. He grabbed her by her neck with his left hand and pulled her towards him.

"I want to show you that impama eyodwa ingawuqeda uphele umendo and ungalinge nje uhayize angithi min zange ngawubanga umsindo?"(...a single slap can put an end to a marriage and don't you dare scream because I never made a sound), he threatened.

"Baby bekuyiphutha ngiyak'cela babakhe"(It was a mistake I'm begging you)

"Lalela ke thembalami, mina ngeke ngikushaye ngempama. Ngizokushaya ngenqindi ngoba you want us to interact man-to-man. You're the man of the house angithi wena? Le ndelelo ewunayo ngizoyikhipha ngenkani namhlanje. Uzoyikhipha ngamakhala uyangizwa baby?"(I won't slap you I'm gonna hit you with a fist. You're going to vomit all the disrespect you're housing today),

"Please let me go", she winced meekly under his grip. He stared into her tearing eyes and unexpectedly raised a boltlike fist but made sure that it got close enough but didn't touch her face. She had already shut her eyes tightly ready to feel her jaw break. He let her go and she swallowed with difficulty with her hand around her neck.

"Get the fxck outta my office!", he barked and she tripped on the chair and held on to the air for balance. She ran out and he dropped his high chest and downed the shot of whiskey he had poured for Bab'Sizwe, which he never touched.

...

Melokuhle got home and changed into his daytime clothes when school was out and ran to his girlfriend's homestead. She wasn't at school and she wasn't taking his calls. He stood at one of the corners knowing very

well that he was going to get into trouble should he get caught. He kept calling but she didn't answer. He sent messages but she didn't reply. The possibility of suicide crossed his mind but he immediately shut it down because he felt he wouldn't be able to handle it if it was the case. He contemplated walking in to check on her but he knew that if she was okay, he'd get into deep trouble with both his family and hers. He took 6 steps forward and turned back in frustration. He exhaled and had a "If I die, I die" moment and took nervous strides to the gate. He saw her come out of kneeling by the fire and blowing to fuel it further. There was no one else outside. He called again but it didn't look like she had the phone on her. She had her palms on the ground with her skirt tucked in her underwear on the sides. Since when do they use ground fire to cook? He questioned his shadow. The fire flamed up and she finally got on her barefeet. She noticed him at the gate and popped her eyes. She gestured with her hands with a stern yet panicked frown on her face that he should go away. He was unsure about what to do. She stomped her foot once to emphasize and he raised his hands in surrender. He gestured with his thumb and pinkie finger that she should call him. She nodded and waved him away still. He left.

On his way home, he came across Ndalo trying to get her wrist back from a boy who was adamant on forcing her to listen to him.

"Awungiyeke!"(Let me go!), she yelled and shook herself so hard the books in her school bag swayed left to right.

"Ndalo nginike nje ithuba elilodwa ngikutshengise ukuthi ngikuthanda ka ngakanani. Mfethu dala ngishelana nawe ngeke uyangiqoma namhlanje!"(Give me a chance to show you how much I love you. I've been after you for the longest time now you're going to agree to be mine today!)

Melokuhle ran closer to the scene and grabbed the suitor by the neck.

"Awumuzwa lomuntu umethi akakufuni? Are you deaf, stubborn or stupid?! Intombi ishelwa kahle ngolwimi not this violence you're subjecting her too"

"Melo mfethu--"

"Fseg!", he shot out and pushed him forward. Ndalo was busy massaging her reddened wrist with a frown on her face.

"Are you okay?", Melo asked, concerned.

"I'll be fine. I'm used to it"

"Used to what Ndalo?"

"Nxn!", she exclaimed.

"So he does this every day?", Melo asked. She nodded.

Mxolisi becomes a madman when triggered. He had better not find out about this. Melokuhle thought to himself.

"I'm sorry about that. Go home. Ngik'bhekile. He's not gonna follow you", Melo said and she gave a bland

"Thank you" and paced up to her yard. Melo stood and watched her till she was inside. He then took a corner and headed home as well.

Chapter Fourteen

"The sympathetic division is primarily concerned with emergency situations: to prepare the body almost instantly for stress and expending of energy. It is the primary method for protection the body from danger, and strongly reacts to conditions such as fear, pain, loss of blood, sexual stimulation and any form of stress. What it does is, it immediately prepares the body for a condition to counteract threats, either external or internal. Oftentimes, we refer to it as the so-called 'fight-or-flight' reaction", Mr Kwaramba's voice brushed on Mxolisi's hearing sense as he got lost in how he was going to compile his proposal. It began fading as his own voice took over, brainstorming in his head.

"Muxholisi!", Mr Kwaramba snapped. It was definitely not the first time he was calling him in that minute.

"Sir?!", he raised his head forward and tried to concentrate.

"Are you in class?"

"Yeah definitely!", he lied.

"What is the collective name for the amine hormones responsible for flight-or-flight?"

"Epinephrine. And norepinephrine?", Mxolisi answered with uncertainty.

"I said the COLLECTIVE name for those two?"

"Uhm, adrenaline", he answered and cringed at his guesswork. Mr Kwaramba looked at him doubtfully.

"Correct. However, I need you to come see me in my office after this class"

Mxo nodded and tried his best to concentrate. His phone vibrated in his pocket. He peaked on it sneakily under the desk and read the text.

"Van Starden wants to see the both of us at 2"-Lwandile.

He read the text and exhaled lightly from irritation. Kwaramba continued drawing his flow diagrams on the white board with a blue marker as Mxo pondered over the obvious reasons why Boerevleis-as they secretly call him, would want to see them.

The siren went off and mayhem arose as each learner couldn't wait to get out of the classroom apart from the few nerds who always stay behind to either draw something, do homework or read a novel instead of having lunch like normal people.

Mxo packed up his books and zipped up his bag. He walked to his locker to go put it away to avoid walking around with it the entire time. Lwandile's smiley face was waiting for him when he pushed the locker door closed. He laughed.

"Stop being a clown", he said and took out his cellphone from the pocket of his grey pants.

"You going in the opposite direction. Lunch is usually that way", Lwandile said.

"Kwarambannoing wants to see me in his office", he informed in a bored tone. Lwandile laughed.

"See why I dropped biology for accounting?"

Mxo thinned his eyes and rolled them behind his lids. Lwandile laughed, told him to call when he's done and

hugged him. Mxolisi is not the hugging type to gents but he does it because his brother enjoys them. Charlotte approached and Mxolisi walked away, leaving her with Lwandile.

"Khopphano", he called out when Mxo entered his office. The butchering he does to the South African names of the learners can never be undone. The damage is too much.

"Yessir", Mxolisi grabbed a chair and sat in front of him.

"You already know why I called you here I'm guessing?"

Mxo laughed lightly.

"I'm slacking?"

"This is not a laughing matter", the teacher said and Mxo nodded trying to collect his seriousness together.

"You were performing so well when you first arrived here. Now look...", Kwaramba said before throwing the test script in front of Mxo. The 63% circled in red was impossible to be missed. He looked down.

"You're a very smart child Mxho. I've come to realise that you learn and grasp most of the content from by solely listening in class. You did not study for this test. Correct?"

"I did sir I just--"

Kwaramba dropped his eyes suspecting eyes under his glasses and creased his forehead. Mxo looked away.

"Correct", he lowly confessed.

"Imagine how much you would've scored had you studied?", he tried to guide, sincerely. Mxo nodded.

"I'll try my best not to let you down", he made a completely empty promise.

"Let me not keep you any longer. Enjoy your lunch my boy"

Mxo left after their handshake. He took out his black bucket hat from his pocket after closing the door and wore it. He bumped into the principal and quickly turned around to avoid him, taking the hat off.

"Hey hey hey! Come back. Come back", he said as he bent his index finger back and forth. Mxo clenched his teeth and shut his eyes before turning back in his direction.

"What did I say about hats in the school premises?"

"Sir the sun is out. UV radiation makes my skin itch"

"There's sun screen for that"

"I can't afford it", Mxo said and it took the principal 4 seconds before he crumbled under his serious facade and laughed in defeat. Mxo tried to suppress a laugh and looked away.

"This will be the 5th hat I'm taking from you this year only"

"Then stop taking them because it's pointless"

"Do you want me to call your father again?"

"That won't be necessary"

"Hand it over?"

"But sir--"

"HAND. The. Hat. Over", Mr Rashmid emphasized in his Indian accent. Mxo dropped his chest and placed it on his hand, ready to receive it.

"That hat belongs to my grandmother by the way"

"Your point is?"

"Don't be surprised when it starts growing limbs and talking to you, demanding to be taken back to its rightful owner", he threatened and Rashmid shot out a laugh. He hit him on the head with the hat and said, "Go to lunch before the siren goes off Mkolisi". Mxolisi laughed and left.

...

Bab'Sizwe and Bayede came back from the Nkosi homestead and found Manqoba conversing and laughing with the guards standing on the pavement outside. He told them to go back to work so he could talk to his elders.

They walked over to the garden and each grabbed an outdoor wooden chair.

"Sibuyile ndodana"(we are back son), Bayede informed. Manqoba fixed his watch and nodded.

"Sikhulumile no Nkosi"(We spoken to Mr Nkosi), Sizwe added. They insisted on giving him the feedback in bits and pieces. His facial expression wasn't doing a good job at concealing his impatient irritation. They laughed.

"Sekunjalo. Uvumile umakoti. Kushoda iynxonxo zama lobola manje"(It's done. She agreed. The only thing that's left now is lobola negotiations), Bayede denounced. Manqoba clasped his hands together and smile in gratitude.

"Fanele ngisho ndodana. Ukhethe kahle. Inhlonipho ibuzwa kuye. Futhi asisakhulumi nje ngo buhle"(I must say, you chose well. She's very respectful. Beautiful beyond measure also), Bab'Sizwe remarked and a smile emanated from Manqoba's heart. They let him know of the date for the negotiations and he offered them lunch. They all walked into the house and he asked Nokwanda to make them something to eat. He then paced up the stairs to go fetch his phone.

He got into the room and found Enhle applying a sheet mask in front the new mirror.

"Have you seen my phone anywhere?", he asked.

"I don't know where it is", she replied and continued digging the purple packet to get some more of the serum on the face mask.

He searched all over and eventually found it in between the pillows.

"You can go ahead and marry her", she said and concentrated in beautifying her skin. He stopped walking.

"Angizwa?"(Excuse me?)

She kept quiet and pretended not to have heard anything he'd said.

"Did you hear a word I said yesterday?", Manqoba asked.

She took a moment to exercise her lungs before she could stand up. She fastened her brown gown and went to stand to stand in front of him. She took his hands and he just looked at her in puzzlement.

"Mntungwa. Mbulaz'omnyama. Mzilikazi kaMashobana. Zikode kaMkhatshwa. I have given you my all. I have vowed that only death will keep us apart. I gave up my life to be your wife. I bore children for you. I love you. And I know you love me too. Ngiyaxolisa babakhe. For how I've been treating you. Kodwa ngokukhuli ukuzithoba nokuhlonipha, you broke all my trust when you cheated on me. You can't expect me to be the same

person"(...I'm sorry... with all due respect...)

He scoffed.

"Are you saying that it is my fault that you're abusive?"

"I am not abusive. Hitting you was a mistake that will never happen again. I am just saying that pushed me to limits I also didn't know I had"

"Ine ntsango le mask ne?"(This mask has weed in it right?)

"Let's start afresh. I promise to be a better wife"

"Enhle--"

"You don't love me anymore?"

"That will never happen and you know it. However, two can be madly in love with one another and still not be compatible. We've tried. We've surely tried everything in the book but we still can't get it right. You're controlling Enhle and I've come to realise that it's not something you choose. It's imbedded in you. Meaning it cannot be changed"

"You promised my father that you'll never hurt me"

"That's before I knew that he didn't teach you respect"

"What is it that she has that I don't?"

"Don't ask me that...", he said and tried to leave.

"You made quit my job so I can be your wife now you want to dump me like a sack of rotten potatoes?!"

"I'll continue taking care of you", he calmly said without doubt. She shot a stare at him. He walked towards the door.

"I will destroy you Manqoba. You'll wake up and find all your filthy dealings in every newspaper. Don't test me", she threatened. He stopped walking but kept his face fixed ahead. She wouldn't...

...

Lwandile and Mxolisi walked to Van Staden's office when the siren announced school out.

"Have a seat", he said and pointed them to the chairs across him as he took a sip by the mini coffee station at the corner of his office. He went over to sit as well and pulled the Typek box with scripts for business studies in it. He went straight to theirs since they were arranged in alphabetical order, surname wise. He placed both scripts in front of them. Lwandile had obtained a 100%. Mxolisi glared at the 48% on top of his script.

"Make me understand. How does this happen?", Van Staden asked. Lwandile exhaled from exhaustion. Mxolisi bit his upper lip hoping to suck out a sensible answer from there.

"Khopano, whatever phase you're going through, it is going to delay and ruin your life if you allow it to. If you're happy with that it is okay. But my biggest fear is, see we've had cases of identical twins failing on purpose just so the other twin can catch up in order for them to be in the same class and graduate high school at the same time. Not once. Not twice. I don't want the same to happen to you. Both of you have so much potential. Lwandilé is putting in the work, the effort. You're just allowing it to rot and go to waste", he went on a rant and Mxolisi fell on his back on the leather chair.

"The reason we have prelims for every class and not just grade 12 like other schools is that we need to gauge whether you're ready for the final exam. This is important for each and every learner. If your marks do not improve by then, I will be forced to call your mother so we can put you under obligated boarding camp before the final exams", he said and Mxo sat up with his eyebrows tensed.

"Yes. While other learners are on holiday, you're going to be stuck here in these very premises. You and I both know that your mother won't object to this. Pull up your socks!", he sternly warned. Mxo saw it fit to nod so the operation-get-Kopano-in-line wouldn't be prolonged.

"Good then. Fare well", he said and waited for them to leave.

...

Bongiwe walked into Muzi's office for the scheduled meeting with nothing but her cellphone and a pen in hand. She was texting and walking. He raised his face once and went back to submitting his email. He closed the laptop and grabbed the file they had to have a discussion over.

"Mr K", she greeted before she sat herself on the chair like a lady.

"Bongi", he said and paged through it.

"I want us to discuss the approach you want to take with the campaign for my new concrete wall design", he said and she put her phone down.

"O-kay?"

"I'm seeing a list of well known influencers here but no prominent newspaper in sight"

"I can explain that?"

"I'm listening?"

"Nobody reads newspapers anymore. News travel a lot faster through social media influence"

"I beg to differ. The people who need this type of service still read newspapers. I am one of them. Bongiwe this not a face cream or a new brand of mascara"

"I know that. I just feel we need to bring in a new serious element to this influencing thing. I am an influencer myself and I already know how I'm going to structure the posts. The briefing will be the same"

"What are you gonna say? "Hi guys MaloCon sent me to take pictures on their new concrete walls to show off their new designs?" ", he asked with a frown and she laughed. Her phone rang, she picked it up and blocked the mic with her palm.

"Just trust me, okay?", she said before placing it on her ear. "Bongiwe here?"

"Yes this is she?", she answered as panic began embracing her face.

"No no, that can't be correct. No. You said he was getting better and that--"

"Doctor there must be a mistake somewhere he was perfectly fine and recovering this morning! He was back to his usual self all I had to do was fetch him tonight as per your instruction!", she was now volatile and highly emotional. She clicked her heels and stood up from the chair with her hand on her forehead, still listening on the phone, running out of breath. Her lips were trembling from the shock. Muzi looked at her in severe concern waiting to hear to what the actual problem was although he had already put the puzzle together from the pieces

he got.

"Okay. Thank you", she roughly said in a low tone and pursed her lips. The phone dropped to the floor and cracked at impact. Muzi wheeled his chair out of his desk and stood up.

"What's going on?", he asked when he reached her and placed his hand on her shoulder. She sobbed and wiped her nose with her wrist.

"Bongiwe?"

"He's gone", she said and looked up to block the tears from flowing with the assistance of her index fingers.

"Your father? I'm terribly sorry", he said and she shook her head in disbelief and scoffed from shock. She couldn't keep it together. She crumbled and he held her before she could collapse to the floor. He placed her head on his shoulder and she wailed and wept her sorrow out.

Chapter Fifteen

Muzi gently pulled Bongiwe towards the couch in his office. He sat her down and she sobbed loudly. He pulled out his pocket square and handed it to her. She took it and wiped her face. In that moment, he trivially remembered where he'd left the handkerchief he was looking for. He thought he'd lost it when it was actually left in her office. Once she got a grip, she stood up and said, "I'm sorry for falling apart like this. I know it's unprofessional", she fixed her skirt.

"It's okay. I know exactly how you feel. I also have a fresh wound remember?", he said and fell on his back on the couch. The face of the late and fallen Chief Nkosenye Khumalo rose from his cherished memories like a phoenix. His father's straight and bright smile encircled his mind. The chief was not a man of many smiles but when he did smile, the whole house lit up. The man who taught him respect as the first lesson from a father. The man who taught him that hardwork makes the character of a man. The same man who taught him that a woman is an egg, and that as a man, you should be careful with it.

"You wouldn't want an egg to break would you", the chief's voice resounded in his head. He last heard these words when he was a teenager but he heard them afresh, clearly like they'd just been said. Bongiwe slowly sat back on the couch when she realized that it wasn't just about her from how lost he was in his own thoughts.

"Mr K?"

"Muzi?!"

"Hm?!", he answered, falling out of the memorial service he was hosting in his brain. "I'm sorry. I'm just... my condolences to you and your family", he added.

"You need to see someone", she mentioned.

"You mean a shrink?", he asked with his forehead furrowed.

"Yes. You've said it yourself, it's a fresh wound but here you are carrying on as if nothing happened. You do it as easily that we've all somehow managed to forgot what you're going through", she commented, wiping the corner of her eyes to get rid of the tears. Her nose was pink red.

"Life has to go on Bongiwe. Ayiqali ngami lento yokulahlekelwa ngumuntu engimthandayo"(I'm not the first person to lose a loved one), he stated and she kept quiet.

"That was insensitive of me I'm so sorry", he apologized wistfully when he realized that his statement somehow meant that Bongiwe was overreacting.

"It's okay. Let me get back to work", she said and stood up.

"Go home. You're in no state to be thinking about work"

"There's a lot of work to--"

"You'll delegate to your team"

She exhaled from defeat. She placed the pocket square on the couch.

"Let me go get my stuff then"

"Call me if you need anything"

Muzi always makes sure that his employees are taken care of it times of need. Be it being involved in a car accident, falling sick or losing a loved one. He's the boss that everyone loves but would never attempt to play

skipping rope on the top of his head. She gave a halfhearted smile, clicked her heels and left. He stood up and went to grab his desk phone.

"Sawubona, I'm going to need transport for Ms Mdletshe?", he informed one of the company drivers, feeling like Bongiwe is in no state to be driving.

...

Enhle rested her head on Manqoba's chest as he played with her hair. She was drawing invisible hearts, strings and circles on his chest as she enjoyed his presence. The moment felt so effortless and free-flowing.

"What does this mean?", she softly asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Do I still need to expect to be served with divorce papers 'no later than Friday' ", she asked and he laughed.

"If you pull one of your stunts then yes"

He said and she laughed.

"You shouldn't provoke me hoping that I'll keep quiet", she warned and they shared a mutual laugh.

"So, I've been thinking baby...", she mentioned as she felt him wrap a few strands of her hair loosely around his finger.

"About?"

"Therapy", she said.

"You want us to go for counseling?"

"Yeah. I feel like we need it"

"I don't understand the concept of taking your problems to another person for fixing like they're a faulty refrigerator or something"

She knew she was taking a mammoth of a chance.

"Don't just shut it down. Think about it first", she pleaded and kissed his chest.

"Okay ke", he agreed to thinking about it, not the actual therapy.

"I have another request"

"Weeee", he exclaimed and she laughed. "Ufunani? Imoto?"(What do you want? A car?)

"No baby man. I just--", she got stuck.

"You juuust??"

"Please allow me to go back to work?"

He exhaled slowly.

"I thought sikhulumile ngalo lo ludaba?"(I thought we've already spoken about this?)

"It's necessary that I do. We fight a lot when I have nothing to do"

"I bought you a sewing machine?"

"That's a hobby!"

"You can always change that"

"Baby?!"

"Ha ah Enhle", he disagreed and her head fell back on his chest as she sulked.

...

"I'm at our spot by the rocks. Please come", Melokuhle read the text with a side eye. The phone was placed on the side of the table as he studied with a mechanical pencil in his fist, against the side of his forehead. He quickly took the phone when he realized that it was from Busi. He'd been waiting for her to text him. He didn't bother taking off his school uniform when he came back. He just loosened his tie and threw his blazer and bag on the table, then hit the books. Manqoba always says that he's a combination of his twin brothers. Stubborn and naughty but hardworking and nerdy at heart. He got up from his chair and slid the phone in his pocket. He used the small gate at the back of the house and walked towards the trees guarded by huge rocks. The place is simple yet so refreshing and beautiful. It's like somebody walked around placing the rocks in between the trees purposefully, whereas it's all natural. The breeze under them gladly and immediately sits on your skin after you've been scotched by the sun.

He got there and found her sitting on one of the smaller rocks, wearing black tracksuits and white sneakers. She zipped up the track top to her chin and pulled the hood over her head. She immediately stood up when he arrived and he separated his arms so she falls into them. She cried so heartbreakingly on his shoulder. The sound of that pierced him deeply. Her tears were like acid dropping on the outer layer of his own heart.

"I'm sorry baby", he begged. She couldn't stop. He pressed her to his neck by the back of her head and allowed her to offload the pain in drops and sobs on his white school shirt.

When she finally calmed down, he placed a kiss on her forehead.

"Talk to me", he whispered sympathetically. She sobbed and wiped her nose with one of the sleeves of her top. A nervous smile escaped her lips.

"You have such beautiful eyes", she said. She's random like that. He huffed out a very brief laugh.

"You tell me everyday. What's going on Cakes?", his hands were now on her waist.

"I'm not going to stay long. They'll be back soon"

"Are they punishing you or something? Why didn't you come to school?"

She rubbed her fingers and looked up briefly. Her eyes were bloodshot. Her long lashes were wet with some strands sticking together. He pushed the hood off her head and exposed her black short hair, and a fresh new scar on her forehead. His mouth hung open as he felt his heart beginning to race.

"Who did this to you?", he asked and she stared ahead, her eyes moving past him.

"Forget this. I have to go soon. I just needed to see you", she confessed and wrapped her hands around his neck. He never hugged her back. He was waiting for her to explain.

"Busi who did this to you baby?"

"Are you honestly going to waste this moment discussing a scar that won't matter a few days from now? You might not see m--", she abruptly cut herself short. Then deflated her chest so she calms down.

"You might not see me for a while", she said. He exhaled from defeat.

"Please hold me?", she whispered. He stared into her eyes before bending a little so he hugs her tightly and properly.

"Thank you"

"I'd hold you anytime you need me to. I meant it when I said got you"

"I mean for everything. Thank you Melokuhle Makhosonke Khumalo. Thank you for loving me so much that I had no choice but to love myself. For helping me find and see my self worth. I grew up thinking that I was not worthy. That's what my aunt would tell me...", she confessed, still holding onto him. He kept quiet. He always knows when she's not done.

"I lived my whole life on survival. Trying to prove something to them each time. Even the high marks were not enough. High marks I only started getting after you came into my life and showed me that I was not as stupid as I grew up believing. The word was as good as my second name but you came in and changed all of that. You took care of me. In every aspect of the word...", she went on with tears streaming down her face. Melo felt himself getting emotional.

"Uhm...", she sobbed.

"Thank you baby. For all the times you'd wake up at ungodly hours of the morning to answer my calls so I could vent. For all the times you drove out in those hours to come see me when you felt it was too much for me to handle. For accepting this pregnancy with responsibility. I don't regret falling pregnant for you. I'd do it all over again given the chance. You're a man amongst boys uyangizwa?", she said and pulled back on the hug to wipe her tears. He bit his lower lip trying to compose himself.

"What happened this time?", he asked. She laughed nervously.

"They... they said I'm a disgrace. That... my parents did well by dying so they wouldn't be here to spectate the disappointment they gave birth to", she let out. Melo's already cracking heart crashed against his ribs and broke into several pieces. He just stared into her eyes, biting hard on his lower lip. She forced a smile through the pain.

"Let me marry you?", he finally said. She laughed in breaks from disbelief.

"What?", she asked, still laughing and sobbing at the same time.

"Yeah. Let me marry you. You'll come live at home at with me"

"Melo we're still kids. Still in grade 12. We're too young to be husband and wife"

"There's no such thing. We'll be done with school soon. I was gonna marry you in the future so kyafana. Why delay it when it's gonna happen anyway?", he rambled. Her phone rang. Panic blessed blessed her whole face. She was too scared to even answer. She silenced the call and it stopped ringing. She held the sides of his face and swallowed.

"I love you. Okay? Ngiyak'thanda Makhosonke. Never forget this", she announced, kissed him in a rush and ran off. He tried grabbing her but she was already gone. Something about that moment didn't feel right to him.

...

Mxo picked up the bowl of amasi and left over pap that he had prepared and headed to his room. Ndalo finally replied to his text, asking her if he could call. She allowed and he dialled her number as he pushed the door to his room.

"Hello", she answered.

"Did I catch a wrong number yin?", he asked and she laughed. She knew exactly what he was on about.

"Askiies. Hi baby", she shyly said in a low tone.

"That's better. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. How are you?"

"I'm okay. Busy?"

"I'm cooking. Wenzani wena?"(What are you doing?)

"I have a test to study for and I don't know where to start"

He complained.

"What subject?"

"Physical sciences"

"I'd help you if I was near", she said and Mxo found this adorable.

"It's just a lot of work. I've been piling it up now it's finally here to bit me in the bxtt", he said and she laughed.

"I think I'll just get to that test room and freestyle my way into it"

"That's not a very safe way of doing school", she warned.

"It works for me. I just wanna pass and get the fxck out of there"

"That's not enough", she remarked.

"What do you mean?"

"You don't sound like you like school much"

"You're correct. I really don't"

"I didn't think of you as a brat", she gravely stated in a voice full of unmasked disappointment.

"It's not like that. I just want to do this life thing differently. We can't all be successful via school", she explained, realizing how much her opinion of him means to him.

"There goes my daydream of us going to the same university", she blurted out and planted the idea in his head.

It immediately started sprouting. He took a spoonful into his mouth and pulled his laptop open.

"What and where do you want to study?", he asked as he logged onto his Instagram.

"Actuarial sciences at Wits", she informed.

"Sorted then. You'll be the rich wife and I'll be a house husband"

A sudden laughter erupted from her end of the line.

"Is there even such a thing?", she asked, still laughing.

"Ngiyadlala. My dad would castrate me and make biltong out of my nxts", he said and she laughed even harder.

"Ngobani?"(Why?)

"Does it make sense to you? My job is to get you to submit , take care and provide for you", he asked and she smiled to herself.

"Just because you're a man? Psh"

"Wee Ndalo, I am not marrying no feminist mina uyangizwa?"(...do you hear me?), they both laughed.

"I'm not a submissive and subservient type"

"You can be an independent woman and submit at the same time. All I'm saying is, I can't sit at home ngikhamise waiting for you take care of me and the kids"

"Listen to you sounding like a husband", she said and laughed.

"Awungikholwa mengikhi ngizokushada angith"(You don't believe me when I say I'm gonna marry you).

"I'm gonna remind you before I raise your veil to kiss you", he said and those familiar butterflies got violent in her stomach, his partners in crime. His eyes popped at what he was seeing on the screen. He dropped the spoon in the empty bowl and got closer to the screen to see properly. Lwandile was being exposed.

"O serious ngalento yakho neh?, Ndalo said and Mxo didnt answer. He was trying to make sense of the screengrabs on the Insta stories.

"Baby, I'll speak to you later okay. I have to go", he said and cut the call. He pulled the laptop closer to read the screengrabs of a WhatsApp conversation between Lwandile and Quinton. Quinton was pursuing Lwandile.

From the screengrabs, their relationship was getting still getting off the ground. Mzwanele somehow got a hold of their conversation and posted the shots.

Mxo ran out of his room to go find Lwandile. He barged into his room and found him covered up sheets, on the phone.

"Mzwanele how could you? You were supposed to be Que's bestfriend?", he said and Mxo grabbed the phone from him.

"Get those screenshots off your page before I fxck you up!", he shot out.

"Don't push me Mzwanele you won't like the outcome. Take those shots down Lwandile will come out when he's ready you inconsiderate punk!"

He looked at the screen with exasperation and realized that Mzwanele had cut the call. He shot out of the room and Lwandile followed him.

"Where are you going?", Lwandile asked as he followed Mxolisi to their parents' room. He opened the drawers looking for Muzi's gun. He didn't find it. He left them open and rushed to the study.

"Mxolisi please don't do anything stupid. What's done is done"

Mxolisi didn't answer. He tried opening the drawers to the desk but they were all locked.

"Dammit!", he shot out. Lwandile had his hands on his mouth. He knows him. There's nothing he can do once he gets like this. He charged to the safe and tried a few combinations to open it. All failed.

"Nxn!", he exclaimed before running downstairs. Both their parents were still at their respective offices. He grabbed the keys to their car and rushed out. Lwandile saw it fit to call their mother. He even forgot the fact that the news of his sexuality might possibly get to their dad before he could tell him himself.

...

Mxolisi eventually got to Mzwanele's house. The woman who was busy polishing the stoep stood up with difficulty and watched him as he walked towards her.

"Sawubona ma"

"Yebo sanalwam", he said to a sweating Mxolisi.

"Ukhona uMzwanele?", he asked and Mzwanele came out of the house.

"Ngiyabonga ma", Mxo said and charged towards him before he could hear what the woman had to say to. He grabbed him by his t-shirt and vehemently said, "You thought I was joking?!"

"Mus' ukungibamba kanje Mxolisi angiyena umngani wakho"(Don't manhandle me like I'm your friend)

"Ngithe susa la masimba la uwafake ku Instagram before I knock your teeth out"(I said take down those screenshots...)

"Haibo!! Yehlisani umoya kanti kwenzenjani nkosiyam"(Calm down) the woman said in her soft but panicked voice.

"Take your filthy hands off of me", Mzwanele threatened with his eyes and Mxolisi thinned his at him in a stare. He jerked him in his direction and pushed his away so much that he staggered but he never fell. After gaining his balance, Mzwanele charged towards Mxolisi and sent a punch flying to his face. The woman was now crying, throwing her hands up and down.

"Vusimuzi!!", she yelled for Mzwanele older brother to come out. Nobody heeded to her call. Mxo touched his mouth with his middle finger when he smelt blood. He raised his face at Mzwanele, who was also standing firm waiting for him to attack. Mxo charged back at him and threw three consecutive punches into his stomach. Mzwanele spat out blood. Mzwanele threw another punch to his neck and the pain ran through very sensitive nerves. When Mxolisi caught his breath, he screamed as he ran towards him to push him to the wall. The collision between Mzwanele and the wall caused his mom to come out. Vusi was evidently not home.

"Myeke!!"(Let him go), she screamed as she dialled on her phone. Mxolisi strangled Mzwanele and punched him at the same time. Mzwanele managed to attack Mxolisi's stomach and Mxolisi intensified the grip on his neck. Mzwanele began popping his eyes as he ran out of breath. The woman got to them and tried to pull them apart. Mxolisi surrendered when her cry pierced his eyes. He let Mzwanele drop down and backed off. The police van parked abruptly at the gate. Mzwanele was coughing out blood. Only then did Mxolisi feel the burning and throbbing pain on the side of his neck where Mzwanele's fist landed. He placed his hand against his neck. The police greeted and the woman pointed to Mxolisi as she kneeled in front her son. He was still very much alive, just out of breath.

"Mshana, ni lwelani?"(Nephew, why are you fighting?), one of the policemen directed this to Mzwanele.

"Young man, you're under arrest for the assault of Mzwanele Mbele. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say or do will be used against you in the court of law. You also have a right to a lawyer. If you cannot afford one, the state will provide one for you", the other policeman said as he handcuffed Mxolisi. His jaws were tightened but he didn't protest.

...

Melokuhle's phone rang when he was about to walk out and leave it on the bed. He fixed his watch before turning back to go get it. The screen displayed that Mthokozisi was calling. He shook his head and rejected the call. He called again. Melo got curious and slid his thumb reluctantly across the screen.

"Yes?"

Silence.

"Did you call to breathe in my ear?"

"She's gone",

"What are you talking about?"

"Busi bro. She overdosed on cyanide", Melo's head began spinning. A sudden cold hit him as his blood froze.

His lower lip began trembling as he tried to make sense of it all.

"I'm sorry...", Mtho added to the deafening silence. Melo blinked a couple of times and dumped himself on the bed. With his phone still against his ear.

"Melokuhle?", Mtho called out and Melo threw the phone to his pillow and put his fist against his mouth, shocked beyond description.

Chapter Sixteen

Melokuhle continued staring into space with his fist against his mouth, befallen by utter shock and disbelief. Something in his brain snapped and he grabbed his phone in that very moment and dialled Busi's number. The phone was off. He dialled again and again, and again. It was still off. His heart was struggling to accept what his brain already knew. His memory jogged itself back to everything she had said that afternoon. The more he processed her words, the more they became easily synonymous to goodbye. Why didn't he see it then? He questioned himself as regret engulfed him whole. Manqoba walked in and slowly dropped himself on the bed next to him.

"I'm guessing you've already heard?", he cautiously asked and kept his eyes on the unresponsive Melokuhle. He was still exchanging a stare with the wall in front of him. Manqoba wrapped his hand around him.

"Khala mfan'wam"(Cry it out). Melo bent his upper lip and shut his eyes. Her face was all he could see. He always told her how he felt her ancestors hand carved her facial features. How he felt they took their time with her. He could see her. He could see her nose getting sharper and pointed as her smile travelled to reach her ears. He could see her eyes, the colour of a ready and ripe hazelnut. How she would flutter her natural long lashes in an attempt to roll her eyes at his silly jokes. She did a bad job at it because she would laugh eventually. He got lost in their memories together. He was having multiple flashbacks all at once. He then shot up like a rocket in a very brusque manner and asked to be excused. Manqoba immediately grabbed him by the arm.

"I know you're hurting but I have a feeling you're to do something stupid. Sit down son"

"They killed her MQ!"

"Who killed--"

"I failed her!", he shot out emotionally.

"There was nothing you could--"

"I shouldn't have allowed her to go back there. I felt it in my gut that something wasn't right but I still didn't try hard enough to save her...", he sobbed as the tears ran a salty race down his cheeks.

Manqoba placed his heavy palm on Melo's shoulder and forced him to look him in the eye.

"I won't allow you to sit here and blame yourself for something you had no control over. Death is blinding. Even if you did feel it as you say you did, there was nothing you could do if she was meant to die. Trust me"

"She wasn't meant to. I'm telling you they killed her!"

"Is there more to this?", Manqoba asked and Melo's haggard self dropped and sat on the bed. Manqoba did the same.

"They abused her MQ"

"Who? Her parents?"

"They're not her real parents"

"She was adopted?"

"Not really. That woman is her aunt. She just called her mom. Same goes for her husband"

"Okay. You said she was abused?"

"Nothing she did was ever good enough for them. The last time I saw her, the scar... I should've--"

"Stop it. Makhosonke there was nothing you could've done to save her if she didn't want to be saved", Manqoba said before pulling him by his shoulder so he could comfort him.

"It all feels so unreal to me"

"Give it time. It'll hit you when it should and even then, don't be afraid of feeling it so you can move past it", Manqoba stated and Melo did not respond. Manqoba pondered over what Melo told him about his late girlfriend's guardians.

...

Betso arrived at the police station 15 minutes later after Mxo was allowed a single phone call. Lwandile explained everything to her the time Mxo left the house.

She got there running out of breath and found Detective Mbele certifying documents from behind the counter.

"Hi. My son was arrested for assault for today . I'm here to bail him out", she said fervidly. The detective raised his eyes and dropped them back on the papers he was signing. He shuffled the papers, thumped the stamp and signed some more. He then handed them to the owner and told Betso to follow him.

She held onto her bag and followed him. He opened the door to one of the interrogation rooms with just a table and a chair. Betso left the door wide open after walking in, suspicious.

"Mrs Khumalo the second", he asked as she walked in.

"Yes?", she affirmed dubiously.

"Don't look so surprised. Your family is quite famous on social media", he mentioned. "Please take a seat", he said and gestured with his hand, leading her towards the chair. She hesitantly placed herself on the four-legged plank.

He also did the same across her. She could hear the laughter-infused noise fluctuating in volume in the corridor. Her ears caught that two of the officers were discussing magwinya and something to do with Supersport.

"Your son is quite problematic", he mentioned, calmly. He had the sleeves of his shirt folded up his arm and his 'gun-holding' belt strapped across his body.

"This is his first arrest"

"Exactly. And I'm very certain you wouldn't want a criminal record tagged to his name. Correct?", Betso angled her head in doubt.

"Of course. But what are you saying?"

"Look, this can be very simple and straightforward. Mzwanele is my nephew. These charges could be dropped, right here, right now but of course at a price"

"A price?"

"Don't act so obtuse. We're both adults. I have kids too, including naye lo Mzwanele. I for one wouldn't want them to be going in and out of court whereas they should be focusing on getting into university", he said in a manipulative yet velvety tone of voice.

"Look. I'm not asking for much. R20K is no different to R5 to you. Drama free", he mentioned persuasively and

fell back on his chair waiting for her to absorb all that he'd said. She thought about Lwandile and how it wouldn't be fair on him that his father would find out this way about his sexuality. She'd wished that he be the one to tell him, at his own time. Not to be ambushed into it.

"Your nephew had no right to do what he did", Betso sternly stated.

"Your son also had no right to attack him the way he did. I could keep him here overnight if it suits you?", Mbele said with absent regret. They shared a challenging stare before Betso could give in. She signed him a cheque and he walked out with a satisfied smile. He came back with Mxolisi with Mxolisi and uncuffed him in front of her.

"You had him cuffed all this time?!", she shot out in exasperation. Mxolisi rubbed his wrists.

"It was nice doing business with you. Wena, behave mfana I might not be so lenient next time", he said with the toothpick sticking out in between his dry lips. Betso inspected his apathetic face.

"Did they hurt you in there? What happened to your lip? I'm taking you to the hospital", she panicked as her hands travelled his face and upper body at Sonic speed. He pulled his head away when she wanted to touch him on the mouth.

"Mom I am tired. Let's just go home"

"Kopano your neck is red. Your lip is ripped. You need to get checked"

"This is what happens when two people fight. I'm not dying. Can we please, can we just go home now?", he begged from exhaustion and Mbele came back with his cellphone and car keys". He placed them on the table and checked Betso's body out. Mxo stopped rubbing his wrists and shot a death stare at him, ready to pounce. He noticed this and cleared his throat. Betso was worried and focused on her son's lip. Mbele left. Her phone rang and she took it out of her bag. Mxolisi noticed that it was his father calling.

"Don't answer it", Mxo commanded. Betso looked confused.

"Why not?"

"We haven't planned our story right"

"For all we know, Lwandile could've already confessed to him. I hate lying to him le ntira eng mara lena?"(...what is it that the both of you are doing to me?), she dropped the hand with the phone in it and Mxo put his hands on her shoulder.

"Look, we both know it's not fair for Lwa to be outed like this. You're don't have to lie to him. You just have to decorate the truth a little bit", he persuades and she laughs.

"Decorate?"

"Yebo. You can tell him that Mzwanele and I fought but don't include the part about the police. We wouldn't have to tell him if I didn't have bruised but here we are", he said and the phone rang again. Betso shook her head and got it.

"Hubby?"

"Hey baby. I'm home and there's no one here. Your shoes tell me that ubuyile emsebenzin manje nikuphi?"(You're back from work... where are you guys?), he said in a relaxed tone sounding like he was chewing on something. Probably biltong, she thought.

"I don't know where Lwandile is. I'm here to fetch uMxo"

"Umfletcher kuphi?"(Where exactly are you fetching you?)

"From some other boy's place. I'll tell you all about it when I get home okay?", she said and cut the call. She then called Lwandile, immediately afterwards.

"Where are you?", that was the first thing she asked when he picked up.

"I'm in the house", he said.

"Don't lie to me Boikanyo"

"I swear I'm in the house. In the entertainment room. O kae Kopano?"(Where's Kopano?)

"He's fine. Have you told your father?"

She asked and he kept quiet.

"You cannot hide this forever Lwandile wa bona le wena gore it's spinning out of control"

"I'll tell him when I'm ready mom", he quickly said and she exhaled.

"Fine. We're on our way home", she alerted and cut the call.

...

When Betso was about to drive in, another car parked outside and she stopped her car. Her mother stepped out at the back and waited for the driver to take out her suitcase in the boot. Mxo ran out of the car and went to hug his grandmother.

She laughed as she stretched out her hands waiting for him to fall into them.

"Koppi Koppi!", she greeted him with a name she knew very well he did not like. He laughed.

"You're back?!"-Mxo

Betso walked over to them with a happy yet subtle smile.

"Yes. I just landed". The man wheeled the suitcase towards them and said his goodbyes.

"Why didn't you say that you were coming?", Betso asked as Violet hugged them both.

"And ruin the surprise? Where's the rest of the family?"

"In the house?"-Betso

Violet was about to say something else when she noticed the cut on Mxolisi's lip.

"And then wena?! What happened?", she asked as she tipped his head over carefully to inspect him.

"Ah gogo it's nothing"

"Number one, kego boleletse gore gogo ke letsulu lela la Natal"(I told you that your gogo is that Zulu woman in KZN) , she corrected and he dropped his face and huffed out a laugh. Her relationship with Evelyn is very unstable and everybody knows this fact. When they get along, everybody knows best not to say anything, even when they fight.

"Number 2, tell what happened to you before I smack your face?"

"Koko struu it's nothing--", he didn't get to finish his sentence before Violet lifted her sneaker off her foot to threaten him with it. He ducked away while laughing.

Betso told the two of them to calm down so they could walk in. They had to wait for Violet to untie her shoe,

put it back on again and tie it again. They did this with obvious impatience but as usual, it did not bruise her anywhere. When she was done, they all got into the car after Mxolisi put the suitcase in the boot and drove in.

...

Muzi was watching soccer with his tie loosened when they walked in and he paused it at the sight of his mother-in-law. He got up with the widest smile and they hugged. He got up to hug her and she greeted him back.

"Take this bag upstairs", Betso said to Mxolisi as she tapped her car key on her palm.

"When did you get back?", Muzi asked as they settled down on the couch.

"Today", she informed.

"How was Moçambique?"

"It was refreshing! I needed the getaway. That place is so beautiful hle lena!", she said with awe and Betso settled down next to her.

"I'm glad you enjoyed it. Where is Robert?"

"You know your father. He's busy closing deals and all. Nna kerile he-eh. I've seen enough. Plus I did most of the sightseeing by myself so, I had to come back"

"He still doesn't want to retire?"-Muzi. Violet laughed.

"He says he's going to die on his office chair"

"Ma! Your whole head is now covered in grey hair", Betso teased.

"Ee akere ke mohumi"(Yes. Isn't it I'm rich?), she said with fake arrogance and they all laughed.

Lwandile came down and Violet stood up to go hug him.

"I was just wondering where you'd disappeared to"

Lwandile laughed.

"Hi koko", he greeted and rested his head on her breasts.

"You've been in the house the whole time?!", Muzi asked. He thought he was alone. Lwandile nodded. Betso took the juice Muzi was drinking and finished it off at one go.

"Ke dintlo tse tsa lena tsadi buzza-buzza. You know there was a man who lived with a woman a whole 10 years without his knowledge?"(It's because of these big houses of yours), Violet said and they all laughed.

"As if yours is any better"-Betso

"10 years? Haibo ma"-Muzi

"Heban. Kana kea lo bolella. Ga yena atsena ko tlung mosadi owe one a etswa. Ge aetswa, mosadi nea tsena. Until one day bo makhelwane ba botsa ele kgale basa bone mosadi ole. Bare hao monna, ke lobaka resa bone mosadi wa gago. That's only when he found it that he wasn't living alone. Big houses are a trap", she told the story and they laughed even harder at her lies.

Mxolisi came back downstairs to the merry living room and sat down next to Lwa. Muzi's eyes flew past him and then quickly went back again.

"What happened to your lip Mxolisi?", he asked.

"Dad--"-Lwandile

"I got in a fight!"-Mxolisi interjected before Lwandile could say anything more.

"A fight? Why? For what reason?"-Violet

"Some boy called Mzwanele"-Mxo

"For what reason?!"-Muzi

"Ungijwayela kabi"(He's full of shxt), Mxo said and Betso looked away.

"Khuluma into ezwakalayo Mxolisi"(Say something sensible)-Muzi

Mxolisi exhaled and looked away.

"He... he was trying to hack my account"-Mxo.

"That's not reason enough to beat somebody up"-Muzi.

"Actually, it is. Identities easily get stolen these days. People who get up to such things need to be put in line before they ruin your life", Betso said and Muzi turned his bored face to look at her.

"Why couldn't he come to me or go to the police? Violence is not an answer. To anything", Muzi said to her and they communicated further with their eyes. He was sending a message and she understood. She remembered all the times when Muzi would beat somebody up. What if Mxolisi had...? She thought to herself before shutting it all down. She couldn't bear thinking about it.

"Give me the boy's address so I can speak to his parents?", Muzi said to Mxolisi and Betso felt a thick lump forming at the back of her throat, struggling to slide down.

...

Melokuhle locked himself in his room replaying all the videos they made together. Most of them had 'Power trip' by J. Cole feat. Miguel. That's the song he felt she deserved an everyday dedication of. The messages were flooding in on his WhatsApp wanting to know if it's all true. Some were sending their condolences and offering shoulders to cry on. He watched one particular video where he was kissing on her neck and tickling her at the same time. The sound of the original video was muted out for the sake of the music, but one couldn't miss how hysterically she was laughing. So much that the video shot was unstable since she was the one holding the phone. He moved on to the next one. It was a video of her singing along to 'When we love' by Jhené Aiko. "Don't lose me, don't lose me", the song went on. He dug his hands into his hair with his elbows balancing against his knees.

"Why did you do it Cakes? Why?", he questioned and interrogated her in his head. The tears kept dropping diligently to the floor. He didn't know how to extinguish the violent fire that kept erupting in his chest. He had no idea how to digest the pain in his heart. It was the kind of pain that felt like it was locked away and inaccessible but still there demanding somehow to be felt. The type of pain that tortures you based on the knowledge that there's nothing you can do to counter it. The pain that had the upper hand.

Chapter Seventeen

Melokuhle's brain eventually got tired of regurgitating everything that Busi had told him, trying to find answers to the many questions that flooded his fuzzed up mind. He passed out on the bed. It frustrated Manqoba that he couldn't hear him sobbing anymore. He was completely silent.

"Makhosonke?!", he yelled out from behind the locked door. Melo's volatile state made it very possible for him to pull any stupid stunt. Manqoba backed away from the door and counted to 3 and clenched his teeth before charging to the door to break it open. It did and he fell into the room. Melo raised his head and squinted his eyes to see what bomb had dropped into his bedroom. Manqoba exhaled with relief.

"What's going on?", Melo asked in a rough and dried voice.

"Nothing. Go back to sleep. And stop locking the door"

"How do I lock it when...", he took a deep breath. "Can I please be alone? Please", he said and MQ nodded before walking out. He pulled out his phone and dialled Muzikayise's number.

"Bafo?", Muzi answered.

"Mfa' ka baba"-Manqoba

"You don't sound too good. Trouble in paradise?"

"Kubi"(It's bad), Manqoba said before settling on the chair in his office.

"What's wrong?"

"It's... Makhosonke lost his girlfriend"

"You called me because a young couple had a fight?"

"Ushonile uBusisiwe MK", he informed. Muzakayise went quiet.

"What happened?"

"Suicide. He's not taking it well"

"I'll be there first thing tomorrow morning. Let me call him now", Muzi said and they cut the call.

Melo pulled his phone and called the warder that usually puts him in contact with his mother. Something in him just felt like he needed to hear her voice. The warden answered but told him that she was off duty. She promised to call him back the next day so could speak to Gugu. He shoved the phone under his pillow, allowing himself to get lost in space.

...

Bongiwe sat on top of her bed in her father's house, holding on to the family photo album, paging through as tears dropped down. Gertrude peeped through before she could walk in. The straightback on her head surely housed a couple of wild animals apart from the dandruff that was evident on her head. The hairpiece was ridden hard and put away wet. She did not bother covering up like almost every woman in the yard. Bongwiwe raised her face once and dropped her eyes back to the photo of her sitting on her father's shoulders and pointing at something far away, as a little girl. Her aunt settled down next to her on the edge of the bed.

"Ubekuthanda ubab' wakho yazi"(Your father loved you), she remarked. Bongwiwe wiped her tears with the back

of her hand and nodded.

"Mabongi...?", Gertrude carefully poked at her attention. Bongiwe knew that she was about to start with her snide and malignant comments.

"What aunty?"

"Ungazifeza izifiso zakhe nom' eseshonile uyakwazi loko?"(You can still grant him his wishes even when he's dead), she said. That was her 'on your marks' into the tired and over discussed conversation.

"Can we not do this?"

"Ngiyasho nje mina. Uyaguga phela ntombi. Iskhathi ngeke silinde wena"(I'm just saying. You're getting old. Time is never going to wait on you)- Gertrude

"You don't have to worry about that"

"Ayabola amaqqa---"

"I FROZE THEM DAMMIT!", Bongiwe snapped.

"Udemet unyoko"(Dammit is your mother), Gertrude jabbed at Bongiwe. Bongiwe exhaled and dropped her chest.

"I'm sorry"- Bongiwe

"Uthi uwafake njan amaqanda efridgin?"(Explain to me how you put them in the fridge)

"It's complicated"

"What if somebody eats them?"

"They're not... aunty I will have kids when I want them. At any point in my life"

"Mnk. So'bona ngawe Ntombizodwa", aunty said and stood up listlessly. When she closed the door, she called her Kenyan witch doctor to set up an appointment for that very same night. When she secured a spot,

"Sifun' iyngane thina lay'khaya. Oopotshozatshoza. Nxaiy"(We want grandkids here. Cute little things), she said to herself when she felt fed up with Bongiwe's stalling.

...

Violet stood up after dinner complaining about being heavily doped by sleep. She also informed that she had to take her pills for hypertension before leaving for her room. Muzi was taking a call in the balcony

"Goodnight grandma!", Lwandile and Mxolisi said at the same time. She kissed both of them on the lips at their obvious disgust. They hate it and she knows it but does it anyway. The two saw it fit to run back to their rooms before she could kiss them some more. They love their grandmother. It's her lack of qualms they would do without.

"Where is MY kiss?", Betso teased as she drank her juice.

"He-eh wena o monamonana le pipi you no longer qualify"(You suck dxck) , Violet said before picking up her phone to leave Betso choking on her drink, coughing like a negligent TB patient. She finally caught her breath and wiped her teary eyes. Muzi came back and noticed the mess she was.

"Are you okay mommy?", he enquired before settling down next to her.

"I am fine", she roughly said and took more sips.

"O-kay", Muzi said doubtfully. "I'm sorry about that call. I couldn't miss it"

"It's okay Khumalo"

"Where's everyone?"

"They went to bed"-Betso

Muzi took a deep breath.

"You look like you're carrying mountains on both shoulders. What's going on?"

"Melokuhle's girlfriend committed suicide", he informed. Betso popped her eyes.

"When? My poor baby..."

"Eish... manje angazi. I wanna finish up some paperwork then drive there so I can arrive early in the morning"

"I'm coming with you"

"No baby you stay. Stay with the kids. It's one thing that Melo's schoolwork and progress are on the line I wouldn't want to interrupt these two as well"

"So you want to hide it from them?"

"No I'm gonna tell them. What I won't allow is for them to come with"

"I can't imagine what he must be going through. He's so young to be losing two people at once"

"Ungasho uphinde. I know I was hard on him for impregnating her but I'm proud of how he was willing to step up. Now this...Was she that freaked out about having a baby?"

"I don't think it was the only thing that pushed her to it. Suicide victims usually have a lot of things piling up.

The pregnancy might've have pushed her beyond her threshold"

"Yoh...", Muzi exclaimed before he could fall back on his chair.

...

Melo eventually woke up and found Evelyn sleeping on the single couch next to his bed with a forest green throw covering the whole of her legs, in the dark. He initially got a fright before his brain could process everything. He's not used to waking up to a 'guard' in his room. He sat upright and checked his phone. The multiple piles of notifications made him dizzy. The painful void was still there. It never went away. He could feel it in his sleep.

"Gogo? Gogo?", he said as he shook her out of sleep.

"Hm?!"

"Go to bed before you sprain your neck", he suggested before standing up to go to the bathroom. Evelyn switched on the side lamp and waited for him to come back. He eventually did, with a wet face. His eyes were bloodshot, puffy and tired. He dropped himself on the bed beside her. It was hurtful for Evelyn to see him in that wrenched state. Nothing could fix it except for time. She knew this fact and somehow wished she could also take the advice that she wanted to give. She closed her mouth and pulled him to lay on her thighs on top of the blanket. He fell apart.

"Shh. Kuzondlula man mfana ka gogo you're breaking my heart Makhosonke", she quavered in heartbreak. She

couldn't hold back her own tears as she held on tightly to his one shoulder and brushed his head at the same time.

They sat in that position for hours till he fell asleep. The sun rose and invaded his room space behind the closed curtain. It got lighter and lighter as minutes passed. Evelyn heard a car drive in outside and she knew that Muzi had arrived. Manqoba had told her that he was planning on coming. She continued brushing his fast asleep head and humming a lullaby. A lullaby she came up with 17 years ago.

Muzi parked outside on the pavement and stepped out of the car. He greeted the guard who was cleaning the vehicle usually used to take Melo to school and they exchanged pleasantries. He then notified him that Melo won't be going to school that day. The guard raised his head in concern.

"Uyagula yini?" (Is he sick?), he asked in concern. The age difference between him and Melo was too big and high to be jumped over but their friendship did not care about that.

"No uhm... ushonelwe yintombi" (his girlfriend passed on)

The concern thickened on the guard's face.

"Ao bandla..."

"Yup...", Muzi said solemnly before telling the guard that he should probably walk in. He walked up the stairs and went straight to Melo's room.

"Ma", he greeted his mother in a whisper. Evelyn gave him a straight smile with warmth in her eyes.

"Unjan?", she said and continued brushing Melo's face.

"How is he?", he continued to whisper as he settled down on the couch next to them.

"He's not coping"

"Understandably. I told the driver that he will not be going to school today"

"I don't think that's a good idea"

"Why not?"-Muzi

"School will be good for him now. He needs the distraction. Sitting here and overthinking will not do him any good"

"Maybe tomorrow. I don't think he'll be able to keep it together", Muzi said and carefully placed his phone and keys on the bedside table. Melo woke up. He gave Muzi a halfhearted smile to acknowledge his presence. Muzi extended his hand so they fist bump. Melo obliged.

"I'm sorry boy...", he comforted lowly. Melo shut his eyes and bent his upper lip.

"It's life...", he said before standing up and stretching his arms.

"What time is it?", he asked his father. Muzi checked his watch and told him that it's 37 minutes past 6.

"I need to prepare for school", he said before searching for his phone with his eyes.

"Why don't you stay home today? Just for today?", Muzi suggested.

"And then what?", Melo asked with sunken eyes.

"You need time to--"

"Life has to go on dad. Busi never thought about me when she cut her life short. I'm still alive. I'm not going to allow a dead person to put a standstill to my life. Please excuse me I'm getting late", he said before walking to the bathroom. Muzi tried to say something but Evelyn raised her hand to stop him.

"Let him go. He's hurt. Angry. Allow him to feel any emotion that decides to him at the time it decides to hit him", Evelyn said softly. Muzi fell back on the couch and massaged his furrowed head with his fingers.

...

After Muzi came back from dropping off Melokuhle at school, he went to the study to go chill with his big brother. He knocked and Manqoba yelled that he should come in. He found him in the middle of a discussion with one of the guards.

"I'm not asking them. You get there and instruct them to get in the car so you can bring them here. Clear?", the guard nodded and left.

"And that?", Muzi asked as he placed himself slowly on the chair across Manqoba.

"Bafana", MQ said and Muzi laughed.

"Ngimdala kabi ukuthi ungaloku ungibiza njalo"(I'm too old for that name), he said before they greeted each other. Manqoba laughed.

"Yaz I'm unsettled about this whole Busi thing"-MQ

"Eish bafo, it's disturbing"

"No man. Something is not right here"

"How do you mean?"

"Her guardians will be here in about an hour. You can join in the meeting if you like?"

"But why? Didn't you say she committed suicide?"

"Melo said something about abuse and a scar. I need to know what that is about"

"Abuse?"

"I didn't want to fry him with questions. He doesn't need that right now. That is why I need them here to explain themselves. Dad would've done the same"

Manqoba said and a smile escaped the corner of Muzi's lips, impressed how Manqoba was assuming the mantle.

Meanwhile in the other room,

Enhle was sending a message to Sphehile inviting her for lunch at Joe's, after hunting her down on Instagram.

Evelyn knocked and Enhle allowed entry.

"Good morning", Evelyn said. Enhle greeted back with a surprised smile, sitting on her crossed heels in between the sheets. She was, at the same time embarrassed at this fact because she was supposed to be up by then.

Evelyn sat on the edge of the bed.

"Look, I know I haven't been exactly the best mother in law since the funeral. I just...", she tried to apologize but couldn't find the suitable words. Her phone beeped and took a glance at it, pulling her attention away from

Enhle and the apology. Her eyes were met by a message from Mbhekiseni.

"You son of a biscuit!", she shot out before clenching her teeth in severe irritation.

Chapter Eighteen

Enhle stared at Evelyn's sudden bout of distress.

"Are you okay ma?", she queried. Evelyn immediately stood up and put up a calm face.

"I'm fine darling. Very fine. Listen, I need to go. We'll continue with this talk later on in the day yeah?", she feigned.

Enhle just nodded, dumbfounded and disturbed by the vibrations of Evelyn's behavior. Evelyn left. Enhle shook her head and got out of bed. She went into the bathroom for a shower, leaving the phone on the bed. Her eyes fell on the phone as she placed her one leg on the bed to lotion up. She wasn't hopeful that she would get a reply, however she was somehow expecting it. She grabbed the phone to check if Sphesihle had replied. Her heart almost stopped after finding that she did. Their lunch was scheduled for 12h30. She threw the phone on the bed and went on a frenzy looking for an outfit. She was in no way going to place herself in any position to be outdone by her. She had to make sure Sphesihle looked at her twice and one last time to confirm and be sure.

...

Busi's guardians finally arrived, abiding to the summon from the chief. Muzi and Manqoba were already seated in the living room. The guard ushered them in and they took their seats with obvious terror and curiosity in their eyes. They greeted both men in the living room. Manqoba studied them in silence before he could greet them back. They couldn't meet his gaze halfway.

"You must be wondering why I called you here?"-Manqoba

"Kunjalo nkosiyami"(That's correct my king)

"Before we get far, how are you related to the deceased little girl?", Manqoba interrogated. Muzi kept his ears wide open but his mouth shut.

"She was my sister's child", the woman responded.

"Where is your sister?", Manqoba asked.

"She died. Fourteen years ago"

"So she was left in your care?"

"Yes"

"Would you mind me asking how your relationship was like? The relationship between all three of you?",

Manqoba kept blowing into the fire of questions and the woman cleared her throat.

"It was fine. We loved her like our own daughter"

"I'm sorry for questioning you like this at such a hard time for you and the rest of the family"

"It's okay. We're also trying to understand what might've led her to such a hasty decision", the man said.

"Could've been a lot of things really. The pregnancy. Abuse?", Manqoba cautiously said, trying to poke into the truth.

"Abuse?", the woman asked.

"Rumor has it that she had a scar on her forehead before she died. I'm trying to figure out where she might've

got it from?"

"Why do I feel like you're accusing us of something?", the man snapped.

"Calm down baba", the woman placed her hand on his knee and begged him to keep it together. Manqoba kept a straight face waiting for an answer.

"Please forgive me. I'm just, all of this is traumatizing for us", the man apologized and fixed his position on the couch though very infinitesimally.

"The scar?", Manqoba reiterated.

"She might've fell. I did not see it", the man said.

"You also didn't see it?", Manqoba asked the woman. She shook her head slowly in disapproval.

"She drank the poison we normally use for rats", the woman said.

"The poison was amongst the things she drank", the man straightened out the woman's statement. Correcting it to accuracy.

"Things?", Manqoba asked. Muzi sat up.

The woman tried to speak but she began sobbing. Her husband squeezed her shoulder. Muzi and Manqoba exchanged looks underneath all that emotional atmosphere. Muzi stood up and went to grab a box of tissues next to the flower vase. He placed it in front of them on the coffee table and Mr Khuzwayo, the husband pulled out a ply. The woman took it and wiped her eyes.

"We found a couple of things in her room but what she was laying with on her bed was the bottle of pills", she bawled out.

"What kind of pills?", Muzi asked.

"With all due respect, can we do this at another time?", the man said as he tried to comfort his hysterical wife.

"My apologies. A car is waiting outside to take you home. My condolences lie with you and your family", Manqoba said and they both nodded, then left with the woman still trying to pull herself together.

"Kukhona ok'shaya manzi la MK"(Something is not right here), Manqoba said before pulling his phone out.

"I agree. I don't know what it is but I'm just uncomfortable with their version of the truth".

Manqoba stood up with the phone against his ear.

"Buthelezi"-Manqoba

He laughed at whatever he was being told over the phone.

"Yeah it's been a minute. Look man, I need you to do some digging for me"

"Nah nothing of that complexity. A little girl committed suicide. I want to find out what happened. Her relationship with her family. The postmortem report. Everything. I'll send you further details when Melo comes back from school"

"Yeah suicide"

"Aish I'm not sure about therapy. I'll try and find out"

"Cool. I knew I could count on you"

He said before cutting the call. Him and Muzi continued to exchange speechless looks, exhaling in between ponders over the missing puzzle pieces. Muzi's phone rang and Betso's name flashed on the screen.

"Baby", he answered.

"I can't hear you properly"

"What's wrong?"

"A headache?"

...

Mthokozisi and his parents walked into the house after their traumatizing trip to the hospital. Mtho placed himself on the couch and laid back in exhaustion, paying attention to every aching muscle in his body.

His uncle and mother walked into the kitchen and watched him with worry.

"Sisi, you have to take this boy to a sangoma", he said. Mtho's mother threw her hand back in irritation before walking towards the fridge.

"Doctors don't know what causes them. If he continues having these mysterious seizures he might get paralyzed or even die for heaven's sake".

She poured herself some cold water and settled down on the chair next to the kitchen table.

"Are you even listening to me?!", he shot out. She looked away and took very loud sips on her water.

...

Enhle stood in front of the mirror with a mischievous smile, looking at her makeup kit.

"Time for all the master classes I've been attending to be put to good use", she said, talking to the kit. She hummed her way into the art around her face. When she was done, she got dressed to kill in her red dress with a front slit. She inserted her feet into her black pointed heels to finish her look. She was sure dressed to kill alright. To kill her performance. She first bit her first a bit to create a convincing bruise. She pulled out a black and red silk doek that she planned to wrap loosely over her weave so she hides her face, with the famous assistance of sunglasses. The look was meant for only a single and specific pair of eyes, not for the whole world. She maneuvered her way out of the house trying to avoid Manqoba. Her bad luck pushed her right into his arms at the front door while she was searching for her car keys in her handbag. She gasped when he held her by the upper arms, trying to protect her from falling.

"Hawu. Uyaphi umuhle kangaka?"(Where are you going looking so pretty?), he asked as he tried to push the loose doek aside so he can admire her properly. She shifted away claiming he was going to ruin her face beat.

"Uhm... I have a lunch date with Bareng. You know, the usual", she lied with her heart threatening to beat out of her chest. She kissed him on the cheek quickly before running to the car to be driven to the mall.

She got there and had to wait. Sphehile wasn't there whereas Enhle was deliberately late. She kept checking the time on her silver watch and clicking her tongue in annoyance after every realization that dawned on her that she might be getting stood up by her husband's potential wife. She ordered some more gin and tonic, downing it at one go without giving it a chance to get comfortable first on the coaster. Sphehile walked into the restaurant zipping up her bag. Enhle raised and waved her hand so she notices her. She watched her sway her hips as walked towards her table in her simple black dress, tight fitting and made of t-shirt material. Something about

how beautiful she still looked without effort ticked Enhle off. She stood up with an awarding-winning fake smile to hug her lightly. She suggested they walk towards the booth for privacy.

"Unjan?", Enhle asked.

"Ngiyaphila unjan?"(I'm well and yourself?), Enhle said before settling down as her lungs adjusted themselves to her relaxed state.

"I'm okay. Can I get you something?"-Enhle

"No thanks. I had a big lunch at work", she said with a friendly smile.

"Okay. I... I called you here because...", Enhle lowered her voice and looked around to see if anybody was minding her business. A suspicious frown grew on Sphe's face.

"My husband wants to marry you and... as a woman, a mother and a sister, I would like to warn you", Enhle said before hugging the empty glass she found on the table with her palms.

"Warn me?", Sphe dug into her statement and Enhle gave three slow nods. She then took off her glasses, carefully. She pulled Enhle's hand immediately ran to her mouth in shock at the sight of the red bruises on Enhle's face. Sphe shifted her face to inspect Enhle with her lips slightly parted. She was taken aback from everything her eyes were feeding to her brain.

"He... he did that to you?", Sphe asked. Enhle sobbed and gave a heartbreaking, "Yes". Sphe tried to touch her on the face but Enhle quickly pulled away when she felt her unexpected fingers on her beat face.

"No don't!", she shot out. She then cleared her throat when Sphe frowned in more confusion.

"It's just... it hurts. My whole face is burning", she explains before putting her glasses back on and fixing her doek.

"Have you tried reporting him to the police?", Enhle asked with great concern.

"He has friends in high places. It'll just make matters worse", Enhle stated before looking into her bag to look for a tissue as extra convincing equipment towards her act. Sphe placed her hands on the table and her eyes fell on red substance that had stained the tip of her natural nails. She got a perfect four when putting two and two together.

"Look, POWA is there to help you through such things. It's an organization that supports victims of women abuse. I am part of it and I can introduce you to--", Sphe suggested and bells began ringing in Enhle's head as her plan began going off plan.

"Look, I don't want to complicate this. Just, I don't want you going through the same thing as me. Manqoba is a very violent man when he doesn't get his way", she went on and unbuttoned her dress to show Sphe'sihle her breast.

"Get his way? What do you mean? Are you referring to.. wait. Does he like...rxpe you also?", Sphe asked as her voice lowered into a whisper and Enhle nodded.

"Yoh! This is too much for me. Thanks for letting me know. I appreciate it. And please, get help before you leave that marriage in a body bag", she said and leaned over to hug Enhle. Enhle couldn't manage the smile that forced its stretch on her lips over Sphe's shoulder.

...

Bab'Ngema's wife entered the royal premises, highly emotional and hyperventilating. Manqoba, as usual, was having his lunchtime talks with the guards standing on the pavement. They all rushed to her to see who was chasing her.

"U right ma?", Manqoba asked as she bent in front of him with her palms on her knees, trying to catch her breath.

"Izan namanzi"(Bring her some water), he said after raising his head briefly to the three guards. One of them ran into the house and came back with glass of water. He handed it to her before she gulped it down. Half of the water landed on her chest. Her hands were unstable and shaking out of control. They stood in front of her questioning each other through their eyes. She handed the glass back.

"UBaba uthe ngibuyene nenkosi ngokuphazama kweso"(My husband said I should come fetch the chief. It is urgent), she finally informed. Manqoba wanted to question her further but second thought alerted him that it would be a waste of time. He asked for the keys to one of the cars and they offered to take him. He was insistent on driving himself so they give in.

He got opened the front door for her and she got it. He went around the car, got in and drove off.

When they arrived, she led her to their bedroom. He laid on his back with a blanket over him, covering him to his nipples.

"Ngiyabonga nkosikazi. Likubusise idlozi"(Thank you my wife. May the ancestors bless you), he said and she gave a halfhearted smile before walking out and closing the door. Manqoba grabbed a chair and sat next to him.

"Mbulazi", he greeted.

"Makhosi"

"Sengiyahamba manje"(I'm now departing), he said and swallowed. He looked weak and dehydrated. Manqoba dropped his head, not knowing what to say. Somehow, the pain he felt when he heard of his father's passing crept over his heart again.

"Nje ngoba ngishilo, usayo thwasa uSkhumbuzo. Uzobuya azoqhubeka la ngicine khona. Kodwa, ufanele uwazi ukuthi uyinkosi manje. Lento kade uyiyenza yokuhlolwa nayisiphi isangoma kufanele iphele"(As I've said before, my son Skhumbuzo is still undergoing training. He'll come back and take over from where I've left. However, you must know that you're a chief now. This thing of yours of consulting with any other healer has to come to an end), he reprimanded softly and Manqoba nodded. This wasn't a problem now since he'll no longer be all over South Africa.

"Ungasabi. Idlozi lo Mbulazi lihlezi linawe. Futhi liyafuna ukuxhumana nawe nqo kodwa alikwazi ngoba uhlezi ucabanga izinto eziningi ngeskhathi esisodwa"(Don't be afraid. Your ancestors are always with you. They want to communicate with you directly but your mind is always occupied and all over the place), he said and Manqoba raised his face, surprised.

"Anjani amahlombe?"(How do your shoulders feel?), Ngema asked and Manqoba's hand reflexively travelled to his right shoulder to massage and squeeze it.

"Abuhlungu..."(They're painful), he replied.

"Ayimithwalo angithi? Aqale mini?"(They're heavy right? When did this start?)

"Ngalela suku lok'bekwa kwami as inkosi"(On that day when I was given the throne), he said, still massaging his shoulder. He ignored the feeling because he kept telling himself that it's mere exhaustion. Bab'Ngema smiled before he could exhale.

"Kuno muntu lo bebafuna ukuk'bonisa yena ngelela suku. Uhlezi uzibuza imibuzo njalo nje mawumbheka lomuntu lo wesfazane. Unazo zonke izimpendulo za yonke imibuzo ewunayo. Zifundize ukulalela. Siyabusa, Dedela idlozi likhulume nawe..."(There's somebody they wanted to show you that day. You're always asking yourself questions everytime you think of her. You have all the answers to all those questions. Teach yourself how to listen. Siyabusa, allow your ancestors to communicate with you)

Chapter Nineteen

Nothing is as quick as a mother's heed to her baby's cry. When the warder notified Gugu of Melo's distraught tone over the phone, she immediately commanded that she be given the phone. The warder slipped it into her pocket, and she left for the toilets. When she got there, she dialled Melo's number. She knew it off by heart.

"Ma?"

"Hi baby. Are you okay?"

"Yeah I'm fine now. How are you?", Melo knew he couldn't afford to entertain the tingling sensation around his eyes that was seducing his lacrimal glands. Gugu couldn't hear him quite properly amidst all the noise behind him.

"Are you sure? Vanessa says you didn't sound okay when you called..."

"I was just... arg I might as well tell you. Busi is gone. I can't talk right now I'm at school. I love you bye", he rambled and cut the call. He went back to the bench to continue his lunch with his bunch of friends. Gugu had no idea where to start processing everything he said. Was Busi gone as in relocated or was she gone gone? She stared at the phone as if it owed her answers.

...

Enhle came back home, humming her way in with her shoes, bag and a bottle of champagne in hand. She found Nokwanda wiping the cupboards in the kitchen. The whole place smelt of potpourri detergent.

"Sawubona wa Noks", she greeted the kneeling and busy help courteously. Nokwanda raised her face with a smile.

"Waze wjabule bo"(Someone is in a good mood). Enhle chuckled.

"Everything is falling into place. That's all I can say", she said and twirled around the open space in the kitchen, reaching for the thinnest champagne glass.

"Mmm", a speechless yet curious Nokwanda cheered and continued wiping the surfaces. The young queen made her way upstairs. She got there and took off the equipment to her disguise. She grabbed the bottle of micellar water to clean herself up.

After she was done, she poured herself a glass and called Bareng, her bestfriend. The call went unanswered. She took a sip on her sparkling beverage, contemplating whether or not she should call Sphe to put the last nail on the coffin housing her failing matrimony. Manqoba walked in.

"And what are we celebrating dear wife?", he asked before prompting her to get up so he could kiss her. She did and hung her hands over his shoulders, careful not to spill. He placed his hands on her waist.

"Nothing really. I'm just grateful. For my life. For you. Our kids. Health. Wealth. Konke nje", she said before placing a peck on his lips.

"Mmkay. How's Bareng?", his hands travelled to her bxtt after he asked.

"She's good. Still a shopaholic as usual"

"As if you're any better", he mocked and they both laughed.

"I'm glad you enjoyed your day. You should go out more thembalami it's seemingly good for you", he added.

"You know what that means right?", she asked with a smile that stretched to spark up her eyes. He puckered his lips and shook his head patiently.

"It means...", she played with the collar of his shirt, "I'll be maxing out your accounts", she stated and he dropped his face in a silent laugh.

"As long as you're happy. Look, I have a meeting with the council elders. It shouldn't take that long", he informed and kissed her forehead. She closed her eyes to float in her husband's affection.

"Don't drink too much okay?", he said before grabbing his jacket from the bed before leaving the room.

After the door clicked to confirm its shutting, she quickly grabbed her phone and dialled Sphe's number. She rolled her eyes as the phone rang and put it on speaker when she felt she was taking too long to answer.

"Hello?"-Sphe'sihle. Enhle cleared her throat to sweep the way for her deceptive voice to strut its way out her voice cords.

"Hey", she said softly. "I just called to thank you for today. Somehow I feel a whole lot better after talking to you"

"It was a pleasure", Sihle coldly said.

"Can you imagine? He was so insecure about where I've been all afternoon", she began sobbing.

"He does that every time?"

"Every single time I go out. He's so... controlling. Possessive"

Sphe held on to her silence.

"I think I might take you up on that POWA offer", she stated in an attempt to sound as convincing as she possibly could.

"I lied about that. I just wanted to see how you'd react", Sihle said and the panic bells rang again in Enhle's head.

"What?"

"Look I have to go. I have work to do", she said.

"You manipulative bxtch", Enhle hissed lowly before cutting the call. She dropped the phone on the stood up, pacing the room with her hands on her waist, trying to figure out what Sihle might be playing at.

..

"How are you feeling now?", Muzi asked Betso as he stood by the window on the living room.

"It's gone? What did the doctor say?"

"I'm glad to hear that I was starting--", his sentence was cut short when he noticed Melokuhle flying past and up the stairs.

"Look baby I'll speak to you later okay?", he said and went after him. He got to his room and found him changing into his homebody clothes.

"Boy", he said as he settled down on Melo's bed.

"Dad", he flatly said and slid his t-shirt down his upper body.

"Come sit here with me"-Muzi.

Melo dropped the hand that his white shirt in it and went over to sit next to Muzi lazily.

"What was going on this morning?"

"When? When I said life has to go on?"

"Yeah. It is too soon for you to be saying things like that"

"It hurt. I've cried. Now we move. I can't sit around and mope forever"

"All I'm seeing is denial"

"It's not. I've acknowledged her passing. Now I'm moving on with my life"

"This anger you have towards her is going to backfire in the future. She must've been really tired for her to do this. Let her go, peacefully", Muzi advised and Melo clenched his jaws, looking away.

"Son, if you carry on this way, you'll never have a healthy relationship before you actually deal with all the hurt that you insist on locking in on the inside of you", Muzi stated and Melo scoffed.

"Women can go jump to be honest", he said and rubbed his left eye, trying to remove whatever was in it.

"Are you going to the funeral?"

"I have schoolwork to do"

"Makhosonke..."

"Dad I know you mean well but I'd rather not talk about this anymore. Promise me that this topic is closed or else you and I are going to have a problem?", Melo said and his father just glared at him.

"Muzi?", he insisted.

"What?"

"Promise me that you won't speak about this anymore"

"And watch you self-destruct?"

Melokuhle exhaled heavily before standing up.

"You said she had a scar?", Muzi probed about the cicatrix and Melo stopped walking.

"Was she seeing anyone? A therapist maybe?", Muzi went on. Melo turned back.

"Mthokozisi once said so, yeah", he confirmed.

"Who's that?"

"A nobody"

"Work with me here?", Muzi pleaded and Melo dropped back on the bed.

"He was, I don't know, her friend? He's the one who called me to let me know about--, you know"

"What did he say?"

"What do you mean?"

"Verbatim. What did he say?"

"Why is it important?"

"Work. With. Me"

"Okay. Uhm... I don't know dad I don't even remember the things that happened that day after he called. He said

something about cyanide"

"Cyanide?"

"Yeah"

"Was he there when she...?"

"I don't know I don't think so. It wouldn't make sense", Melo said impatiently and Muzi stopped with his interrogation when he realized how badly it was beginning to affect him.

...

Two days later...

Buthelezi, Manqoba's childhood friend and private investigator walked in after MQ allowed entry. They greeted one another ebulliently and bumped shoulders in between. He greeted Muzi who was sitting with his laptop in the living room, having a meeting with his deputy over video call. Manqoba lead Buthelezi upstairs so they don't disturb him.

"It's been such a long time man I almost didn't recognize you", Buthelezi said and Manqoba laughed as they walked up the stairs.

"Stop being a clown. Anyway, you good?"-MQ

"I'm good I'm good. How are you, nkosiyami?", he teased. Manqoba smiled and shook his head before they could walk in.

"I've got no complains. So, ungiaphathelen?"(What do you have for me?), he said before directing him to sit on the chair.

"Well, the man, Khuzwayo? He's a medical doctor. His lady is a housewife", Buthelezi reported.

"Okay--?"

"The original report? The autopsy? It reveals that the girl, whatsherface?"

"Busisiwe? And what do you mean original? Is there another one?"

"Yes there's two versions and we both know what's up when this happens. It shows that she suffered a blow to her head but that was not the cause of death. Traces of cyanide were found in her blood but the amount was not enough to cause death, well atleast in the amount of time it took for her to die"

"Huh?! Is that all you found", Manqoba said in sharply shocked voice.

"Wait. There's more. My thing is, there was a suicide note in her absolute handwriting"

"So she did plan on committing suicide?"

"As it seems. You made mention of the fact that she was pregnant right? But listen, in the original postmortem report, the baby wasn't there"

"There was no baby?"

"Nope. Just the placenta"

"What's a placenta nawe?", Manqoba asked and Buthelezi laughed.

"Sorta like a blanket around the baby that helps with feeding and stuff"

"So, that means, there was a baby before?"

"Yes"

"Did she abort?"

"Uhm.. highly unlikely. I'm not sure but if she did, they should've taken out all the contents. A retained placenta can be dangerous"

"I've never been so confused in my entire life", Manqoba said and fell back on his chair.

"Where is this suicide note?"

"Under police custody"

"What do you think happened?"-Manqoba

"I've never come across such a case before. The cyanide is suspicious but suicide note? Also, why did the report need to be cooked if everything is straightforward? Where is the baby?", Buthelezi asked with his eyes on Manqoba. Manqoba stared back thoughtfully.

...

Later on in the afternoon, Manqoba drove from his barber to his father's resort to inspect the damage of the flooding that he was called for, after getting his haircut. When he got there, he found all the guests that were booked-in outside, watching as the water was being swept out. Some barefoot, others with their cornrows exposed and their wigs left inside. Others were made to evacuate whilst in the middle of a shower.

"What happened?", he asked one of the workers.

"You're here already? There was a pipe burst. Two pipes actually"

"So the whole place is flooded?", he asked and the guy nodded. He bent his neck in exhaustion and exhaled. His eyes fell on a barefoot Sphesihle who was rubbing her upper arms, in just a towel. Her hair was dripping wet.

Her mother was on the phone as she watched impatiently for the guys to finish.

"This cannot be a coincidence...", Manqoba lowly said to himself.

"Huh?"-the guy.

Manqoba shook his head out of oblivion and asked the guy if he cannot get him a blanket.

"I'll try the other house", the guy said and followed instruction. He took strides to the other half of the resort and came back with a fleece. Manqoba took a few notes from his wallet and handed them to him. He took the blanket with a subtle smile and walked behind the people who were all chattering and complaining. He got to Sihle and put the blanket over her, covering her whole.

She turned her head and was met by Manqoba's face, biting his lower lip in a smile. Her jaw almost dropped...

Chapter Twenty

Sphesihle tried her level best not to get lost in his light embrace.

"You must be feeling cold", he said with his large palms on her relatively small shoulders. She nodded.

"Unjan?"(How are you?), he asked, lowly and huskily.

"Ngiyaphila unjan?"(I'm well and yourself?)

He watched her lips move in a vocal dance. With so much unapparent fervor that blinded his brain from registering even when the rhythmic movements between the two lips came to a halt. He quickly snapped back to earth and stabilized his senses when he saw a smile growing on her face that slowly transitioned into a laugh. He bowed his head and laughed as well. Sphesihle's mother was still on the face at a short distance from them. He raised his phone to look at her and brought his eyes back. The resemblance gave their relationship away. There was no need to ask.

"Please apologize to ma on my behalf. For the inconvenience. Now let me go fix this mess?"

"Okay?", Sphe tried to say but her voice went on some andizi. If he wasn't watching her face, he wouldn't have caught it. Manqoba's phone rang from his pocket and he took the call. He looked at the screen once before going, "Buthelezi?", walking away.

After the rightful service providers were called to undo the flooded mess, Manqoba drove back home, thinking about the woman in a white towel. He laughed at himself when he had to squeeze his bulging crotch to get his genitals to behave.

After stepping out of the car, he saw his brother by the distant kraal and walked towards him. Muzi was just idly walking around with his hands in his pockets. Different people are inclined to different(even weird) smells. Some like the wet smell of soil after it rains. Some enjoy the fresh yet pungent smell of bleach. Muzikayise? Muzi oddly loves the smell of cow dung and manure. He stopped and stared when he saw Manqoba walking to him.

"Mfa' ka baba", Manqoba greeted. Muzi greeted back. They began walking together beside the empty kraal. The cows were out to live their best lives with their herd boy.

"Something strange happened today", Manqoba said and furrowed his forehead thoughtfully.

"At the barber?"

"The resort flooded"

"Aand that's strange how? These things happen. Or you think somebody was behind it?"

"That's not the strange part. The strange part is when I got there and found Sphesihle", he explained. Muzi laughed. Manqoba shook his head with smile.

"If you've been looking for a sign, there it is", Muzi said and picked up a stick for absolutely no reason.

"Is this what happened with you too?"-Manqoba

"Not necessarily but something along those lines. Sphakamile and I met in a supermarket, a supermarket I had no business being in in to begin with. If you ask me what I was looking for that day I won't be able to tell you. I

was even late for a meeting if I remember correctly", Muzi explained and Manqoba's shoulders couldn't stop moving up and down in laughter.

"I thought I knew love when I met uMbalenhle. Le engizwayo manje ayichazeki"(What I'm feeling now is ineffable)

"Trust me, I know exactly how you feel"

"Are you trying to tell me that you love uSpha more than you do uGugu?", Manqoba asked with one eye shut in suspicion. Muzi laughed at this expression.

"It's not that black and white bafo. I loved uMaDlamini with everything I had. However, when Sphakamile came into the picture, the whole definition of love took a complete different direction"

"You still haven't answered my question. What exactly are you saying Pacman?", Manqoba asked with his first buried in his armpits and his upper arms appearing inflated.

"I am saying, both have their different places in my heart and why is this suddenly about me again?"

"Ngiyay'buzela nje mina"(I am just merely asking), Manqoba said in a slothful yet mocking tone.

...

"Mama?", Betso called out to her mother who was indulging in tub of low fat yogurt.

"Hm?", she answered as she licked the spoon with her eyes on the television.

"I think I'm pregnant", she confessed and Violet dropped the spoon.

"Are you sure?", her mother got closer to her on the couch.

Betso nodded with a flushed face.

"O bone eng?"(What did you see?), she asked and took Betso's hands. The smile on Violet's face began to disappear when she remembered seeing Betso hooked to intensive care machines. She promised her to never bring it up for the sake of peace but somehow these news brought it all back.

"I don't know. Matswele aka. Discharge. I threw up this morning and I have this stubborn headache that just won't go away"(my breasts), she explained and violet took a deep breath out.

"And how do you feel?"

"I don't know. I don't want to get my hopes up only to get disappointed but also, I have this little fiery excitement in my heart that's making me anxious"

"Have you told your husband?"

"No I can't do that. I first have to make sure that I really am pregnant. If I'm not it'll be easier to deal with the disappointment by myself"

"Oh ngwanake hle"(my poor baby", Violet said before pulling her so Betso's chin rests on her shoulder.

"I can accompany you to go get a pregnancy test. I think I saw ClearBlue at the Kalapeng pharmacy?", Violet suggested.

"Now??", Betso asked in a what almost looked like panic.

"I think the sooner you know, the sooner you'll be put out of your misery?"

"I guess...", she said before Mxo and Lwa walked in from school, arguing as always.

"Boys, we're going out for 2 minutes, behave", Betso commanded before picking up her car keys. Mxo laughed as he loosened his school tie.

"Take all the time you need", he teased and his mom gave him a side eye before walking past him. Violet kissed the boys goodbye and they wiped their lips. She laughed as she walked out. Lwandile dropped himself on the couch.

"I'd like a bacon and cheese sandwich with orange juice thank you", Lwandile said before crossing his legs and pressing the remote. Mxo raised his eyes from his phone screen and dubiously looked at Lwa.

"It's not my turn to make lunch"

"Just do it I'll take a double turn", Lwa said as he concentrated on the recorded episode of Real Housewives of Johannesburg. Mxolisi rolled his eyes in annoyance before heading to the kitchen. He was busy admiring the selfies that Ndalo had sent to him while he pulled the loaf out of the bread bin, which kept sliding back down before he was using one hand. He checked to see if Melokuhle had replied to his text and he hadn't. He sighed and decided to just wait. He'd tried calling him in the morning but he declined his calls. He was replying to his texts throughout the day till now. Just when he was about to reply to Ndalo, his phone rang.

"Sne?"

"Outside njani manje when we spoke so nicely about this?"

He pinched his nose when he heard her sob. He then opened the gate for her before carrying on with his task, after leaving the door open. He placed the bread in the sandwich maker after stuffing in the contents and Sne walked in.

"Hey", she greeted before she could slide her hands into the front pocket of her hoodie.

"What's up?", he asked and backed himself against the oven.

"I just needed to vent. You're the only person I can talk to", she said, with puffy eyes.

"They left? Again?", he enquired, referring to her parents. She nodded.

"I feel like the only thing they care about is travelling and their honeymoon that lasts for 365 days", she offloaded before settling down on the high bar stool. Mxo looked at her waiting for her to let it all out.

"People think I have this best life because of the clothes, the parties and the cars but they don't know Mxo", she went on and wiped her tears with her sleeves.

"All my parents are good for is throwing money at me like I'm a plant that only needs currency to grow"

"Have you tried speaking to them about this like I advised you to?"

"How when they're always busy? My mom lives for designer bags and facials. My dad is always on the phone. If it's not that, they're both not around. Like now", she sobbed and Mxo took out the sandwich and almost burnt his fingers. He quickly dropped it on the plate and poured some juice. He placed the food on the kitchen counter and pushed them towards her, then went back to balance himself against the oven embedded into the cupboards. He unlocked his phone as he listened. As much as he wanted to be there for Sne, he also did not want to upset Ndalo by blueticking her.

A man in ravaged and soiled clothes appeared in the front door. Sne and Mxo exchanged puzzled looks. Mxo asked her if she closed the gate in a whisper and she shrugged in uncertainty.

"Sawubona baba?", he greeted the man who stood outside. The man just nodded and indicated with his hand on his stomach that he was hungry. Mxo just concluded that he was mute. Mxo gestured with his hand that he should come in. Sne had her nose shrunk in disgust.

"You're just gonna let him in?", she asked. Mxo ignored her as he looked for a plastic bag. He found one of his mom's reusable shopping bags and took it. She loved them but she would have to forgive him. He was planning to place food that did not need to be cooked in there for him, including the bread. He took out the other sandwich from the maker and placed it on another plate. It had already cooled down because he had left it open. He poured some more juice and placed the food in front of him. He showed gratitude by clapping his hands before digging in. Mxo then remembered that his father had clothes in a box that he mentioned that he wanted to give away. He ran upstairs to go look for those. Sne eyed his phone on the counter before pulling it towards her. The man paid no mind to her as he continued eating. He was famished and it showed. Sne's eyes landed on Ndalo's contact, saved with a red heart. She exited WhatsApp and typed her a text message.

'My girlfriend is back in town. I'm sorry but I can't do this anymore. If you can, please cut all contact with me. For your sake'

She sent the message and deleted it.

"What are you doing?", Lwandile asked her with suspicion before his confused eyes could fall on the man. She almost got a heart attack and dropped the phone on the counter.

"Nothing...!", she quickly absolved(or atleast attempted) herself of the crime, with her eyes wide open like a deer caught in headlights.

...

The siren went off and the learners went to the hall. It had been announced that Busi's memorial service would be held on that Friday when school was out. Melokuhle packed his books lazily as he began contemplating if he should attend it or not. The last thing he needed was losing the grip he managed to tighten around his emotions. Ambivalence hung over his head about attending the service.

"You coming?", his friend, Mongezi asked with his backpack over his shoulder. Melokuhle nodded in agreement to avoid an interrogation. He zipped up his bag and they flocked with the other learners towards the school hall.

The service had already commenced with Hillsong's Oceans playing lowly amidst the paper shuffles as her biography as a learner was being handed around. Mongezi and Melo took seats at the back with their eyes at the podium where Mrs Greenleef was speaking. Melokuhle texted his driver that he should come fetch him at 15h30, when the ceremony ends.

"...unfortunately, her parents couldn't make it however, we ought to honour her precious and innocent memory. In as much as this pains you as her friends, peers and classmates, it cuts my heart just as deeply as her teacher

and a mother away from home", she sniffed before carrying on with her speech. She turned back to lay her eyes on the large picture of the deceased learner displayed on the projector, the same wide-smile picture that's on the school yearbook.

"Busisiwe Cherubim Mlangeni, rest well and easy my angel", she whispered on the microphone before blowing a kiss to the picture. Melokuhle felt the muscles below his eyes tensing up, trying to push back the tears. He wasn't going to cry. He promised himself that.

"Are you ready?", Mrs Greenleaf asked Busi's female bestfriend, Bukamina. She nodded with bloodshot eyes before standing up from the front row and fixed her blazer. Melo made it clear in the morning that he wasn't going to speak. Almost everyone, including the teachers knew about his relationship with Busi. Bukamina walked towards the podium and held it tightly with both palms before speaking. She exhaled so deeply that the mic released a screeching sound, unpleasant to the ears. She took out her speech from the pocket of her shirt and ironed it with her palms on the glassy and metallic podium.

"Hi everyone", she greeted in a throaty voice and they greeted back in mumbles.

"I...", she wiped her tears with her fingers.

"Busi was no writer. She was also no poet. Busi was a singer. A beautiful one with an angelic voice at that. Our friendship was bred through music, so I am not going to read this. I would instead love to sing a song in loving memory of my late best friend", she expressed as she looked Mrs G in the eye as if asking for permission. Mrs Greenleaf nodded with a pained smile. Bukamina got off the stage and walked towards the piano. The guy who was behind it stood up to make space for her. She adjusted the mic and cleared her throat.

"Everything happens for a reason, by Zhané", she informed before placing her hands on the keys and took a brief moment before she began playing.

"Saying goodbye can be the hardest thing to do, when you really love someone...", her velvety voice blessed the room and erupted in almost everyone emotions that they were trying to suppress.

"You can say goodbye enough times to make the feelings last a lifetime, but all the memories never go away. Holding on, holding on, holding on, holding on.

Believing in love can be the hardest thing to do, after losing a friend as close as you. I need to feel, once again, like a child in love but I don't. I can't help but to keep holding on, holding", she went on and allowed herself to get lost in the song accompanying the memories.

"Everything happens for a reason, they say...", when she got to this part Melokuhle stood up and muttered an "I can't do this" to himself before leaving the hall. He left the school premises to go catch a taxi home. He came across Senzo and Menzi, brothers who happen to be his friends as well. They hollered at him as they shared a smoke. They then all walked together. However, Melokuhle never made it home.

Chapter Twenty-One

Melokuhle, Menzi and Senzo continued walking as the two shared an exhausted cigarette.

"Skeif?" (Want a puff?), Menzi said to Melokuhle with his voice sounding like it was coming out of a tightly closed Mayonnaise container.

"Nah ngi grand", Melo said without paying no mind nor sight to him and took out his phone. Menzi cautiously took out a syringe from his back pocket when they reached a more or less secluded area, careful not to break the needle and stabbed Melo with it on the neck. It took a second of anguish before he passed out. Senzo was looking around nervously to see if anybody was coming. Menzi made sure Melo didn't fall. They called their 'master' and alerted that the job was done. She arrived five minutes later in a blue BMW-X3 and immediately opened the boot. She signalled with her head that they should carry him into the car. Senzo stepped on the cigarette. They then did as instructed and she closed the boot before anybody could suspect anything.

"Good job boys!", she smirked and a stack of cash to Menzi before getting in the car and driving off.

"Yoh. I suddenly don't feel too good about this", Senzo remorsefully said.

"Stop with your whining. You know very well that we need this money"

"Aish. I'm just glad we no longer have to lure him from his house that would've been more suspicious. I just hope nothing points back to us"

"We're safe. I was already tired of watching him all the damn time. He was great guy but nothing in life is fair. Stop beating yourself up about this"

"Was? You're already speaking about him like he's dead. Do you even have a copy of a heart?"

"I do. It's just uncertified", Menzi said before picking up his backpack. Senzo shook his head and followed slothfully behind him, feeling the guilt-trip from his conscience towering over his murderous head.

...

Enhle arrived at Bareng's house for their late lunch date.

"Hey bestfriend!", Bareng cheered as she continued packing away her daughter's toys.

"Boo", Enhle greeted back before dropping herself on the brown leather couch.

"What can I get you to drink?"

"I see she's keeping you busy? Wine will do thanks"

Bareng laughed before she glanced at the colorful rattle worm in her hand, a warm smile growing on her face.

"I'm not complaining. Coming right up!", she energetically said before throwing it in the basket of toys and heading to the kitchen.

"You're a much stronger woman than I am. I don't think I'd be able to keep up with kids at this point, nevermind adopted ones", Enhle said and Bareng shook her bored head while she took down the large wine glasses, from the stand that held them in an upside down orientation.

"Anyway, how have you been?", Bareng changed the topic as she clasped on the corkscrew to the green bottle.

"I don't even know where to start..."-Enhle.

Bareng raised her eyes briefly in concern and continued turning the screw. The bottle finally opened and she carried it to the living room.

"How do you mean?", she settled down next to her and placed the fragiles on the coffee table. Enhle poured for the both of them.

"Remember I told you that my husband wants another wife and and and?", they faced each other with each of their legs hanging off the couch.

"Mm-huh?", Bareng confirmed before she could swallow down a gulp of her fermented beverage.

"Well, I tried to make the problem go away and I think it's about to backfire in my face"

"Mbali what have you done now?"

"I...", she said and bent her lip, "called her to lunch and made up a few things about him, hoping to deter her from accepting his proposal", she explained.

"What do mean you made up a few things? What exactly did you say to her?", Bareng asked and Enhle darted her eyes around as she took a sip of her white wine.

"Mbali!"

"Okay okay! I told her that he's abusive, sexually and otherwise", she confessed and Bareng's jaw fell to the couch.

"YOU DID WHAT?!"

"I know I know I'm sorry"

"Oh no darling you're apologizing to the completely wrong person Mbali how could you? I thought you loved him?"

"Duh? Of course I do hence I had to do damage control"

"You don't speak so ill about a man you love. I don't imagine uttering such vile and disgusting words about Sfiso when he's nothing like that! Just the thought of it makes me nauseous!", she shot out and Enhle threw her eyes to the wall.

"That was low. Even for you considering the rate at which WE women are being killed every hour in this country. Throwing such false accusations is despicable sies man Enhle"

"Listen, I know all about GBV and stuff. I was just trying to save my marriage spare me the sermon"

"GBV and stuff? This just goes to show how ignorant you are. You don't even know the difference between gender-based violence and domestic violence"

"Oh really? Educate me then shall you sensei?", Enhle mocked when she felt like her intelligence was being undermined and Bareng released a very heavy breath from exhaustion.

"Mbalenhle, you accused your husband, an innocent man of domestic violence and you see nothing wrong with it? The only reason you're stressed is because you might get busted?", she scoffed.

"I'm still waiting for you to educate me, smart one"

"You want an education? I'll give you one. Gender based violence, Enhle, is when you're harassed solely based on your gender. You're targeted just for the mere fact that you're a woman, a man or queer. Domestic violence is exactly what you accused Manqoba of, violence that occurs in a domestic setting like a marriage, for example", Bareng explained and Enhle rolled her eyes.

"I've been to hell and back with this man to just allow him to love somebody else"

"Allow him? Honey please wake TF up. You made excuses for him everytime he cheated. What's different this time? That he wants to make his cheating official? This is no excuse to be making jokes out of the traumatizing livelihood some women have to face every. single. day. You're undermining their pain and the severity and seriousness of this matter. Also, let me tell you this, when your man is after me as a woman, you have no business hunting me down. Fix your household and your man's cheating ways. If there's something you saw in him that attracted you to him, then sweetie we are all going to want it. Tough if he's not stingy with it. Then it means it's going to belong to the whole universe and its neighbors. No woman owes you fidelity on your husband's behalf!", she preached and fiddled with her wedding ring. She then took it off and stuck it in the air. "You see this? If Mandla steps out that door looking for another woman, I am putting it down on this very table and packing each and every thing of mine. Why don't you?"

"It's easy for you to say. You don't know shxt Bee. You don't know shxt!"

"I may not know shxt but I sure as hell know my worth"

"Coming here was a bad idea", she said before standing and gulping down her wine, before picking up her handbag.

"I made prawns?", Bareng mocked in a condescending and irritated tone.

"Yoh sala nama prawns wakho Bee!"(You can go jump with your prawns), Enhle shot out and let herself out.

"Ta ta!", Bareng yelled as she bent her back towards the coffee table, pouring herself another glass.

...

"I think we should go to a doctor instead", Violet said after Betso secured parking at the mall.

"Mara mama. Setsi re fihlile?!"(Now you suggest when we're already here?), she snapped and unbuckled her seatbelt. It slid off her front body.

"No hear me out. After everything, you should agree with me that this pregnancy is very delicate. We can't take shortcuts. Call your doctor before I do it for you", Violet commanded and took out her make-up bag to freshen up, blatantly ignoring Betso's alternating facial expressions. Betso eventually gave up and dialled Dr Masingita's number. She said she wasn't at the surgery however she could meet her there in 15 minutes. She then buckled up again before reversing and driving off.

They got to Masingita's office 9 minutes later and waited in the car. It was closed so they could not wait inside.

Dr Masingi parked next to them after a few minutes and they got out to greet her.

"I am so sorry for the inconvenience ", Betso said as they hugged.

"You know I'd cancel my honeymoon for you", the doctor said and they all laughed as she hugged Violet. She fiddled with her keys to find the right one as she took energetic strides to the door. She undid the lock on the burglar doors and opened up. She then switched on the light and locked them in for safety.

"Did you manage to remove that stain my way?", she asked as she went round the reception desk, looking for Betso's file.

"Yeah the sneaker cleaner worked real magic. It just needed me to leave it there for a while. I was so stressed mosadi", she stated and they laughed lightly. Masingita found the file.

"I'm glad. Please follow me", she walked in front of them and unlocked the glass but opaque door to her office.

"So, what is the matter that required me to stop my yoga?", she teased.

"Uhm... I think I need an ultrasound scan?", Betso said with a smile full of uncertainty.

" Hmm ultrasound? Why? Do we think we are expecting?", she said with a smile as she scribbled down the date on the file. Betso nodded when Masingita raised her eyes to steal a warm glance at her.

"O-kaaayyy...", she exclaimed before standing up and asking Betso to lie on the examination bed. Betso got up and laid on her back on the cold black leather. Masingita adjusted the chair so it was comfortable enough for her.

She switched on the machine and placed her hand in between her legs to pull her chair forward. She pulled Betso's t-shirt up and smeared the icy gel on it. She flinched and Masingita laughed.

"Can never get used to it", she said and began examining her stomach. The smile on her face began to disappear as confusion took over. She adjusted her self on the chair and looked closer. Betso stretched her neck to see what was baffling the good doctor.

"Masingita what's wrong?", she asked as she held the folds of her t-shirt up.

"Please give me a minute...", Dr M said as she continued moving and bending the instrument on Betso's stomach, sliding it across the gelled surface. Violet got up and came closer. Masingita scoffed in disbelief.

"Please tell me what's wrong?", Betso begged desperately.

"I've worked with this machine long enough to know that that's an almost fully developed baby", she said and they both popped their eyes.

"What?!", Betso and Violet simultaneously shot out.

"Yup"-Dr Masingi

"That is not possible. How? I have been getting my period normally every month"

"You confused that with spotting. It happens"

"It happens? Where did you get your degree?", Violet asked, still in utter disbelief. Masingita laughed.

"The baby hides, sometimes. It's rare but it happens", she explained and Betso couldn't get herself to digest this fact, severely agape.

...

Sne eventually left, a couple of minutes after the man. Mxo's phone rang and he smiled before answering.

"Hey baby", he said cheerfully as he went up the stairs with patience.

"What's going on?", she gravely asked.

"Uhm... with?"

"The text message I just received from you?", she asked in great annoyance.

"I'm sorry if this will upset you even further but I honestly have no idea what you're talking about sthandwasami"

"When I told you that I hate surprises I forgot to also tell you that I hate mind games!"

"Whoa please calm down sizokwazi ukukhuluma kahle"(...so we can talk properly)

He could hear her expelling a deep breath from the other end of the line.

"Let's start here. What did the SMS say?"

"Something to do with your girlfriend being back in town and me cutting contact with you for my sake"

"What the fxck?!"

"Yes"

"Are you sure that... dammit Sne!", he exclaimed before he could stop himself.

"So you ARE with somebody there?"

"Baby, I can explain. Please don't cut the call let me explain..."

Ndalo took another heavy breath.

"Sne and I are over but she has this tendency of coming here unannounced. I am sorry for all this. I promise you, ngeke kuphinde kwenzeke"(it'll never happen again)

"How do you expect me to trust you after this?"

"You have no reason not to. But I'll do anything to prove to you that I am not cheating on you Ndalo"

She did not reply.

"There's no one else for me besides you. Please trust me?"

"The two of you must be really close if she has access to your phone"

"She doesn't. That's another long story"

She mumbled something he didn't manage to catch.

"If this is something I have to tell you over and over again, I will. I don't mind"

"And what would that be?"

"That if you were a religion I'd be a martyr"

He softly said and she laughed unintentionally. He sighed from relief.

"Mciim stop making me laugh I'm mad at you"

"You'd quit that nonsense with immediate effect if I was near"

...

Buthelezi drove into the royal homestead. Muzi and Manqoba watched him while seated on the veranda in front of the house. He got out of the car and they stood up.

"Gentlemen", he greeted and they greeted him back.

"Hopefully you have something tangible for me today", Manqoba said and Buthelezi handed him a blue file.

"What's this?", he asked as he opened it. Muzi peaked through.

"That my friend, is Busi's file from her therapist"

"And you stole it?!", Manqoba shot out.

"I'm not dumb. Those are printed photos"

"Okay. Give me a summary"

"Alright. From what she confessed, the child was clearly being molested by her male guardian. The wife did not believe her at all. Or at least she did not want to. "

"Wait, you said the baby was missing when they ran the autopsy tests right?"

"Correct", Buthelezi said and gave a sure nod.

"So it is possible that the baby was his? Khuzwayo?"

"Could be. We'd need a DNA test for that. However, there's more..."

"Out with it?"

"I did some further digging and discovered that these people only began living here 7 years ago. They come from a village called Gezisoka, where they were accused of the murder of a 12 year old princess. The case vanished into thin air"

"When you say princess, you actually mean royalty right?"

"Correct"

"Let me get this straight, are you trying to tell me that these people harvest body parts or some shxt?"

"I dont know man I'm just giving you a rundown of what--"

"Mbulazi!", the driver slash guard came to stand in front of them panicked.

"What's the matter?"

"Unyamalele uMelokuhle. Nocingo lakhe livaliwe"(Melokuhle has disappeared. Even his phone is off)

He reported and they all exchanged suspicious looks before slipping into a frenzy.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Buthelezi handed Manqoba his car keys as they rushed to the car. They all drove out but had no idea where the Khuzwayo household was located. Their only hope was in the pedestrians they came across. The first two ones had no idea of who they were talking about, until they came across a teenage girl they almost ran into. She was highly distracted because of her earphones. When she recovered from her well-nigh heart attack, Muzi got out of the car.

"I'm so sorry I wasn't--"

"Forget that. Uyamazi uBusi Khuzwayo?"

"Busi Khuzwayo?", she asked in bafflement.

"Yeah. She recently passed on?"

"Oh! Busi Mlangeni. Ngiyamazi. Are you on your way to the funeral?"

"Yes but kinda lost. Mind giving us directions?"

"Err I'm not very good at giving directions. Let me just drive with you?"

"Thank you but please don't make this a habit"

"What?"

"Driving in cars that belong to strangers", he warned before they got into the car. She laughed.

"You might not know me but there's no way I wouldn't know about you"

"Still", Muzi said and she greeted the two men in the front. The talking GPS they'd picked up put them right on the gate of the Khuzwayos. There were a few people in the yard and a couple of cars packed on the street. They thanked her and she got off.

"Stay here and try to track Melo's phone. I'll be back", Muzi said before stepping out.

"You might need this?!", Buthelezi said before handing him his gun.

He arrived to a group of elderly women seated bxttflat outside in front of the house and a young woman in her mid-twenties came out with a tray of cookies and a pot of tea before he could get to them.

"Sawubona", he said softly although his chest was burning. He had a lightbulb moment at her sight. She greeted back.

"I'm looking for Mr Khuzwayo or his wife. Are they around?"

"My mom is not here but dad is at the back", she replied shyly like a lovestruck teenage girl, playing right in the arms of a man old enough to be her father.

"Oh so you're the daughter?", he asked with his trusted charming but nervous smile. A part of him felt like he was running out of time but he also felt she'll be useful if things don't go his way. She nodded.

"Do you have siblings? I'd like an older version of you", he said and she laughed.

"I do but I'm the oldest you can get. After that you'd just be a pedophile", she stated and he began feeling like he was wasting time.

"Please get your dad for me?", he said and she agreed. She took the tray to the women and went round the house. Muzi waited. She came back with him but took a different direction. Muzi was trying to gauge the guilt

in Khuzwayo.

"Khumalo?"

"Mind if we talk inside?", Muzi gestured with his head that they should go in and never bothered to greet back.

"Sure", Khuzwayo looked around briefly before leading the way. They greeted the ladies in the kitchen and took the direction of the main bedroom. Khuzwayo walked in first and Muzi followed, closing the door behind him.

"What's going on?"

"I'm only going to ask you this once. Where is my son?"

"What do you mean? I don't know wha--"

Muzi grabbed him by the neck and his breathing short circuited.

"I am not in the mood for whatever games you're trying to play. WHERE IS MY SON you fxcking mongrel?!"

"I swear. I have no idea what you're talking about. I have been home all day and--"

"Where's your wife?", Muzi asked, the veins in his neck and forehead out to volunteer for emphasis. Khuzwayo bit his tongue trying to explain with his short legs dangling in the air.

"You had better speak fast because you sure as hell don't want me finding her myself?" -Muzi.

Khuzwayo's phone rang from his pocket

"Please put me down?", he said in his strangled voice. Muzi placed him on the floor. Muzi sent a fist flying to his jaw when he was struggling to take the phone out. He spat out a single bloodied tooth.

"What was that for?!", Khuzwayo shot out with his palm on his jaw bone.

"For being a fxcking pedophile. You repulse me msunuwakho!"

The phone continued ringing. Khuzwayo took it out. Muzi took a glance at the screen and saw that his wife was calling. He took out the gun from the back of his belt and pointed it to his forehead. Khuzwayo shut his eyes when he felt the cold metal that could end him settling roughly on his skin.

"Answer it, put it on speaker and act normal", Muzi commanded. Khuzwayo swallowed.

"Ma... mama?", Khuzwayo let out in a nery voice. Muzi twisted the gun so hard it twisted his skin.

"Normal", he threatened in a whisper.

"Baba. Are you okay?", she asked in concern, with wind sinking and cutting into her voice.

"Yebo I am perfectly fine. Perfect. How's grocery shopping going?"

"Grocery? What--", she said before catching on that she probably had to lie for some reason, "Uhm I'm still at Checkers. I'll be done soon then I'm heading to Fruit and Veg. Is everything going well there?"

"Everything is fine. Take your time", he said and Muzi took the phone from him

"One, just one weak scar on any part of my son's body and you and your whole family will die a very painful death while dancing to slow gospel do you hear me woman?"

"Just how stupid do you think I am? I'm giving you one last chance to tell me where my son is or you'll soil your pants"

"Khumalo, Mbulazi..."

"For your sake, he had better be alive wherever you've kept him. Now listen to me and hear me well, you're gonna walk out of here with me and you're not going to make a scene ulalele? One wrong move and bullets will

go out flying. Who knows? One might land in your precious daughter's skull by mistake if she's lucky"

"Please don't--"

"Walk your funky a** out!"

He shot out before opening the door. Khuzwayo walked with him to the gate trying his best not to give anything away.

"You're seriously abducting me from a funeral?", he lowly asked.

"Continue talking and it'll turn into yours"

They got to the car and Muzi made sure he got in first. There were a few suspicious looks but that caused no change in mind. They drove off.

"I found his phone", Manqoba said.

"I found his daughter", Buthelezi said.

"Whose daughter?", Buthelezi asked.

"The daughter that goes to Bridgerton boarding school?", Manqoba said in a calm yet threatening tone of voice.

"Please no. I'll do anything just leave Sonia out of this?", Khuzwayo begged. Buthelezi handed Muzi the phone as they continued driving.

"Shame she's cute yena yaz. Imagine this adorable face in a tiny coffin", Muzi remarked as he held the phone in one hand and the gun in the other.

"I swear if you touch her--"

"Then what? What you fckng rpxist?!", Muzi threatened back. Khuzwayo thinned his eyes as his chest began moving up and down in exasperation. Night was now falling upon them. Buthelezi parked in front of a house.

"Is this where you kept him?", Muzi asked Khuzwayo who was stubborn enough not to speak.

"I'll handle it", Manqoba said and got out of the car.

"You don't know who's in there. I'm coming with you"

"We're all going out. Including you, phuma", Muzi said to Khuzwayo who was reluctant to open the door.

Muzi tapped the back of the gun on his head and reiterated the "Phuma!". Manqoba's phone rang after the two got out of the car. He raised his face to Muzi and said "Evelyn".

"Don't answer it"

The walked to the house forcing Khuzwayo to lead the way. He was still clutching on to his silence.

...

"Why is he not waking up? He should be up by now?!", Mrs Khuzwayo snapped to the sangoma.

"You should know. I don't remember giving out any instruction that he is supposed to be drugged with western medication", he jabbed back as he sat on a crate crushing his herbs. Mrs Khuzwayo was standing over an unresponsive and unconscious Melokuhle, whom they'd placed on a dirty and empty Super B sack. She clicked her heels and paced the rondavel in panic.

She then abruptly knelt next to him to check his pulse.

"No no no you cannot die on me boy", her voice was shaking as she ripped his shirt to feel his heartbeat.

"He'll no longer be of any use if he's dead. We need to extract his beating heart"

"What kind of a sangoma are you speaking of ifs? Aren't you the one who's supposed to be telling me what's going on?", she snapped.

"I've already told what I can see. I can only see your husband right now. I can't see the boy for some reason"

"We have to be quick before Khuzwayo cracks"

"I am telling you this for the 5th time. He needs to be awake for this ritual to be successful. The baby's blood is not working. We can't take chances with this one. His blood is strong. If we do this well, we'll be wealthy for life", he said as his evil eyes inspected Busi's bloody red foetus in the jar he placed it in, swimming in a yellow fluid. Mrs Khuzwayo desperately placed her ear on Melo's chest, desperately checking for a heartbeat. To her complete disappointment, his heart was completely silent. The sangoma stood up to check for himself.

"See what you've done?!", he erupted in fury. She was about to respond when he placed both his palms on his temples, screaming in agony as if he was being tormented by a demon.

"It is only a matter of time before they come here!", he informed.

"The boy needs to be buried and you need to get out of here!"

Chapter Twenty-Three

The three made Khuzwayo barge into the house so he enters first. Senzo immediately stood up swallowed whole by panic. They were surprised to find him there. They knew him as Melo's friend along with his brother but they had no idea where he lived.

"Senzo, where's Melokuhle?", Manqoba questioned.

"I don't-- I don't know...", he stuttered.

"But his phone is here. Why?"

"Uhm he must've forgotten it when he was here but I really don't know where he is I swear"

Muzi approached Senzo and he took a few steps back.

"Why are you lying? Didn't you parents teach you any better?"-Muzi.

Khuzwayo tried to run since he was now unguarded but Buthelezi quickly blocked him. Before he knew it, Muzi had already sent a bullet flying to his thigh. He yelled when it teared into his skin and hit his femur. Muzi pinched the bridge of his nose in great annoyance and asked once more, in a forced calm this time.

"Khuzwayo, where is Makhosonke?", Khuzwayo hisses in anguish at the pain that was emanating from his thigh. Muzi turned towards Senzo.

"You also want one of those?", Muzi asked him, referring to the bullets. "Trust me I am very generous".

Hot pee began running down Senzo's one leg through his grey shorts.

"It wa-- wa-- wa-- it wasn't me. Mr Khuzwayo and his wife paid us each R5000 to follow Melo and let them know of his movement so they could take him. I tried telling--"

"Us? Who's this us that sold my son for a mere R5K?!"

"I tried telling them that we shouldn't--"

"He's most probably speaking about him and Menzi. Where is he vele?", Manqoba asked.

"He's out. Please don't kill me", he begged and both his hands up in surrender.

"I don't know this boy!", Khuzwayo shot out and Manqoba scoffed. Manqoba then apprehended him without warning and twisted his arm to his back without warning. He twisted it so hard that everyone in the room heard it dislocating from its joint, along with the sound of his tendons and ligaments tearing. He then stabbed him with his knee and forced him to the ground.

"Please don't kill me I am--", Senzo tried to plead his case and Muzi quickly said "Shut up boy. I swear, if Melo is dead wherever he is we're using you as his underground pillow", Muzi said before dropping his exhausted self down on the couch.

Khuzwayo still refused to speak. Manqoba wiped his sweat with the back of his hand and took out his phone, with Khuzwayo still restrained to the ground, in severe pain.

"Sandile"-Manqoba, calling his cousin.

"Are you around?"

"Great. I need a small favour ne? I've sent you a couple of photos on WhatsApp. That little girl goes to Bridgenton boarding--"

"No no please don't--", Khuzwayo begged. Manqoba blatantly ignored him with his eyes on the back of

Khuzwayo's head.

"---Get her for me ASAP"

"No no don't harm her. Leave all that to me"

"OKAY! OKAY! I'll take you to him please leave Sonia out of this", Khuzwayo finally cracked. Manqoba twisted his arm some more and he yelped in pain. Manqoba cut the call and yanked him up. They walked out and left Senzo there.

"I can't walk...", Khuzwayo said in a breaking voice.

"Crawl", Muzi coldly said and continued walking to the car. Khuzwayo walking like a tortoise taxed Manqoba's patience. He pulled him by this jacked and dragged him to the car. After they were all in, Manqoba began massaging his shoulders when he felt a very heavy and uncomfortable load settling there.

"Are you okay?", Muzi asked.

"I'm fine. Let's go"

...

The car backed out of Mrs Khuzwayo's plan to flee. It just got stopped in the middle of nowhere. She heard the engine going dead and she saw the lights switch off.

"No no no you can't do this now!", she begged the machine as she inserted the key in and out, trying to revive it. She slapped her palms on the sides of the steering wheel and wiped her tears. She rummaged through her handbag and eventually emptied it on the passenger seat looking for her cellphone. She eventually found it and dialled her husband's number. No signal. She anxiously switched off the phone and restarted it to remind the network coverage that it had a job to do. She looked back trying to see if any car was approaching and road was empty. She slightly opened the door before changing her mind and closing it again, relinquishing all her bravery. It was way too dark for her to step outside. When she brought her eyes back, she saw a figure walking towards her direction. The figure had a tall straight stature with grey hair. Walking with its hands in its pockets. She squinted her eyes to see properly but her eyesight kept failing her in that uncomfortable dark. It took her one incomplete second to blink before she saw a wild cat pouncing onto her windscreen. The only thing she could see clearly were the yellow, illuminating wild eyes. She tried to see what it was. She screamed harder when the hunting leopard began slashing into the screen and cracking it. When one paw fell through the crack, the entire screen came crashing down. She lost all sense and ran out of the car, placing herself right in the hands of her demise.

...

The men drove to Gezisoka under the direction of Khuzwayo. He kept whimpering in pain and begging them to spare his daughter's life while trying to stop the bleeding from his thigh with his hands. They gladly allowed him to speak to himself. Muzi loaded more bullets into the gun and polished it in grimacing silence. He was trying to shut down all the intrusive thoughts of having to bury Melo, failing dismally as they wrestled their way into his

conscious mind. They finally arrived at the hut buried in trees with no fencing. The dog kept barking rabidly threatening to pounce. Muzi ran towards the open hut and it followed him. He shot it in the head out of irritation and it immediately collapsed into the dusty sand.

"Do you hear that?", Manqoba said cautiously with his hand raised into the air when the dog grew quiet. His other hand was holding tightly to Khuzwayo's wrist. They all stood quiet and heard what sounded like a shovel going into a heap of soil and filling a hole. They all ran to the back of the house and saw the back of an unrecognized body disappearing into the forest with speed. Manqoba slowly let go of Khuzwayo's hand and walked towards the small mountain of soil on the new grave.

"That can't be--", Manqoba said in shock.

"Don't tell me that's--", Muzi said and angled his head in disbelief. He looked up briefly before extending his hand and offloading almost all the bullets in the gun on different parts of Khuzwayo's body. Manqoba picked up the spade and dug up to see who was really buried there, although he already knew the truth at the back of his mind. He was hoping otherwise.

"That's enough!", Buthelezi said to Muzi as he tightly squeezed his shoulder. Muzi's hand fell down. He puckered his lips emotionally and shut his bloodshot eyes. He had no idea how to feel. He desperately wanted to cry to extinguish the pain in his heart but it just wasn't coming. The tears weren't there behind his burning eyes. Manqoba eventually managed to pull the boy out and dragged him to the leveled ground. When Muzi caught sight of him, he sent more bullets flying to the head of an already dead Khuzwayo. Manqoba wiped the drops of tears in both of his eyes with his thumb. Muzi placed both his arms on his head. Manqoba knelt next to Melokuhle and dusted the soil off his face and hairline. He took a deep sigh and pursed his lips.

Buthelezi dragged Khuzwayo's body until he reached the empty grave. He pushed him with his foot and he fell in. The corpse thumped against the ground and he began rolling his sleeves before picking up the spade so he could cover everything up. The two were still under the siege of shock and trauma. Muzi eventually dragged himself to his son's body. He placed his hand on Melokuhle's shoulder after squatting next to him.

"Ngikuphoxile Melokuhle. I only had one job. One job as ubab'wakho to protect you and I failed. Ungixolele Makhosonke ngihlulekile ukukuvikela. Ngixolele Khumalo.

Mtungwa,

Mbulaz'omnyama,

Wena wakaBhej' eseNgome,

Wena wadl'umuntu umyenga ngendaba,

Wena wadl' izimf'ezimbili ikhambi laphuma lilinye,

Lobengula kaMzilikazi, Mzilikazi kaMashobana

Shobana noGasa kaZikode,

Zikode kaMkhatshwa,

Okhatshwe ngezind' izinyawo

nangezimfushanyana,

UMkhatshwa wawoZimangele, UNyama yentini yawoZimangele
Mabaso owabas' entabeni kwadliwa ilanga
lishona..."

He went on and Manqoba bent his head and tightly shut his eyes as he felt his heart ripping apart. Melo began coughing weakly as his father recited his full clan names as a manner of saying farewell. He eventually coughed out a cupful of water. Buthelezi came closer and they all widened their eyes. Muzi fell to his knees and placed his hand on Melo's cheek. He raised his eyes to Manqoba so he can tell him that he wasn't dreaming...

Chapter Twenty-Four

Melokuhle continued coughing while trying to stabilize his breathing at the same time. Manqoba looked up to the heavens and clasped his hands together in gratitude.

"Hayi noh. I can die now. I have surely seen it all", Buthelezi mumbled to himself. Muzi pulled Melokuhle tightly to his chest and shut his eyes, faced with the difficulty of actually believing that this was not a dream and that it was indeed happening. Melo was still lost and disoriented.

"I'm really sorry you had to go through all this before I could find you", Muzi sincerely expressed.

"My throat is dry", Melo let out coarsely and weakly through his ashy and dry lips.

"Let's get him home", Manqoba said before standing up. Muzi got up as well and carried Melo in his arms, they then all walked to the car.

"The body? I'm suddenly not sure about just leaving him here. It might come back to us", Buthelezi said.

"What body?", Melokuhle asked after Muzi placed him in the back of the car.

"Now is not the right time to be talking about that", Manqoba whispered to Buthelezi. They all ignored Melokuhle's question and drove home. Buthelezi dropped them off and drove away. Muzi tried offering balance to Melo but he raised his hand and said he's fine. The guards were happy to see Melo back in a single functional piece.

"How are you feeling?"-Muzi

"My whole body is in pain but I'm fine. Is anybody going to tell me what is actually going on here?", he asked as they continued walking to the house. Evelyn quickly rushed to them when they opened the door.

"Care to explain why all your phones were off?! Where the hell have you bee--, Melokuhle, why are you so dirty? What is going?", she rambled in anger.

"Your guess is as good as mine", Melo said and proceeded to the stairs. Manqoba dropped himself on one of the bar stools in the kitchen and Muzi sighed, heavily. Evelyn was still waiting for an answer with her hands in the air. She dropped them and slowly walked towards Muzi when she realized how distressed he looked. Her eyes travelled to Manqoba who had his bowed head in his hands. She continued looking for answers, looking the stairs and back at Muzi, confused.

"Why do you look so terrible? What happened?", she softly asked and Muzi walked past her, following Melo to his room. Manqoba had no choice but to take up the task of filling her in.

...

Melo turned on the faucet in the shower and entered in there with his soiled school clothes. His shirt was far from being recognized as white. Muzi heard the water running and decided to give him some time to himself. He walked back downstairs. Evelyn and Manqoba were sitting in the living room, with her hand on her mouth as the news struck her dumbfounded. She finally closed her mouth and fell back on the couch. Muzi dropped himself down on the single couch at the corner.

"How is he?", Manqoba asked. It took Muzi a moment before he could answer.

"I am waiting for him to get done showering. I don't know", he informed.

"Do you think he's aware of what almost happened to him?"-Manqoba

"I think he's mostly affected by the fact that we pulled him out of a grave. I also wouldn't know how to feel if I was buried alive", Evelyn said in a low yet shocked tone.

"I'm still trying to understand what actually happened here. Why did they bury him if it's his body parts they wanted?", Muzi questioned.

"Only he can answer some of the questions we have. Which I also don't think is a good idea to ask", Muzi said.

"Let me go make him something to eat. He must be starving", Evelyn stated and quickly got up. Manqoba told Muzi that he was going to check on Enhle since she's an early sleeper. Muzi just nodded. Melokuhle walked down the stairs looking more decent and humanly, just as his grandmother was about to go up.

"Come. Come and eat", she said as she took quick steps in front of him back into the living room. Manqoba sat back down, plastered in concerned curiosity. Melo uncovered the plate and grabbed a spoon. His grandmother had placed four pieces of chicken on top of the samp swimming in stew soup. The food was overwhelming and the potatoes halves were not even trying to unburden this fact.

"I saw umkhulu", he dropped his statement right into center of the atmosphere suffocated by damp and grey morosity.

"Hm?", Evelyn said before settling down next to him. Muzi stood up from the far couch to sit across them. Melo continued chewing.

"I was with him and the others, including the one that looks exactly like you", he explained and raised his eyes to Muzi. He'd seen him in old black and white pictures. Muzi shifted his sight to his brother

"Where?", Manqoba asked. Evelyn dusted the particles of soil she saw in his wet hair.

"I don't know that place. It was all so messy and confusing. What I remember is that I felt like I was under water. I suddenly feel like a lot has been wiped off my memory or something", he explained with all their eyes intently focusing on him. He just continued eating.

"Maybe you forgot because they don't want you to remember?", Evelyn said softly and placed her hand on his shoulder.

"How I wish I could see him too...", she let out as her mind swirled into a reverie.

"I still don't understand what really happened here"-Muzi

"Makhosonke?", Manqoba probed.

"Hm?"

"You'll have to forgive me for this but are you sure that baby was yours my boy?"

Melokuhle raised his puzzled face.

"What do you mean?"

"No man something doesn't quite make sense here. If they managed to get the baby out of her for these sick rituals then why did they still need you if the baby was your blood?", Manqoba tried pulling the puzzle pieces to the center of the table of sense.

"I don't think he would've went through all that morning sickness if he wasn't the father?", Evelyn dropped the missing piece that Manqoba had neglected.

"Ma has a point", Muzi commented.

"Whose baby did you think it was?", Melokuhle asked. Manqoba opened his mouth then immediately closed it when he realized that Melo didn't know. .

"Why do I feel like there's a lot you're keeping from me?", Melo's question was punctuated by the sound of the spoon dropping on top of the ceramic plate.

"Dad?"-Melokuhle.

Muzi put his hand behind his neck, trying to figure out where to start. Melo popped his eyes and jerked his head to indicate that he was impatiently waiting for an answer.

"Eish boy listen... Buthelezi did some digging aand, he found that Busi's autopsy report was fabricated to hide a few things...", Muzi explained in the gentlest way he found possible. A frown was shrinking on Melokuhle's face.

"Number one, the cyanide that her 'parents' lied about, the amount that was in her blood was not enough to cause death in the space of time the second autopsy report stated. Number two, her cranium suffered a blow like she had been hit with something. Number three, the baby was missing when her body was collected for a postmortem. So, we don't think she committed suicide. She was probably killed or the induced abortion went wrong. He also found that they were not only abusing her emotionally, but sexually too", Muzi went on. Melokuhle lips were incredulously parted. He stood up from the couch and shortly settled back down on the armrest.

"But... that doesn't make sense", he lowly argued. They all kept silent, with absolutely no idea of what to say next.

"The things she said to me that day, it took me a stupid while to realise that she was actually saying goodbye to me. Why didn't she run, tell me or do something if she knew that they were planning to kill her? Why didnt she tell me that that bastard--!"

"People tend to know when they're about to die. She might have said goodbye without herself even realizing it. Death operates like that sometimes", Evelyn tried to console his heart.

"But my thing is, why was there a suicide note? In her own handwriting?", Manqoba asked.

"Maybe... maybe she was planning on taking her life, they found out what she was planning to do then got mad because they needed the baby. Her killing herself was going to derail their plans I'm guessing?"-Muzi

"OR, the plan could've been about Melokuhle from the start. Maybe she was a disobedient pawn"-Manqoba

"Wait, you mean, they could've been using her to get to Melokuhle then she somehow messed up the plan?"-
Muzi

"Nah that's not true", Melokuhle objected while shaking his head.

"Son, she was probably being used to get you to them, then fell in love, resulting in her backing out of the whole plan"

"Yazin, let me just go to bed", Melo said before shooting up to leave. Muzi tried getting up to follow him but Evelyn stopped him.

"Give him the space he needs to digest this. It's all too much for the boy", she suggested.

"My main concern right now is that bab'Ngema is very sick and Makhosonke needs to be cleansed", Manqoba

gravely stated.

"I'll call Bayede. And Hlengiwe. They'll know what to do", Evelyn assured before releasing a very loud sigh. She unlocked her phone for a quick glance at time.

"It's heading to twelve. The two of you have had a long day. Go get some sleep", she said to the two and they shortly stood up. They then took their silent trip upstairs. Muzi headed to his room and Manqoba took a detour to his study.

...

Betso kept changing postures in front of the full-body length mirror, studying her tummy with a smile. All along, she thought the small paunch she saw protruding was just her gaining weight. She was only wearing her gown over her naked body. She pinched her eyebrows when she remembered that the day was ending and Muzi was still "busy". He promised to call via SMS when he was done and that was hours ago. She fixed her night robe and tied it before picking up her cellphone on the bed. She slowly settled down on the bed while waiting for him to pick up. He answered in a languid, raspy voice.

"Mommy?"

"Baby. Are you okay?", Betso asked and he exhaled, deeply.

"I'm alright. I'm just tired that's all"

"What were you doing?"

"Can we talk about it when I get home?", he gently dismissed.

"Now I'm worried. What is going on?", Betso pleaded for the truth.

"Melo was kidnapped but he's fine now"

"Kidnapped?! By who? Why?"

"It's a very long story sthandwasami I'll tell you all about it in person okay"

"Should we come down there?"

"See why I didn't want to tell you?"

"But baby--"

"I'll be back soon and I'm coming back with him. There's no need. I'm not even sure if you should tell the kids ngoba omunye ikhanda lakhe liyashisa"(One of them is a hothead)

"They'll find out anyway"- Betso. He went quiet for a moment.

"Baby?"

"Look let me... I don't feel like talking right now. I'll call you when the sun rises. Ngiyak'thanda uyezwa? Take care of yourself and the kids for me"(I love you okay?)

"I love you too", she reciprocated in great concern and just watched the phone screen when the call went off.

She tried to call Melo but his phone was off.

"Are we ever going to know peace in this family?", she questioned her meta self. Meta-Betso did not have any answers.

...

The sun rose on Muzi's watch. Not even once did he shut his eyelids to give his body the rest it desperately needed. His mind insisted on being busy as a beaver as he laid on his back, on his bed, with both hands under the back of his head. He stood up when the sun's brightness invaded his room. The curtains weren't even closed. He was still fully clothed, including his shoes. He stood up and went to the en suite to wet his face. After that, he walked to Melo's room. The light sleeper in Melo raised its sleepy head when he heard his door clicking open. He walked in and Melokuhle had no choice but to sit up. Muzi settled down on the bed as well. He raised his eyes to study the irritated Melokuhle.

"Come with me to Joburg?"

"Not this again"

"You need to be where I can see you Makhosonke"

"You think MQ is doing a bad job?", Melo said and laughed.

"This is not a joke"

"Dad, you can't protect me all the time. I could still die while living in your house. And I'm in matric now. I can't just up and leave. No school will take me now"

"There's ways around everything"

"No. I know what you're thinking. You can't throw money at everything and every problem. It's midyear now. Relocating will just fxck up my life"

"Melo--"

"No dad. I know you're worried about me but I'm fine here"

"Why are you so stubborn?"

"It comes with being Muzikayise's son", Melo stated and played with the switch on the side lamp. Muzi shook his head and took a deep breath.

"I'm not stupid dad. I know the people who did this were dealt with. I heard that conversation yesterday.

Nothing is going to happen to me now", Melo defended his case and Muzi just looked at him with fatigue in his eyes. Evelyn knocked once and peeped through.

"The cops are here", she notified. Muzi sighed before standing up. Melo stood up after him.

"No stay here. Ngiyabuya"(I'll be back)

"Dad please stop treating me like a child. I have an I.D and a full set of teeth", he protested. Muzi had zero energy to be going back and forth with a product of his nxts. They got downstairs and found two men in blue conversing with Manqoba while standing.

"What's going on?", Muzi asked.

"We have a few questions for you regarding the disappearance of Mr Khuzwayo. He was apparently seen walking out of his yard with you but never came back", the one officer said.

"His wife is also missing", the other added.

"I have no idea where he is. Or his wife. I went over there to ask him what I can do for the family since the deceased was my son's girlfriend. I just went there to offer my condolences and he asked me for a lift. I don't

know where he headed from there", he explained coolly. They both looked at each other and back at him dubiously. One of them had a small notebook in hand and a pen over the white striped surface. Muzi extended his hands and said, "Arrest me if you feel it's necessary"

"Do they have a warrant for that?", Manqoba asked contemptuously.

"That won't be necessary. However, we would like to ask you a couple of questions if you don't mind?"

"Ask away", Muzi said and directed them to the couches in the living room.

...

"Fano, someone is here to see you?", Enhle said while standing against the frame of Melo's door. Melo slightly closed the laptop screen and asked who it was.

"She says her name is Hlubi. I can turn her away if you don't feel like visitors?"

"Nah it's cool. Where's grandma?"

"She's out. Why?", Enhle asked with a slight laugh due to the fact that Evelyn never wants girls upstairs.

"Nah it's nothing like that", Melo defended. "Tell her to come up. I don't have the energy to go down the stairs"

"Alright. Just keep the door open", Enhle warned and raised her index finger to him. He laughed and nodded. He pushed the laptop screen up and continued with his machination. Hlubi walked in and he closed the laptop again.

"My nxgga my nxgga ", she greeted and closed the door. She dumped herself on the bed. Melo stood up and hugged her before sitting down on the bed with her.

"You good?"-Hlubi

"Is that a trick question?", Melo asked and laughed lightly. Hlubi pursed her lip and brushed his thigh.

"You'll be aight. I was hoping to see you today at our Saturday class even though I wasn't betting on it"

"You came straight from there?"

"Nope. I went to drop my bag at home first. You know that physics study guide is not a joke on the shoulders", she joked around and he laughed. "The squad was heavily incomplete today I felt so fxcking lost kwaphela konke ukuphapha"

Melo laughed harder.

"But I always warn you about picking on people hoping we'll always bail you out. Who else wasn't there?"

"Mordecai and Rigby", she informed, referring to Menzi and Senzo. Melo nodded with pretence-filled nonchalance.

"On a serious note though, how are you holding up?"

"Taking each day as it comes"

"I can come with you to the funeral if you like?"

"Nah there won't be any need for that", he said and stretched his arm, massaging it with the other. Hlubi admired his bare upper body and puckered her lips. Melo noticed she was staring.

"What?", he asked and continued stretching.

"Hayi nix", she said shyly, laughed and looked away.

"You sure?"

She nodded.

"There's this new series on Netflix and--"

"Err, I'm really not up for that right now", he let her gently and stood up, indicating that it was time for her to leave. He suddenly felt like she was crowing his little peace. She understood and stood up, ironing her purple summer dress with yellow flowers, with her palms. They patiently and slowly walked to the door while chattering about the class he missed. Before he could open the door, she quickly wrapped her hands around his neck on impulse and hugged him. He hugged her back.

"It's gonn be alright", she whispered. He just nodded. They slowly broke the hug and she stared into his eyes, distracted by his bushy brows and long black lashes. She stole a kiss from him and tasted his lips.

"What are you doing?", he coarsely asked. She went in again and deepened the kiss.

"Hlubi...", he broke the kiss and removed her hands from his cheeks.

"This ain't right and you know it", he said.

"You need a release and I'm here for you so why not?", she asked and stared, waiting for an answer. Her hands travelled down his bare sides. He stared back for a while and felt himself sustaining an erection under his jean and briefs. He attacked her with a breathtaking kiss and backed her against the wall next to door. She gladly received it. He pulled her thick, yellow legs up and grabbed both her bxtt cheeks while devouring her lips. He then suddenly got hit by a wave of regret and broke the kiss. He placed her down and shut his eyes with his forehead against hers.

"Go home Hlubi", he said coarsely and opened the door for her to leave.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Albeit prisoners parted ways with freedom, their basking in sun days provide a taste of something a little similar. Some played soccer whereas some just stood and exposed their skin to the warm sun. Gugu sat by herself, reading the second chapter of the new book she had just received from Bongiwe. Each time she's done with a book, she hands it in to the delivery man for a new one. She sat on her crossed heels with her back against the rays of the sun, in her orange prison suit. Just when she was about to turn a page, her disreputable cellmate dropped herself too close to her that that Gugu felt the harsh rub on her shoulder. She hemmed Gugu in with the rough cut wall. Gugu rolled her eyes and sighed.

"Spinach, do you mind?", she complained in an undertone.

"Ah. I thought you needed company, slayqueen", Spinach jeered at her. Gugu sucked her teeth and continued reading, or at least tried.

"You're very special do you know that?", Spinach remarked.

A flat "Oh?" floated off Gugu's tongue.

"After all these years I thought you'd have given up on being a snob. I guess it's in your blood", she said and glared at Gugu for a reaction. Gugu did not respond.

"Or is it because you think this prison is your castle?", she continued to taunt. Gugu raised her eyes ahead and let out a sharp sigh.

"Nah nah I'm not fighting waboh? I actually have a proposal for you Elizabeth", she said with minor enthusiasm.

"Elizabeth?", Gugu did not understand where this sudden name was coming from.

"Queen of the castle. Nestum baby", Spinach said and gave her a double wink. Gugu rolled her eyes and shut her book.

"So? Are you not going to ask me what I have in my brilliant mind?"

"I'm not sure I want to know", Gugu said before collecting herself to stand. Spinach pulled her down quickly and held her in place, tightly locking her fingers around Gugu's upper arm.

"You're hurting me", Gugu hissed through her gritted teeth, lowly so they don't cause a scene for the warders to pick up.

"Stop being stubborn and listen to me. I have a way that can get us both out of here", she whispered and darted her eyes around to ensure that there were no unsolicited extra pairs of ears spectating the conversation.

"What?"

"You have all these fancy bathing products but you don't wash your ears"

"Why are you telling me this? If you wanted to escape you would've. So what do you want from me?"

"I get us out of here and you fund our freedom. I know you have the money. I have no where to go from here", Spinach explained.

"Huh?"- Gugu

"So you do have wax in your ears?", Spinach said impatiently and placed her hands over her raised knees.

"When you say I fund our freedom you mean I should take up the responsibility of supporting you?"

"Not forever man. Just until I find my feet"

Gugu dropped her chest and bent her lip thoughtfully.

"Even if I wished I could, I can't"

"What do you mean? You live like the magistrate's wife in here I know you definitely have the money"

"It's not that simple"

"Now you want me to beg you to explain?"

"Spinach I do not owe you anything"

"Suit yourself", she shot out irritably and stood up.

"Okay WAIT!", Gugu said then cleared her throat. One of the two warders sitting on the black plastic chairs with steel legs by the entrance grew suspicious. Spinach sat back down.

"Open the book and pretend as though you're explaining something to me", Spinach instructed. Gugu did just that.

"Look, I should've been out of here a long time ago but my husband insists on making my life hell. If I get out of here, I'm going to lose everything. Including the privileges you think I have"

"Wait. You mean to tell me that he's the reason why you're in jail but he's also the reason why you're comfortable in here?"

"Yes"

"Make it make sense"

"I also don't get it"

"A ruthless sweetheart?"

"Something like that"

"He sounds like an influential someone. What did you do to the man?"

"It's a long story"

"Does he ever come here?"

"No. He sends people"

"It sounds to me like this man still loves you. He just won't forgive you for whatever you put him through", Spinach said and Gugu looked away, slowly getting consumed by her own thoughts, and regret.

...

Muzi and Manqoba arrived in Gezisoka to clean up their mess. The hut was secluded, making it easier for the job to be done during the day. The house was still wide open, just as they'd left it. Manqoba walked in first while Muzi inspected the outdoors trying to figure out how living in that place could be normalcy for a person.

"Muzi!", Manqoba called him into the hut. He went in running.

"What's going on?", he asked as Manqoba inspected a jar while squatting on the floor.

"Is that...?", Muzi incompletely asked as he got closer. They inspected the jar and saw the small foetus floating innocently in the transparent container with a rusted gold lid.

"Should we even be touching the things in here?", Muzi asked.

"I wasn't until I saw this"

"Think we should take it home with us? To bury it?"

Manqoba sighed.

"I don't know yaz"

"Let's just hold on to it and burn everything else. It's our blood at the end of the day", he said and threw his eyes around to see what else was in there. His sight bounced on a ton of jars on the wooden shelf at a corner. Tails of different wild animals bedecked the wall painted with dung. Manqoba stood up with the jar and walked to the enclosed van. He came back with twenty litres of petrol, a roll of black refuse bags and duct tape. Muzi was digging up the grave. He found the spade right where they'd left it. Manqoba went around the house to help him. When a hand appeared, he stopped digging and yanked Khuzwayo out of the soil. Manqoba pulled three bags over Khuzwayo's upper body and did the same for the lower body. They sealed him up with the grey tape on several parts of the corpse. He placed him over his shoulder and walked to the van while Muzi covered the grave to hide the soil that had blood on it. He went back to the front and emptied the petrol into the hut and around it. "Uphi umatches?!" (Where's the match box?), he yelled to Manqoba who was on the phone. He continued with his phone call as he opened the door to the passenger seat to look for it. He found it and walked toward Muzi, with the intention of being at a distance close enough for the projectile to reach him when he threw the yellow box. Muzi picked up from the ground and set the house alight. They then drove to their trusted morgue so they could get the corpse incinerated, dodging the traffic cops.

...

"Nurse Khumalo?", a baritone voice called out from behind Enhle as she waited by the counter to fetch her takeaways at Joe's. She stopped playing with her car key and turned back.

"Dr Maluleke! Oh my God hi", she said with a wide smile as she leaned in for a hug. The tall individual bent forward to accommodate Enhle's height, especially because she wasn't wearing heels.

"Still beautiful as ever", he complimented. The familiar scent hit her nostrils and she hugged him longer than she should've have. He smelt exactly like her husband did. She broke the hug and lifted her hands off his muscular humps over his shoulders. The man certainly never misses gym day.

"Uhm.. I'm sorry. How are you?", she asked, struggling to collect the pieces of herself she lost in that hug. He gave her a far-from-obvious smile.

"I'm good. Can't complain. We miss you at the hospital", he mentioned. She laughed lightly. Her order arrived and she received the large paper bag. Careful with the contents, with her phone underneath and her key dangling from her index finger.

"It was nice seeing you Muhluri", she said with a smile, taking infinitesimal steps as she spoke.

"Likewise", he said with a brief smile before turning away to answer his phone. His wedding ring caught her attention for some odd reason. She shortly walked away.

...

Manqoba and Muzikayise went back home after the illegal cremation. Muzi greeted Enhle graciously before proceeding up the stairs. She wiped her oily hands with a serviette and received a kiss on the cheek from Manqoba.

"How was your day?", he placed his hand on her waist and picked up a wing from her plate.

"Nothing out of the ordinary. Where have you been?"-Enhle

"Out", he said and continued chewing.

"Out?"

"Yes. Out", he said and they shared a stare.

"Mmkay", she said suspiciously before pulling her phone.

"Aren't you going to make me anything to eat?"

She got off the bar stool.

"Nokwanda!", she yelled for one of the helps as she walked away and climbed the stairs as her thumb made patient interactions with her phone screen. Manqoba shook his head, stepped over to the fridge to grab a bottle of water. One of the guards walked in and greeted him. He handed him the LangaDaily newspaper and left. He placed it on the table with no immediate intention of reading, but the front page caught his eye as he drank his water.

"Mzilikazi?", Nokwanda humbly greeted and questioning the reason for her summon at the same time. He just told her to "nevermind" and read the headline.

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN SAVAGELY MAULED BY MYSTERIOUS BEAST IN THE OUTSKIRTS OF GEZISOKA.

His gut was somehow sure that the woman being spoken of was the wife of the Khuzwayo scoundrel. He took the paper and the bottle of water and made way to his office. The guard came back to report the arrival of visitors when Manqoba was halfway up the stairs. He sighed and came back down.

"Mbulazi, kune ngxabano la ngaphandle ngenxa yocezu lomhlaba"(There's a land dispute outside), he reported and Manqoba exhaled loudly. He wasn't in the right mood.

"Okay kulungile. Bangenise"(Let them in). He walked to the throne and dropped himself there. His hand reflexively travelled to cover his eyes so he could gather enough strength for whatever was to be discussed. The two men walked in, greeted the chief and were instructed to sit down.

They both spoke at the same time and Manqoba kept quiet with his head against the leopard skin that covered his black highchair, his hand balancing his chin. His eyes speedily travelled from one to the other as a warning and they kept shut.

"Kwenzenjani?"(What's the problem?), he asked flatly.

"Mbulazi. Mina ngegama ngingu Cele. Bengihlala la eminyakeni eyishumi edlule, ekhaya. Ngiwu mfana wokugcina kithi. Kuye kwenzeka ukuthi ngihambe. Ngithe mengibuya namhlanje ekuseni, ngathola lomlisa enethezekile emzini wami"(My name is Cele. I used to live here 10 years ago. It then happened that I had to leave. When I came back this morning, I found this man living in my house), the first man explained.

"Ngiyithenge ku mfazi wakhe lendlu. Ngeyami manje. Futhi ngiyakhe ngabusha ngoba vele beyibhidlika"(I bought this house from his wife. It is mine now. I demolished his ruins and built mine), the other man defended his case.

"Ungubani?"(Who are you?)

"Oh mina? Ngingu Dlomo Mzilikazi"(I'm Dlomo)

"Ubani oyiphethe i title deed? (Who has the title deed?)

"Yimina", Cele informed.

"Yena ukuphi umfazi wakho?"(Where's your wife?)

"Siye sa hlukana engakashoni nkosiyam"(We got a divorce before she died my king)

"Manje azange akutshela ukuthi uyidayisile lendlu yakini?"(So she never told you that she sold the house?)

"Cha"(No)- Cele

Dlomo stood up and showed Manqoba the 'before and after' pictures of the houses. The first one had no windows and a roof. The paint was also coming off. The second one is a decent and recent 4 roomed house.

"Okay. How about... ngikusikele olunye ucezu kwenye indawo wakhe khona ngabusha?", (... I cut you another piece of land somewhere else so you can build there?), Manqoba suggested to Cele to extinguish the fire.

"Ngeke kulunge. Kahle kahle bengeke ngibuye mina la. Kodwa uyakhala umkhulu uthi simshiye nabantu angabazi"(My grandfather is complaining. He says we left him with people he doesn't know)

"Nimngcwabe egcekeni?"(You buried him in the yard?)

"Hayi uqamba 'manga manje. Akukho thuna laphaya"(You're lying now. There's no grave there)-Dlomo

"Ithuna likhona. Into engekho itshe"(The grave is there. What's not there is a tombstone)-Cele further explained.

Manqoba sighed. He felt a cluster headache covering his head.

"Dlomo, Ngiyayizwa indaba yakho and futhi iyazwakala. Kodwa ukuthengiswa kwale ndlu kwakungekho emthethweni. Noma ungaya enkantolo, bayokutshela yona lento engiyishoyo manje. Manje ngoba kufanele ngibe nobulungiswa, uCele kuyofanele akukhokhele for lendlu le entsha ngoba naye wenze ubudedengu. Awuhambi uyishiye inganakiwe indlu. Ufuna abantu abazo renta to avoid izinto zokfana nokuthi iygebengu zifihle impahla entshontshiwe kuyo lendlu. Ngiyathemba siyavumelana?"(Dlomo I hear you about the house and you make sense. However, you bought this house illegally. Even if you go to court, they'll tell you exactly what I am telling you now. But to be fair, Cele will have to pay you for your house because he was also negligent. You don't leave a house unattended to avoid stuff like criminals hiding stolen goods in it and whatever else. I hope we're reaching an agreement?), he said and they both mumbled under their breaths.

"Siyavumelana na?"(Do we have an agreement?)

"Yebo", they both lowly agreed reluctantly, both not satisfied.

...

Melokuhle knocked on Muzi's open door after Muzi's shower. His dad was tying up his sneakers seated on the bed.

"Ngena"(Come in)

Melo walked in slowly and sat beside him.

"Muzi"

"Ntwana. You okay?", Muzi raised his eyes to him briefly and asked. Melo nodded.

"I just, I have an odd question for you", Melokuhle asked before twiddling with his thumbs.

"Shoot"

"You're a powerful person, right?"

Muzi huffed out a confused laugh.

"Uhm, I'm not sure how I'm supposed to answer this question. Powerful in terms of what? Money?"

"Yeah. Influence"

"I... guess. What exactly are we talking about here?"

"We both know that you can get mom out of jail. Why aren't you?", Melo asked without making any eye contact and Muzi's brain momentarily stopped working. He was expecting this conversation, but he was definitely not looking forward to it.

"It's not as easy as it sounds. It's complicated", he cautiously said.

"Uncomplicate it then" - Melo

A heavy sigh left Muzi's lips.

"You know, ever since I was a kid, I've always known that there's nothing my dad can't do. In my eyes, you've always been a superhuman of some sort. I know you can get her out of that place. You just don't want to", he expressed. Muzi kept his silence. Melokuhle turned to face him.

"Wives to the same man fight all the time. Yeah sure. She shot her but trust me when I say she regrets it now", Melo pleaded. Muzi was not sure if he should tell him the whole truth about what happened. All Melo knew was that her mother shot her husband's wife and that is why she was in prison for attempted murder.

...

After a long drive back home, Muzi arrived to a dead asleep house. He poured himself a glass of water from the dispenser and took a sip. He discarded all of it down the drain when he felt it wasn't hitting the spot. Mxo came down with sleepy yet suspicious eyes to check on the roach that was making noise in the kitchen. He laughed lightly when he saw Muzi.

"Ja mfan", Muzi greeted him as he wrapped his arm around his shoulder and ruffled up his hair.

"Uzenz' istarring neh? What if I was a burglar?" Muzi asked as they walked up the stairs.

"As grandma would say, beotlo tseba gore why mpya e robala kontle"(You would find out the reason why a dog sleeps outside). He said and they both laughed.

"How are you?", Muzi asked in a serious undertone.

"I'm worried about Melo", he stated and Muzi sighed. Somehow, he knew he hadn't found out about the kidnapping. It would've been the first thing he asked.

"Life happens my boy. We'll talk properly tomorrow morning aight?", Muzi said when they when they reached

their junction.

"Goodnight dad"

They bumped fists and Muzi headed to his study. He got there and poured him a double shot of whiskey before heading to his room. Betso turned sides when he opened the door and he stood still, careful not to wake her up. He closed the door carefully and the light from the corridor disappeared. He put his phone on the pedestal and took of his watch in the dark. The clothes came off last and he was left with his underwear. He slid into the sheets and cuddled her from behind.

"Hey", the sleepy wife whispered with a smile. He huffed out a laugh.

"I thought you were fast asleep", he whispered back and kissed her shoulder. She sighed.

"How's Melo? Have yall eaten? I should probably go warm up the--", she said as she tried to get out of bed.

"Muzi tightened his grip around her.

"He's not here", he informed.

"What? I thought--"

"I'll tell you all about it tomorrow. Can we sleep now? I'm tired", he asked of her, politely.

"Okay", she said and placed her hand over his. She thought about breaking the news about the pregnancy but figured she should let it go. The timing was completely off.

Chapter Twenty-Six

On that Sunday, Betso woke up first. Muzi was still fast asleep on his stomach, his head rested on his one arm. She made her way out of bed and into the bathroom. After brushing her teeth, she stepped into the shower.

When she came out, her sight fell on Muzi by the basin.

"Good morning", she said adoringly while carefully stepping out of the shower so she doesn't slip.

"Morning baby", he gave a muffled greeting since his mouth was full of toothpaste and a brush. She fixed and tightened the towel around her body before hugging him from behind, placing her head on his bare back. He continued with his business until he was done. He then pulled the towel off its round metallic hanger on the wall and wiped his mouth.

"You okay?", he asked before turning to face her and place his cold hands on her cheeks, after playfully fixing her shower bonnet. She nodded with a smile.

"Are YOU okay?", she asked with her hands on his waist.

"You're smiling. That's all it takes to make my day no matter how bad it would've turned out", he rubbed her chin.

"Uhm, we need to talk", she alerted and he frowned.

"A...bout?, curiosity anxiously took over. She laughed.

"Why do you suddenly look like you've seen a stripper ghost?", she continued chuckling up. He had no choice but to laugh as well.

"I told you how much I hate those four words"

"You must've done something you shouldn't have then", she said and he laughed harder before picking her up like a bride.

"Lutho njan"(I've done nothing), he assured before smothering her lips with his. He placed her on the bed and sat in a squat in front of her.

"I'm all ears"-Muzi. She took his hands and exhaled with her lips puckered in a smile.

"Hawu. Kwenzenjan wa moyizela kab'hlungu kanje? Is it something I've done?", he questioned with a baffled and curious smile. She nodded. The excitement was beginning to choke her.

"And that is?"

"Uhm let me see... gave me another baby?", the smile on her face was reaching her ears as his diminished in confusion.

"If this is a joke then it's not funny baby?"

Betso laughed.

"I am not joking! I am 6 months pregnant!", she exclaimed and laughed even harder.

"Wait what?", the confusion further consumed him as his eyes scanned her tummy.

"Where is the baby?", he asked and his lip was left hanging.

"Somewhere in here. I suspected that I might be pregnant then mom said we should go see my doctor. She performed an ultrasound scan when we got there and bam, I found out that I'm about to be a mother again", she informed and placed her hands on his head.

"But how? The scarring. They said--"

"I don't know baby all I know is that we're about to parents again"

She stood up when the news rendered him speechless. She fetched the printed scan from her handbag and came to sit back down in front of him. He hadn't moved. She handed it to him and he studied it with growing admiration.

"Do you know the gender?"

Betso shook her head in disapproval and watched him slowly brushing and running his thumb on the scan, still in disbelief. He then knelt and placed the side of his head against her tummy, hugging her. She hugged him back and caressed his brush-cut head.

"Mrs Khumalo?", he hoarsely called for attention.

"Hm?"

"Ngiyabonga mama. Words fail me. I don't have enough vocabulary to express how happy you've just made me", he whispered and hugged her even tighter. A tear settled on her eye and fell on his scalp when she shut her lids.

"Can we pray? I feel like we should for some reason"-Betso.

This took Muzi by surprise since she barely does what she was asking of him. Neither did he.

"Sure?", he agreed, however. They held hands as they knelt down on the carpet. A brief laughter escaped her lip and he opened his eyes to see what was going on. She still had hers closed.

"I don't even know where to start. God is surely going to have a heart attack at the sound of my voice", she said and Muzi couldn't contain his own laughter.

"Uyathandaza or ngisukume mina la?"(Are you praying or should I stand up?)

Betso's laugh delivered itself in breaks and pieces. She was trying too hard to be serious.

"I can just imagine him calling Moses ukuthi ezombonisa lemihlola ayibonayo la"(... to help him spectate the taboo he's seeing here)

Betso wrapped up her laughter and said, "Okay okay. On a serious note now..."

Muzi closed his eyes and bowed his head.

"Papa Modimo yo maatla Modimo yasa hlolelwe ke selo. Re tlike pele ga sefahlego sa Gago ka Sabatha e, gotlo kgopela tshireletso. Ke kgopella lapa laka kokeletso ya matsatsi a bophelo. Please protect and strengthen this pregnancy to full term. Bless the birth and arrival of this precious little one. Bless the life of baby Miracle. Amen"(Father, God of all might the God who makes all things possible. We come before you today on this Sabbath to plead for protection, for my entire family. I am asking that You extend all the days of their lives, she stated her plea and they both opened their eyes.

"Baby Miracle?", he asked with a slight smile and a raised brow.

"That's his womb name", she said and laughed.

"His?", he questioned with the same tone.

"I'm hoping it's a boy", she said as they stood up and he placed his hands around her waist.

"Hayi baby abafana abangaka. I'm hoping that it's a girl this time. I never got to raise Ava as a baby. I can just imagine nje. Daddy's little girl. Ngizom'spoil nize nimemeze ukuthi kfanele ngingandwe"(I'm going to spoil her

until you all scream that I should be stopped), he said and she laughed before he could even finish his sentence. "Since you're on this prayer warrior tip today would you have a problem menginga shis' impepho?" (... if I burn some incense?)

He still had his hands on her waist.

"Of course not", she assured and brushed his beard.

"I was just making sure", he teased and turned her around so he could caress her tummy.

"She must be so small", he remarked. Betso laughed.

"I also couldn't believe that there's a baby in here"

...

Manqoba walked into the bedroom where Enhle was fastening the thin belt to her green maxi dress.

"Hawu. You look like you're going somewhere?", he said as he settled down on the bed. She continued with what she was doing and said, "Iyup".

"Uyaphi?"(Where are you going?)

"Out", she flatly said before walking back into the closet. She came back with her white sandals, thudding them onto floor before slipping her feet into them.

"Out?"

"Yes. Out"

She continued to spritz on her cologne before placing it in her handbag.

"What is the meaning of out Mbalenhle?"

"Baby I should be asking you that", she said vengefully.

"What do you--"

"Have you seen my watch anywhere?", she cut his sentence short while looking around.

"There...", he pointed with his head, defeated.

"But this dress you're wearing thembalami"

"What about it? It's long nje?", she coolly defended as she swayed it to display how it sweeps the floor.

"Ibele lakho lonke liphumele ngaphandle"(Your breasts are completely out on display", he complained.

She raised her hands to fix her slightly showing black bra and jiggled her cleavage.

"I see nothing wrong with how I'm dressed", she stated before picking up her handbag and kissing his cheek. He shifted his straight face away from her. She stopped and stared for a brief second. She then shrugged and picked up her handbag, leaving the room.

...

Enhle arrived at Bareng's house and rang the door bell. When Bareng opened, she handed her the bottle of red wine as a peace offering and gave her an anxious, regretful smile. They'd agreed that she should come over, over the phone. Bareng looked at her and feigned a serious face before sighing and smiling, then taking the gift and

letting her in.

"I'm really sorry for how I behaved the last time I was here", she said as she went down the three steps from the entrance, into the open space between the kitchen and the living room.

"It's cool"

"Chomizer!", Benzy yelled from the couch and Enhle immediately rushed to hug him. Bareng just smiled before heading back to the kitchen.

"And when did you get here?", Enhle asked as they settled down on the couch. Benzy downed his large Tanqueray glass.

"Oh you know I'm no statue bubu!", he exclaimed and Enhle laughed.

"I was in Durban and Bee happened to mention that Sfiso was out of town and I thought yassssss haunty! Let the pajama parties begin!", he exclaimed loudly and ran his hand over his dyed white hair.

"Oh you been sleeping over here and you didn't think to tell me?", Enhle said and scoffed although she wasn't mad. He grabbed the bowl of cheese curls and dug his nail into one and tossed it into his mouth. His manicures were long enough to be used as forks. Him being way younger than the two makes him the life of the friendship. The baby monitor called for Bareng's attention amidst the jazz music she was playing. She pushed the chopping board with robot peppers forward before grabbing the dishcloth to wipe her hands. She continued wiping them on her tight blue jean as she made her way to the baby's room.

"Oohhh that a** honey! Sfiso had better be laying that pipe good and doing that booty some JUSTICE!", Benzy said and Bareng shot out a laugh but never looked back. She continued walking and dragging her slippers as she swayed her huge, round hips.

"And then? What was happening between the two of you?", Benzy whispered to Enhle.

"What do you mean?"

"I asked her about you when I arrived and she changed the topic. And I damn heard your pink a** apologizing at the door"

Enhle laughed lightly and picked up her handbag from the couch and placed it on the table.

"Why didn't you persist and ask because you always do?"

"You know Bee has a vault for chest. She don't crack", he said as he refilled his glass while texting.

"Ah we had a fallout when I told her that mans wants to take somebody else. Long story"

"Take as in, rondo rondo Sarah?", he with his eyes popped, referring to polygamy. Enhle nodded and took the glass that was meant for him and sipped on it, trying not to dwell on the hurt.

"Child!", Benzy exclaimed and lightly slapped her thigh.

"So what are you gonna do because you can't leave him?"

Enhle laughed.

"You sound sure"

"Bxtch I'd cancel you if you did. You can't leave all that yumminess because of a glitch"

"A glitch?", Enhle couldn't help the laughter that was itching in her mouth.

"Yes. A glitch. If it's the game he wants to play you should also get yourself a side snack béby!"

He said and Enhle shook her head while sipping on the gin, thinking about what he'd just said. Benzy had already moved on. He was now on a video call making the loudest of all noise.

...

Muzi called everyone to the table for a family meeting. Violet had left for her own house since her husband was back. He sat on one end of the table and the Betso on the side next to him. Lwandile went to sit next to his mom and Mxolisi walked over to a chair on the other side.

"Before this starts, whatever I did was not intentional and I can fully explain?", Mxolisi exonerated himself of any possible sentencing.

Betso and his brother laughed.

"Boy sit your a** down", Muzi said impatiently. Mxo pulled out the chair and dropped his weight there.

"Uhm, as you all know that I was at home these past few days for Melo's sake. A lot happened and I feel like you all deserve to know", Muzi gravely stated. They kept quiet waiting for him to continue.

"Despite him having to deal with the loss of his girlfriend, the mother of his child, Makhosonke was also kidnapped on Friday"

"What? By who? Why!", Lwandile and Mxolisi shot out at the same time as if propelled by an unspoken agreement. Betso sighed and took one of Muzi's hands. Muzi explained everything about the suicide suspected to be a murder, Melo's treacherous friends and him being buried alive. The only thing he left out was the part about Khuzwayo suffering from the wrath of 'his' cruel gun.

"I was just talking to him now and he never told me about that. I could tell he wasn't okay but I just figured that asking why would be dumb of me since he's... well, grieving"- Mxolisi

"Yeah he's not in the best of spaces right now", Muzi said and squeezed Betso's hand. She squeezed back.

"Yoh. Have you booked him into therapy?", Lwandile asked from a place of shock.

"You know how stubborn your brother is", Muzi languidly said and fell back on his chair. Silence joined the conversation around the table.

"I don't know when but we're going to have a thanksgiving ceremony to show the ancestors how grateful we are for saving Melokuhle's life and also...", he stopped and looked at Betso. He was asking if he should tell them. She understood the eye communication and nodded. The two were questioning themselves about this hidden statement behind Muzi's trailing "also".

"And also, to thank them for another expected addition to the family three months from now", he informed with a growing smile, his eyes lodged on Betso. She blushed and bowed her face. After all these years, he still hadn't lost his touch with making her weak with just a look. It took a couple of moments for it to make sense to the two.

"Wait? You're pregnant? Whaaat?", Lwandile got up and hugged her with cheerful countenance. Mxo was still to pick up his hanging jaw. Betso hugged him back.

"And then wena?", Muzi asked Mxolisi, a brink away from laughing.

"Is your English somehow kinda warped or am I the one who doesn't know how to count?", Mxolisi questioned

and blinked a couple of times.

"Count what?", Lwandile asked as he broke the hug between him and his mother, settling down back on his chair.

"He said three months FROM now?", Mxolisi said and Lwandile began processing the statement. He'd missed it upon impact. The rents laughed.

"There's nothing wrong with your father's English nor your mathematics Koppi. I am six months pregnant"

"How? Where is the baby?", Mxolisi questioned further, the confusion intensified.

"Apparently he or she is "hiding"", she imitated quotation marks with her fingers.

"So the 'I didn't know I was pregnant' show is not a hoax?!", Lwandile asked.

Betso nodded with her lips pursed, forcing herself not to laugh. Mxolisi had his hand on his mouth, in utter disbelief.

"I never thought I'd see the day where you run speechless", Muzi teased him. Mxolisi never replied. He kept switching sitting positions on his chair.

"How small is the baby going to be? The size of a chihuahua?", he asked and Betso finally exploded.

"Ketlogo bethela ngwano waka wena"(Keep trolling my child. I'm going to beat you up), she threatened while laughing, with her index finger pointed out. Muzi stood up and prompted Betso to stand too. Mxolisi sunk into his chair and ran his hands down his face.

"Anyway, congratulations mommy", Lwandile said happily. She brushed his head with adoration and gave a mute "Thank you".

"So I don't deserve to be congratulated?", Muzi asked.

Lwandile laughed.

"You too dad"

"Nxa"-Muzi exclaimed and they all laughed except the traumatized Mxolisi.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Everyone sat around the table for Sunday lunch at the royal house, including Bayede who dropped in unannounced. The forks and knives continued flirting with the plates in silence. Questioning eyes occasionally being raised in lieu of a normal conversation. There was an unadulterated sense of awkwardness in the atmosphere. Bab'Bayede does that do people when he is in the mood to sprinkle some discomfort in the room. He is that elder that will have you rather fall and sprain your ankle in a pit than continue walking to face and greet him in the street. The elder that multiple people give up their chair for upon his arrival. That one elder who can walk into a room full of laughter and dishevel the entire circus for the hell of it. Especially in an environment where there's a woman or more.

"Nathi", he finally spoke, speaking to Manqoba.

"Mbulazi?", MQ paid attention and slowed down on the chewing.

"Ukuphi umfazi wakho?" (Where's your wife?), Bayede asked with his eyes riveted on his plate. Evelyn cleared her throat. She knew this question was not coming from a place of courtesy.

"Kunezinto ebefanele ukuyoy' lungisa e mall" (There's a couple of things she had to fix at the mall), Manqoba lied. Melokuhle continued turning and disinterestedly stabbing the roasted baby potatoes on the bed of rice that laid on his plate.

"On a family day?"

"Yes"-Manqoba

"Mmmh", Bayede remarked opprobriously.

Manqoba felt the food in his mouth growing insipid and bland as he chewed. He knew exactly what Bab'Bayede was thinking. That he has zero control over his wife. A similar feeling began sprouting in his mind. He pushed the underplate forward and asked to be excused.

...

"See I don't want you to jump on the beat from zero you get what I'm saying? Let it play for about a minute then instead of the hook just ride the bars. The hook will come after, not prior like it does here. You feel me?", Mxolisi said to Kryptlines who was reclined on his chair in Mxo's room. He nodded slowly with a smile as the song made sense in his head.

"So we're scrapping this one?", he asked and pointed to the speakers as if the song was a tangible object just sitting over there.

"Not entirely. The only problem I have is how it starts. There's just a lot going on in the beginning and you know how I feel about that"

Kryptlines laughed.

"Noise?"

"Exactly! I thought it would work for a change but--", his sentence was cut short by the phone ringing on the table.

"Gimme a minute", he excused him and got out of the room.

"Baby?", he greeted Ndalo as he closed the door, heading to entertainment room.

"Are you okay?"

"Uhm, yeah. You sound worried. What's up?", he asked as he settled down on the couch next to the billiard table.

"How could I not when I last spoke you to this morning? The day is practically over"

"Hawu. But I told you that I have a lot going on today"-Mxo

"I don't dispute that. But texting to show that you're okay wouldn't kill you. It won't even take a minute of your time"

"Sthandwasami we can't speak for the whole day every day. I told you what I'll be doing today and I also told you that I'm not going anywhere. What could have possibly happened to me in this house? The roof collapsing on my head?", he argued and she kept quiet. He pinched the bridge of his nose and exhaled.

"Look, I'm sorry for speaking to you like that. It's just, uyingixaka ukuthi ulwelani kahle kahle ngoba ngikutshelile ukuthi ngizobe ngibusy namhlanje, which I still am by the way"(I'm baffled why you're fighting because I told you that I'm going to be busy today)

"And when was that? 12 hours ago?", she jabbed back.

"Hawu Ndalo kanti ukwate ngempela? Askiies baby I didn't mean to worry you like that" (You're really angry?)

He could hear her releasing a deep breath from her end of the line.

"No I'm sorry. I'm sorry for projecting my own fears onto you"

"Fears? What do you mean?"

She did not respond.

"Khuluma nami. What is it that you fear?"(Talk to me)

"I'd rather not talk about it", she tried to retreat from the topic.

"Okay then watch me disappear for a week", he threatened and she laughed.

"Hayi man Mxo. I'm just, I have this constant fear of losing the people I love. It's always hanging over my head", she finally confessed.

"Why? What caused it?"

She kept quiet once again.

"Have you ever lost somebody you love to death?"

"Yeah. My dad"

"What happened to him?"

"Car accident. 6 years ago"

It took a moment for him to gather the right words to say.

"Fears are meant to be confronted Ndalo. I also have this thing where my chest just closes up when I think of death hitting anybody that I love. But instead of avoiding those thoughts and quickly shutting them down, I now force my self to think about them. This was after a conversation I had with my dad where he happened to mention him dying and stuff. If I am meant to die your fear of this fact is not going to save me. Same goes for everybody in your life. It will instead make it even harder for you to cope", he shared his view and waited for

her to digest it.

"Death is inevitable. You cannot run away from it. So don't allow it to ruin your life" -Mxo.

Ndalo sobbed.

"Are you crying?", he asked softly in a voice dipped in concern.

"No...", she lied. Then laughed nervously.

"I'm sorry if I opened up old wounds"

"It's okay. I kinda needed to hear that"

"I'm coming to see you next weekend", he informed.

"When did you make that decision?", she laughed.

"Right now"

"Lies. You planned this"

"Yes. I planned it, now"

Ndalo laughed.

"Do you know why some cases are ruled out as culpable homicide and classified as murder?"

She continued to give a muffled laugh.

"Mm-mm?", she said, indicating a no.

"Because even if it is a spur of the moment thing, I can still plan to kill you and execute that in just one minute, or even less"

"Firstly, what is culpable homicide"

"It's when somebody kills another but without intention. The act is not murder but it is still regarded as blameworthy by the law. It doesn't have to take months and weeks for a person to plan something. A minute is enough", he continued as she laughed at the analogy he gave.

"Mciim yabheda. Weird how you chose just the perfect weekend"

He gave an intrigued "Oh?"

"Yeah. My mom is going away for a church conference next weekend", she informed and a naughty, lascivious grin grew on his face.

"So bewuthuleleni sonke le skhathi?"(Why didn't you say all along?)

She chuckled.

"I didn't think you'd come"

"You're an enemy in this relationship wena. Instead of working with me, you're working against me", he ranted with mirth and she continued to laugh.

"Don't get any ideas though. I'm just saying that I'm gonna be able to spend time with you without checking my watch all the time. Nothing else", she warned and he laughed.

"Heban. Ngitheni kanti mina?"(I never said anything though)

"Mxo..."

"Relaaax. I'm just coming to see you. I won't even touch you"

He said and she shot out an immediate laugh.

...

Manqoba sat in his office chair lazily swinging it sideways as he studied Sihle's profile on Instagram. Her business number was there for wig orders. He contemplated calling her but changed his mind and put the phone aside, opening his laptop. The date for the lobola had been set and he wanted things to be done strictly the right and ancient way. He tried punching in the access code but his memory wasn't interested in retrieving it. Her face and calm voice kept undulating and reverberating in and around his conscious mind. He shut the laptop closed and grabbed the phone.

It rang repeatedly and went unanswered. He's one of the belief that calling a phone more than once will not make it ring any louder. If a person does not pick up, then it means they're probably busy and don't need to be disturbed, he always says. He placed the phone on the table and watched it with the back of his fingers lightly pressed against his mouth thoughtfully. The phone rang and caused his heart to forget and skip a single beat. "Yebo?"

"Hi. I am terribly sorry I missed your call I was engaged with other stuff"

"So I'm other stuff?", he said and bit his lower lip in an attempt to keep away a smile.

"Excuse me?", she was genuinely baffled.

"Angithi you're engaged to me. So by mathematical derivation, that makes me the other stuff you're referring to?"

"Ah...", she regretfully said and punctuated that with a low laugh.

"Also, our relationship hasn't started but it's already in past tense?", he continued to tease.

"What do you mean?", she tried to contain the brewing laughter she felt tingling at the back of her throat.

"You said was. Didn't you?"

"Ngiyaxolisa Mbulazi bengingazi ukuthi ngikhuluma nawe"(I didn't know that I was talking to you), she apologized with sincerity. He just smiled to himself.

"Do you ever raise your voice?", he asked and she asked why he was asking.

"Phela cishe wangabi nayo ivoice wena"(You almost didn't have a voice), he said and she laughed. She did not reply since she did not know how to.

"Wenzan namhlanje?"(What are you doing today?)-Manqoba.

"Lutho. I'm faced with washing and packing away a mountain of dishes", she informed.

"But your family is not that big nje"

"It's my mom's birthday weekend. Hence you saw us at the resort on Friday?"

"Oh. I was wondering about that. I thought maybe you were on a girl's day out type of set up"

"No it was her birthday. So today I decided to cook for her and call a few family members and some of her friends", she continued to explain.

"Mmkay. So you can cook?"

"Hawu, of course yes", she laughed.

"Ah haa, when a person is that confident they usually cook nonsense", he said in disapproval and an immediate

laugh slipped from her lips.

"I'm not even going to defend myself. The proof is in the taste"

"Okay then. Tonight, I'm coming over to fetch a tupperware full of that taste"

"Haa. You know very well that you can't come here"

"Then you'll have to bring it to the car"

She laughed in disbelief.

"Haibo. Inkosi ayidli noma ikuphi"(A chief doesn't just eat anywhere)

"Sihle, ngiyalibeka uyalibeka?"(Are you disagreeing with me?)

He asked gravely and she cleared her throat.

"Cha"(No)

"Kuhle ke. I'll see you tonight"(Great then...)

With that, he ended the call.

...

"Knock knock", Enhle peeped through Dr Maluleke's slightly open office. He was standing and studying two radiographs sticking them into the air. He turned towards the door and immediately smiled at the lady clutching onto her handbag.

"Hey you. Come in", he politely welcomed her and placed the x-ray images back in their large brown envelope. Enhle walked in and they hugged.

"I wasn't sure I was going to find you here...", she said with her chin over his shoulder. There she went again with that prolonged hug of hers. The scent. The scent is the primary accomplice in this habitual crime.

"Take a seat", he guided with his hand and went round the desk to occupy his chair. He pulled the stethoscope off his neck and dropped it in his drawer.

"I asked Lilly about Dr Yasshim and she said he left?", her statement came out as a question. He gave a straight smile and diminished it.

"See why I said I miss you around here? I have no one to eat with now. You left. He's gone. I'm all by myself", he feigned self-pity.

She laughed.

"Oh please. You can always make new friends"

"That has never been a forte of mine unfortunately"

His words got lost along the way in the distance between them. Her focus was engraved in the movement of his dark lips. It dawned on her how much Muhluri and Manqoba had in common.

"Xiluva?", he called out. She snapped out of it.

"Mciim. You still call me that?", she laughed.

"It's another version of your name I don't know why you have a problem with it", he said and fell back on his leather chair and sunk it a bit.

"I don't have a problem with it. I just don't get why it is so necessary for you to translate it to Tsonga"

"Ritwakala kahle"(It just sounds better)

"There you go again. You know I heard nothing from that", she said and laughed.

"Ah khale nikubyela ku swo boha udyondza ku vulavula ririmi leri hiku meh na xitwa xiZulu ni tlhela nim hlamula hi xona"(I've been telling you that you should learn this language as well because I can hear Zulu and also respond to you in the language), he said with a smile and her lips trembled as she tried hard to suppress hers.

"Why do you insist on abusing me this much?"

"I'll keep abusing you until you stop being tribalistic. Swinge tirhi la ka meh"(It won't work with me)

"Muhluri!", she shot out with a laugh.

"Promise to learn and I'll translate", he said in a cool and collected manner, with his head resting against the chair and his signature smile that never attempts to stretch his lips.

"Okay fine. Fine. I'm willing to learn...", she said and he kept the same posture, studying her.

"What? Is anything the matter", she asked and checked her self to see if anything was faulty.

"What makes you think there's anything wrong?", he asked and clicked his pen.

"Why are you staring then?"

"Can't a man just admire and appreciate the beauty placed before him without being taken to court?", he asked without a single blink in sight. Enhle cleared her throat and shifted her smile to the side...

Chapter Twenty-Eight

After night fell, Manqoba drove his way to Sphesihle's homestead. He parked one house away from her gate and called her to come out. The party was pretty much still on going in the yard with music softly playing under various conversations and laughs. She told him that she was still trying to figure a way out. He kept himself busy on his phone as he waited. The madam arrived and he leaned over to open the passenger door for her. A blushing smile was pasted on her face the whole time.

"Sawubona", he greeted her as she got in. Before she could reply, a woman appeared on the window and knocked while verbally crucifying her.

"Sphesihle ubonana kanjani namadoda kube uzolobolwa kunge k'dala awungitshela? Eyaka bani le moto?!" (Why are you seeing a man when we're about to receive your bride price? Whose car is this?), the woman went on angrily and Sphe shut her eyes in embarrassment. She opened the car door and softly said, "Mama angibonani namadoda...".

She was about to lash out some more until she caught a glimpse of Manqoba's face. He held in his laughter by puckering his lips.

"Ohh...", she cleared her throat. "Kanti uwena Mbulazi..." (I didn't know that it's you), she laughed awkwardly as she slowly closed the door. Sphe had her hand over her shut and disgraced eyes as she bowed her head.

Manqoba nodded, still trying hard not to laugh.

"Ngcicela ungamtsheli ubaba ngalento" (Please don't tell my father about this)

"Hayi nono. Khululeka. Ithi nginisiye ke" (Let me excuse you), she shortly left after that, giving no platform for a reply.

"Who was that?", he finally asked as he took the burgundy tupperware from her thighs, careful not to drop the silver shining spoon on top of it.

"Wee Grace. Gracey! Iza ngikuxolele iyndaba mghee!", she shouted in an amused tone as she walked towards the gate and the person she was addressing stood in the middle of the yard waiting for her to arrive with a curious smile and eyebrows pinched.

"My stepmother. Bayohleba ngami manje" (They're going to gossip about me), she informed as shook her head.

"Who's Grace?", Manqoba asked as he opened the container ajar.

"My mom"

"How many wives does your father have?" -Manqoba

"Four. One recently died", she said.

"Mmkay. Yaze ya inhle i seven colours yakho" (Your plate of seven colours looked appetizing), he said as he turned the container in admiration.

"It's actually six", she corrected.

"I'm rounding off. There's two types of green here", he argued pointing at the olives and the lettuce pieces. Sphe laughed and looked out the window even though there was nothing much to see.

"For future reference, angiyidli lento mina" (I don't eat this), he stated, referring to the olives.

"Why? Zimnandi nje" (They're nice though)

"What? These things taste like rotten grapes. You need to get your tastebuds checked. Ubutho bonke nabangani bakho abayidlayo futhi"(And take all your friends that eat it with). Sphe smiled defeatedly and shook her head. He began eating while nodding as he chewed.

"Usa dancer namanje?"(Do you still dance?), he asked as he took another spoonful into his mouth. She shot out a laugh.

"Oh my God!", she exclaimed, struggling to put a leash on her laughter.

"Hawu. Uhlekani ngoba ngiyay' buzela nje mina? Yaz wena... if Caiphus Semenya's Angelina started playing you'd become unstoppable"

Sphe now had tears coming out of her eyes due to the laughter.

"Please stop..."

"Next to your father's ice cream van. Phela we just came there to see you perform not that we wanted what the old man was selling", he continued

"Ngiyakhumbula. Wena no bhut wakho"(I remember. You and your brother"

"Everyone who came there was coming for your sake. Who would've thought.. phela you were about seven or eight when I was 24 years old do you know that? "

"I was seven. I remember this because I moved away when I was eight", she corrected. The shared laughter's vapour stuck around in the car.

"Did they tell you why I want to marry you?", he asked and took a bite of the roasted chicken thigh.

"No. But I know why...", she said.

"You do?"

She nodded.

"It's a story for another day...", she softly said and tilted her head against the leather seat. He raised his eyes and glared at her as she sent her eyes to the dark behind the windshield.

"Are you a professional dancer now?", he teased and another laugh left her lips.

"That was just me being a child. And I wasn't that good angazi benichazwa yin"(I don't know what you were enjoying there), she continued laughing. Manqoba laughed too.

"So wenzan manje Michael Jackson?"(What do you do now?)

"Ah yaboh manje? How can I wipe that memory off your mind?", she complained amidst the mutual laughter.

"Okay okay. But seriously though, what do you do?"

"I make wigs and sell them. Along with a bunch of other beauty products"

"Mmkay..."

"Wena? Before becoming a chief what were you doing?"

"A lot of boring things you wouldn't be interested in", he stated as he cleaned the container, placed the spoon in it's center and closed it.

"Try me", she dared in her quiet voice. He exhaled and grabbed a bottle of water. After drinking,

"Bekumnandi ukudla kwakho mama..."-Manqoba

"Glad you enjoyed it", she said with a smile as she received back her tupperware. She then clutched onto it against her stomach. He stared with adoration. She stared back with her lips puckered, fighting a blush.

"I have to go now", she informed and opened the door.

"No goodbye hug, at least?", he complained and she bowed her head and huffed out a laugh. She leaned in to hug him with one hand since the other had her container. She was anticipating it to be brief- just as a normal goodbye hug should be. He held on to her, with his fingers around her waist. It was long enough for his scent to imprint itself onto her skin and clothes. He broke it slowly so his eyes could find hers. She shifted her body away to avoid further happenings. He smiled and fell back on his seat as she stepped out of the car. He then watched her till she walked in safely into the yard before he could drive off.

...

Melokuhle was robustly pulled out of his sleep by the loud and unfamiliar ringtone of his phone. He never really personalized the settings after they bought it. The only thing he did was to retrieve his contacts from Google. He was mystified by who the call was coming from.

"Ufunani?"(What do you want?)

"Come outside. I have something that belongs to you", he said and Melo frowned at this information. The energy for a back and forth was what he did not have. He cut the call without confirming whether he was coming out or not. He sat upright in his jeans and grabbed his white vest. He slid into his sandals and made his way out.

"Are you okay boy?", Evelyn asked before she could close her magazine so she could pay attention to him before he could walk out. She was seated in the living room.

"I'm fine gogo. I'll be outside with Mtho if you need me"

She just nodded slowly, somewhat concerned.

He made his way to the gate at the back because it made directional sense that he will be there instead of the front. He found him sitting on the grass next to the fencing with his knees up, playfully throwing the long reed in his hand back and forth. Melo dropped himself next to him in the same position and hung his arms over his knees.

"Ufunani Mthokozisi?", he let out a tired voice. Mtho turned his head in Melo's direction.

"Uyazi ukuthi unginyanyisa the very same way you feel about me?"(You do that you disgust me...)

"Siyakuhalalisela Bhungane. Again, ufunani?"(Congratulations Bhungane. Again, what do you want?)

Mthokozisi scoffed before reaching for his back pocket and taking out a USB stick.

"Mi, msun' wakho"

"What is this?", Melo asked and just looked at the stick. With zero propensity to take it.

"Just take it man uyekel' uku behave sengath ngiyakushela. Busi wanted you to have it"(Stop behaving like I'm courting you), Mtho said and stuck it out for Melo to take it. Melo's pinched brows began relaxing. They shared a spiky stare before he could take it. Mthokozisi stood up and left, with his hands in his pockets. Melo took a glance at the metallic stick and turned it, then watched his former bestfriend walking away further into the dark without looking back.

"U grand boy?", the guard asked with his hand stuck out on the gate. That's what it took to yank Melo out of his

swirling confusion.

"Yeah. Ngi... grr-aand", he said in slow motion before standing up and walking back into the yard.

...

Manqoba walked into his bedroom and found Enhle waiting on the bed in her thick, fleecy maroon night gown, the hood halfway on her head.

"Ubuyaphi Manqoba?"(where were you?), she asked and he walked past her and went straight to the ensuite. She followed him.

"I asked you a question", she probed as he urinated. She shoved her hands into her armpits and watched him wash his hands.

"Askiies?", he said, wanting her to unblock the doorway. She did and followed him out as he undid his watch.

"You were with her isn't it?", she thinned her eyes, somehow hoping to pierce his back enough that he pays attention. He carried on with his business as if she wasn't in the room.

"Khumalo!"

"Haibo yini?!"(What?), he shot back after turning to face her then taking short reverse steps before walking straight to the closet.

"Answer me dammit!"

He came back to stand in front of her. He held her by the shoulders and looked her in the eye.

"Ufun' ukulwa. But I am not in the mood"(You want to fight), he walked away again. She tapped her foot continually on the floor and bit her lower lip trying to calm herself down. It felt like he was riding her second last nerve with a quad bike. She took out her cellphone from the large pocket attached to the robe and dialled. She placed it against her ear as she left the room. She got into Oluhle's empty room and closed it.

"Hello?", Sphesihle answered.

"Did you tell him?"

"Tell him what?"

"About the--", her tongue couldn't bring itself to say it. Sihle kept quiet, waiting for her to speak.

"That I told you about the rap... the abuse? Did you tell him?"

"Why would I do that?"

Enhle was pacing the room throughout this conversation. An irritated "Nxargh" left her lips and she cut the call. She continued pacing with her hands on her waist. Biting her upper lip thoughtfully.

..

Melo received a call from Mxolisi as he took quick steps up the stairway.

"Mxo", he quickly answered.

"You good?"- Mxo

Melo exhaled. He did not know where to start.

"I'm good. Is you okay?", he closed the door to his room with his foot.

"It don't sound like it", Mxo said doubtfully.

Melo took another heavy breath before dumping himself on the bed.

"It's just... it's a lot to talk about over the phone. I'll tell you all about it when I see you. You coming for the ceremony right?"

"You know it's not negotiable", Mxo said and decided to keep the fact that he was coming in a week to himself, wanting it to be a surprise. After the silence that follows a light laugh,

"I think I have a problem on my hands", Mxo confessed.

"Is it something I can help with?", Melo asked as he threw his shoes off his feet and laid on the bed on his back, raising his one leg in an acute angle.

"Ndalo posted uZanele with some bestie caption bro", Mxo said and Melo laughed.

"Zee your ex?"

"Yena loyo"(That one)

"Yikes. Then usenjen. Deep in the dog"

"Yaz I don't know whether to tell her or not"

"Since when are they friends?"

"I legit have no idea..."

"You do know that once she finds out that she's dating her bestie's ex it's tickets for your relationship right?"

"Yoh...", Mxo exclaimed followed by a very heavy breath. "What do you suggest I do then?"

"M'hlabhe"(Fxck her)

Mxolisi laughed.

"How is that going to help me with anything bhatata?"

"Hawu. Do I have to spell it out for you? You mark your territory and make it even harder for her to leave ndoda", Melo says and Mxo laughs.

"Akekho ready man"

"Was Zee ready? Hlaba lengane Mxolisi uyekel' ukungibuza into engekho"(Fxck this chick and stop asking me nonsense), Melo said as he got up and walked to the bathroom.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

"Look at you!", Betso cheered to Muzi while standing by the open door, watching him study the A3 mall plan he had pinned to the board, standing by the side of his desk. He turned at the sound of her voice and smiled.

"This is a nice surprise", he said as he approached to hug her. He pecked her lips with his hands on her waist.

"Sawubona mama", he greeted in a hoarse whisper.

"Hi daddy", she greeted back and gave him a peck also.

"Have I ever told you how sexy you look in these?", she complimented and ran her hands down the sides of his black vest. He bowed his head and shook his head, trying to suspend a blush. She was referring to the navy blue worksuit he was wearing with lime highlights around the knees. Along with black work boots.

"Is it?", he asked flirtatiously.

"Mm-huh", she affirmed and inserted her hands into the knot created by the sleeves of the matching jacket he'd tied around his waist.

"From now, this is an equivalent to lingerie", he said and she laughed.

"Am I not disturbing you?"-Betso

He checked his wrist watch.

"You can disturb me freely for the next 15 minutes", he informed. She gave a celebratory smile and turned her head when a knock sounded by the door.

"Come in", Muzi said to Bongive and kept his hands on his wife's waist. She walked in while paying all of her attention to her iPad.

"Oh. Hi Mrs K", she greeted Betso, who in turn greeted with a smile.

"I see you're all tied up. I'll come back a bit later yeah?", she suggested while taking reverse steps in her red bottoms.

"I'mmm only going to be back in the office tomorrow morning. From here I'm off to the site"

"Still okay", she said and left with a smile.

"Nidlile?"(Have the two of you eaten?), Muzi asked Betso.

"Yeah I was at Tasha's just now. I like this lady", Betso said to Muzi who raised his brow in subtle surprise.

"Uban? UBongiwe?"

"Yeah. She's nice. She has this warm vibe about her. Every single time I see her. ", she added. Muzi gave a snorty,brief laughter.

"Are you sure you're straight?", he asked and they both laughed.

"Mciim is it a sin to appreciate a fellow woman?"

"No but the way you say it... hayi", Muzi said and Betso playfully hit his chest.

"Anyway, what exactly does she do around here?"

"Uhm, ngiyibeke njani... her company is in my company, which is also my company. Well half of it", he explained and placed his forehead against hers.

"Why are you explaining like you're speaking to a fifth grader?", she questioned and gave a muffled laugh.

"Because you're here to see me kodwa sibusy sikhuluma ngo Bongive. Why?"(We're busy speaking about

Bongiwe), he squeezed her bxtt and pulled her towards him. Betso tried to respond but he devoured her lips instead. They heard somebody clear their throat by the door and broke the kiss. Muzi puckered his lips in a smile and said, "Yes?"

"Are we still leaving together or you'll catch me there? Apparently there's problems with two of the TLBs?", said the man in formal wear with a yellow helmet on his head.

"That's something they should be able to sort out by themselves though?", Muzi grunted with his hands still on Betso's bxtt. She had her head on his chest as she listened to them speak.

"Well?"

"I swear this is the very last project I'm working on with these guys. Hamba ngizokufica khona"(Go I'll find you there)

The guy tapped the wall on the inside twice as he nodded then left. Muzi stole another kiss from Betso's lip before she could speak.

"Let me not keep you any longer", she said and pulled away. He exhaled deeply and said, "Suddenly I don't feel like going there anymore". She laughed and walked, flaunting her a** for her lustful husband, rotating her car key on her left index finger. When she got to the door, she turned back to catch a glimpse of his displayed torture and shot out a quick laugh.

"You're gonna pay for this...", he threatened and went to unpin the plan from the board, rolling and securing the cylindrical shape with a rubber band.

...

Bab'Bayede came back to the royal house and asked for Manqoba. After he was called, he came down the stairs and found him in the living room with his suede hat on his knee, his green Brentwood slightly pulled back for comfort.

"Mbulazi"

Manqoba sat on the single couch after he greeted him.

"Yebo Mntungwa", Bayede greeted back.

"Sa vakashelwa kabili evikin elilodwa inhlanhla engaka madoda"(Two visits in one week. Such luck)

Bayede laughed.

"My week starts on a Monday so it's two weeks", he said and they both laughed.

"Ndodana. Ngize ngodaba olubalulekile la. Remember ubab'wakho wanted to cross breed with the Bonsmara le...", he clicked his fingers trying to remember

"Ka Schoeman?", Manqoba came to the quick rescue of his fossilized memory.

"Ehhena. Manje ke--"

"Hayi angifuni uku sebenzisana nalel' bhunu mina. Unekhanda eliqine kabi uSchoeman"(I don't want to work with this boere farmer. He has a hard head)

"Lalela. Bavumelana phela labantu ngeke manje sijike sithi thina--"(These people had an agreement. We can't just turn--)

Bayede's jaw dropped to the carpet when he caught sight of Enhle coming down the stairs rummaging through her handbag looking for her car keys.

"Haibo haibo haibo! Inkosikazi ephelele yase bukhosini iphumele ngaphandle iqgoke kanje? Mameshana!"(An entire royal wife going outside dressed like that?!), Bayede ranted from shock and Enhle licked her upper teeth in shame. She was wearing a different version of the dress she had worn the previous day, only, this one was tight around her bxtt and had a front slit.

"Sawubona baba", she greeted shamefully and placed her hand behind her neck. Bayede turned his widened eyeballs in Manqoba's direction, who then exhaled from exhaustion and threw his head back on the couch, looking out the veiled window.

"Nathi!", Bayede shrieked. Enhle took quick steps back upstairs while holding on to her dress so she doesn't trip. She had no idea he'd be there and he's the very last person she'd disrespect. Manqoba tried his level best to pay no mind to the whole incident that had just erupted but a fire was rising in his chest.

...

After the call she received from the twins' school, Betso dumped herself on the couch trying to pull pieces of her scattered peace together. She put both her hands on her bowed and frustrated head.

"Waitsi ngwana ke yo! NGWANA KE YO!"(Here's an unruly child!)

She forced herself to empty and fill her lungs since she felt her brain needed some fresh oxygen to function better. She then took her phone and called Mxolisi. It rang for a while before he answered.

"Sthandwasami", he answered cheerfully.

"Kopano...", he statement trailed off with a breath of anger.

"I can explain"

"Where are you?!"

"I had a few errands to run. I promise I'll be home by school out", he explained as promised. Betso was at a complete loss for words. Her temples were throbbing.

"Okay?", he said softly trying to pacify her, which in turn poured a litre of diesel into the fire.

"MAN! MAAN!", she yelled out with her fist clenched. She cut the call and said,"Aowa dammit hle!", lashing out some more and gulping down the glass of milk she had placed on the coffee table.

"Trouble in paradise?", the tattoo artist asked with a tight lipped smile, an edge away from laughing as he continued running the machine on Mxolisi's lower arm.

"Naahh. That was my mom. I was hoping they wouldn't call her", he stated as he endured the inking pain.

"Who's they? Your school?", the guy asked as he wiped the surface of Mxo's skin with spirits and continued drawing with diligence and concentrating.

"Yeah. We weren't doing much today so I left. In her eyes it's gonna seem like I skipped classes"

"Eish batswadi"(parents), he concurred and continued with his job. Mxo laughed lightly, with a little bit of unease. He'd never heard her that mad before.

"I'm guessing she hasn't seen the one on your chest?"

Mxo laughed.

"Nah she hasn't"

"And this one? How are you planning to hide it then?"

"Ke godile nnou. That was two years ago. Now, if I die, I'll just die"(I'm grown now). The guy laughed. Mxo continued scrolling on his phone.

"Can I ask you a question?"-Mxo

"Anytime bafanas"

"Say you dated a girl neh? Then yall happened to break up. Then you date another one. Then later find out that they're friends. What do you do you?"

"Girl code never crosses anywhere with the guy code. You continue with the relationship. It would've been a different case if she was YOUR friend's ex"

"Flopo keore mastene ha itsi waboh?"(The problem is that my girlfriend doesn't know)

The guy stopped inking and placed his hands with black gloves on his knees.

"Wai wai wait. The girlfriend doesn't know that you were in a relationship with her friend?"

"Yes"

"And you love this girl? Mastene?"

"Yes"

"Ayayaya. Mjitaka omo mpyeng"(You're in shxt my guy)

"You're the second person to say that"

"That's because you are"

"As in shxt shxt?"

"Multiply that by 4. You're in the kaks", he said and went back to drawing. Mxo fell deep in frustration, trying to figure out a way to get through to Ndalo without putting their relationship in jeopardy.

...

After the sangoma left, Melokuhle went back into the house, leaving Manqoba and Evelyn outside with the tub full of the black liquid that was used to cleanse his blood. He had a grey towel around his shoulders and black shorts on his lower body, barefoot. He eyed the USB on the table that he had been avoiding since the previous night. He took a shower to get rid of the foul smell. After he was done, he sat in front of the laptop and inserted the flash drive. There was a single item in it, a video. He curiously pressed play and leaned it to watch. Busi appeared on the screen with her short hair neatly combed.

"Baby. I would've probably been gone by the time you see this", she looked calm and decent. Collected.

"First of all, I already owe you an apology. A deep and sincere one. I am deeply sorry for the pain I'm about to cause you. I know how much you love me Makhosonke and I will die loving you just as much. I've... I've just reached and went way past my threshold. I don't see how life can continue from here. Even if I decided to stay alive for your sake, I'd just be a wound that will need constant dressing and nursing in your life. My depression

will grow to become an infection and I believe that if I love you as much as I say I do, I shouldn't allow that to happen on my watch", she continued speaking as Jhené Aiko's 'Party for me' (feat. Ty Dollar \$ign) played in the background.

"I'm going to leave this in an envelope in Gogo Nkambule's mailbox and write that it's from me. I know it will get to you somehow. I want you to be happy. I want you to continue laughing. Smiling. Should you want to move on, which I so much wish for you, don't allow my ghost to hold you back. I love you. Okay? If you feel you can't cope, find my grave and bring a LunchBar with", she winked.

"Farewell, my nxgga", she then took a lengthy kiss from her lips and placed it against the screen. Salty waters were burning behind Melo's eyeballs. He shut his eyes and tears fell from the top of his table.

Chapter Thirty

After Bab'Bayede left, taking with his hanging jaw, Manqoba carried his bruised ego to his room. He found Enhle in her night robe with all her make-up off. She just stared ruefully, waiting for a reaction. Manqoba opened his mouth wanting to spit out the fire that was roasting his lungs but closed his mouth instead, turning to the bathroom.

"Baby?", she stood up and followed. He got there and tightly held against the basin. If it was the work of a negligent installation, it was certainly going to tumble to the floor in pieces, considering the force he was exerting on it.

"Baby I'm sorry. I didn't think he was going to be here today. I swear this wasn't intentional", she begged placatingly. She'd rather he lash out than keep quiet in any argument. The silence can mean one of many things. Including irreparable hurt.

"Ufuna ngithini mama?"(What do you want me to say?)

"I'm really sorry. I really did not mean to undermine your throne", she continued trying to staunch his bleeding heart.

"Why did you do it then?", he questioned sourly and raised his face to capture hers in the mirror. She kept quiet.

"Hm?", he persisted.

"I don't know. I just--, I wanted your attention", she confessed and played with her fingers.

"Attention?", he hissed.

"Yes", she expressed, voicelessly.

"In your world, disrespect buys you attention?"

She kept quiet.

"Don't you have my attention Mbalenhle?"

She held on to her silence.

"I asked you a damn question!", he shot out, veins visible on his temples. She jumped like a mouse at the quick realization of a snare. The cheese suddenly wasn't worth it anymore.

"Do you want a weakling for a husband?"

She raised her face, clearly flummoxed by this question.

"Where is that coming from?"

"It doesn't matter ukuthi iqhamukaphi. The bottom line is that it's here. Do you want a weakling for a husband?"

"No", she answered doubtfully.

"Why?"

"There's nothing attractive in being weak. Where is this coming from?"

He pulled out a heavy breath then released it.

"Are you the weak man in this case?"

"I'm not. You want to turn me into one. Unga phambanisi iynkomishi"(Don't confuse things)

"That's not true"

She tried to touch him and he arrested her hand away from his chest.

"It is. You don't miss a chance to emasculate me and you do it so perfectly"

"But I don't have to kneel and serve you to prove that you're a man. The way I dress has nothing to do with you as an individual. You see it as an emasculation because your idea of masculinity is toxic", she defended lowly and he quickly said, "Askiies?!", for her to repeat what she had just said. She kept quiet and shot her eyes to the shower glass, riveting them there.

"Now I see why abadala feel I need--", he stopped himself before he could finish his sentence. Incomplete as it is, it was enough to light a few firecrackers in her brain. The soft apologetic look on her face flipped into a scowl.

"What? That you need another wife? Because I'm not good enough?!", she shot out.

"Fix yourself...", with that, he left.

"Manqoba!", she yelled for attention. He kept walking.

After he shut the door to the whole room, she screamed and sent a hard and impulsive punch into the mirror above the wash basin. The second victim of two. It sliced her soft hand when it came crashing down and breaking even further upon impact with the ceramic surface below it. All her senses flushed down her face contemporaneously, bringing her to earth after a moment of shutting her out. She inspected the hand and realized that the bleeding was bad. Her hand carefully went into the basin and she tapped the faucet up so hot water flows out. She whimpered when it came in contact with her torn and bruised skin. The diluted blood ran over the pieces of the mirror that fell into the centre. She waited for the blood to retire in its flow but it wasn't happening. She then went across the room to the closet to look for her first aid kit. Inevitably leaving drop trails of blood. She got there and found a bandage and wrapped it around her hand. She changed into pair of velvet tracksuits and left with only her phone and car keys. She passed by Manqoba's study and found it closed. She then stopped for a second before deciding against it.

"Muhluri", she called him once she got into the car, strapping on her seat belt. She wiped her tears with the back of her hand. Something in her needed to hear his voice desperately.

"Heyyy, wa rila? What's going on?" (Are you crying?), he questioned in great concern.

"Where are you?"-Enhle

"I'm at home. Ku endleka yini Enhle? Where are you?" (What's going on?)

She sobbed and tried to speak. The muscles around her mouth felt tired and painful. She ended up closing her mouth while seated in the slight dark of the garage.

"Tell me where you are so I can come get you?"-Muhluri.

He eventually went quiet and allowed her to collect herself enough to speak. When the current of her tears stopped choking her,

"Can you check my hand?"

"Sure", he said curiously.

"I'll be there in a minute"

"I'm not on call today"

She went dead on the line.

"Okay. I'll just have to see who's there"

"I'm at home. I'll send you the coordinates"

She went quiet again and wiped her red nose with a pocket tissue.

"Okay", agreeing, eventually.

...

Mxolisi eventually went back after he was done with his tattoo. He arrived 20 minutes later after Lwandile.

"Where's your mother?", he asked him and Lwandile laughed lightly, seated lazily by the couch.

"Why? Are you done? Lemme see", Lwa asked, referring to the tattoo.

"Yeah", he said excitedly and extended his hand to show him the big black eagle circling almost his entire lower arm.

"This is so pretty omg", Lwandile admired it. Mxo smiled with pride.

"I know right? And you? How was swimming?"

"Yoh. Ryan was angry today so he overworked us. I am so flippin tired"

"Who needs motivation to quit when Ryan is your coach? He's another reason why I dropped it", Mxo remarked before dropping himself on the couch.

"He's a big time mood killer", they stopped complained when they heard the front door opening. Mxo froze a bit. Muzi appeared and he sighed from relief. He appreciated the respite from his mother's expected earful.

"Ja nina", he greeted them coolly and they greeted back with smiles.

"Is your mother back?"

Lwandile shook his head. Muzi took out his phone to call her. When he established that she was still at the shops, he went to sit next to Mxo. His eyes fell on his hard-to-miss arm bedecked in black ink.

"This is new", he said as he raised Mxo's arm to inspect it. Mxo just waited for another comment to direct his reply.

"An eagle. Why it specifically?", Mxo asked, still inspecting the fresh tattoo.

"It's there to remind me that it's in my nature to soar high, no matter the obstacle or the circumstance", he explained and Muzi nodded a few slow nods in approval.

"I like it. Just don't get more in places you won't be able to cover should you need to okay?"

Mxolisi laughed.

"Like where? My face and ruin this pretty muh'fxcker? Never."

Muzi laughed as well and brushed Mxo's head before standing up.

"Lwandile are you okay?", he asked suspiciously at the state he was in. Lwandile was already dozing off with his eyes half open.

"The water drained the life out of him", Mxolisi replied on his behalf.

"Oh konje it's Monday today...", Muzi commented and stepped over to him with the navy jacket in his other hand. Mxolisi nodded and took out his phone.

"Boy? Lwandile?", Muzi gently tapped his cheek to wake him up.

"Hambo lala ekamaren you'll sprain your neck here"(Go sleep in your room)

Lwandile swallowed languidly, stretched his arms first before standing up and pulling his bag and blazer off the couch.

...

Evelyn heard screeching and shuffling noises in Melokuhle's open room and decided to go check the cause behind them. She found a basket full of his sheets outside the door.

"Sonke?", she called out cautiously when she jumped over the miscellaneous pile blocking the door.

"What's going on?", she questioned when she saw him appearing from the bathroom at her call.

"Ngiya cleana gogo"(I'm cleaning), he reported and she looked around. The bed was balanced on its head by the wall. The study table moved to a different location- a corner.

"But why?", she was still baffled. "Did they skip your room this morning?"

He laughed.

"No. You wouldn't understand", he stated and brought the bed back to stand on all fours. He then pulled the light brown fitted sheet from the chair and asked her for help. She approached with doubt, still trying to figure out the reason behind this extensive cleaning. The fitted the sheet to the mattress together. He occasionally raised his face, struggling to decide whether to ask or not.

"Gogo?"

"Hm?", she answered, running out of breath. When they were done she dumped her weight on the corner of the bed.

"Haa you're already tired?", he laughed.

"Hey angiyona intanga yakho phela mina. Ihambe no moya iminyaka"(I'm not your age mate. The years have gone by), they laughed together as she pulled him towards her so he could sit.

"What is it?"-Evelyn.

"Why did Ava leave?", he finally decided on the right string of words.

"I am not the right person you should be asking about that baby"

"Please gogo. She always changes the topic when we speak about this. Always avoiding why she can't come home if not giving excuses. Why is my most immediate part of the family in shambles?"

Evelyn sighed heavily and placed her hand on his far shoulder.

"Your sister was dealing with a lot Melo. Especially when she turned 15. Her mental health was very... sensitive and volatile. Unpredictable. I can't count the number of times we've had to fetch from public spaces because of panic attacks and meltdowns. Sometimes she'd just drop to the floor and the people around would have to call an ambulance. It's a miracle how she made it out of high school. When she was 16, she became addicted to alcohol, and other stuff. Luckily, we found out sooner so we managed to contain it", Evelyn explained and Melo just sat there, listening.

"You need to understand that Ava was not raised by your parents as a baby. You know this right?"

He nodded.

"I think she began attaching your mom's arrest to her as a person since the first woman she knew as mom was also in jail"

"You mean like, blaming herself?"

"Sort of. Yes. At least that's what I think. It took multiple, multiple therapy sessions for her to get back on track again. Bese sis'khohliwe ne smile sakhe ukuthi sibukeka kanjani"(We had even forgotten how her smile looked like)

"But she doesn't sound and seem like a troubled somebody to me. Why did you let her go if she was that unstable?"

"We didn't want to. However, when she landed her first job in Australia, that was the first time in a very long we've seen her that happy. Keeping her here wasn't going to do any good", she continued to explain and there was silence.

"What do you mean your family is in shambles? You have a mother and father that love and care for you. Including your brothers"

"UMa ngiyamthanda and I appreciate the way angithanda ngakhona. She doesn't make feel like an outcast but recently, I've been feeling this void in my heart that just won't go away"(I love ma and I appreciate how she also loves me)

"See why I don't want you talking to your mother on the phone? You're always a mess after each and every phone call"

"Don't start gogo. Please don't start..."

Evelyn raised both hands in surrender and looked away. The maroon vacuum cleaner kept her eyes company as Melo digested the contents of their conversation.

"Someone is here to see you", Nokwanda reported to Evelyn after knocking on Melo's door. She thought it was one of the people who usually drop by for the queen's point of view in their personal lives, for guidance. She stood up and promised Melokuhle that they'll continue when she comes back. She walked out with Nokwanda as they engaged in banter and chit chat. Her smile disappeared when she saw Mbhekiseni by the couch, legs cross and arms outstretched over the headrest on the couch. He was certainly feeling comfortable.

"Sawubona swidat"(Hello sweetheart), he greeted with the widest of all smiles. Evelyn sneered and looked away briefly.

"Thank you, Nokwanda", she said and Nokwanda proceeded to her duties in the kitchen. Evelyn marched to him and raised him by his foul-smelling oversized jacket.

He dragged her out the glass door and closed it as they stood outside.

"WHAT THE HELL--", she hissed through gritted teeth.

"What the hell are you doing here?", she lowered her voice as her eyes travelled the inside of the house with speed, to ensure that nobody was coming.

"Hawu. Ngikutshelile ukuthi ngizobuya. Awusho, sishada nini mina nawe ngisale ngihambisa le suit yam kuma dry cleaner?"(I told you I'll be back. Tell me, when are we getting married so I can take my suit to the laundromat?), he then twirled in his grey attire, raising the jacket only for Evelyn to see the few loops he missed

when he rounded his ravaged and brown leather belt eaten by overuse. She felt fury rising in her chest.

"Mbhekiseni. I no longer want to see you here or else I'm going to set the bulldogs on you are we clear?"

"Uyayithanda indodana yakho mara wena?"(Do you love your son?), he threatened and his awful breath flew right into her nostrils. He was drunk as a skunk.

"How much do you want?", she asked in a low and overpowered voice. A mischievous smile grew on his face.

"Yabona ke?"(You see now?)

"How much do you want Mbhekiseni?!", she hissed some more, still trying to see if anybody was coming. The only people she could see were the lawnmowers at a far distance.

"Uyangazi angihluphi kakhulu mina. Nginike nje i-one thauzen fafandrethi ngizophuma eynweleni

zwakho"(You know I'm not bothersome. Just give me R1500 and I'll disappear)

"I don't have that kind of cash with me right now. I'll send it to your bank account hamba ke", she said trying to shoo him away.

"Haibo azongenzan ama bank charges? Ithumele ku Shoprite sthandwa kuzoba ngcono"(Bank charges are going to rip me apart. Send it to Shoprite)

"I'll include the fee hamba Mbhekiseni tuu", she continued trying to chase him away without having to touch him.

"Awungithi mancaa ngo kiss phela(give me a kiss), he stuck out his pouted dry lips for her. She frowned at the thought and rolled her eyes as he kept his shut.

"Hamba Mbhekiseni ngiyak'cela baba so I can quickly send you your R2000", she decided to bribe him and he smiled, forgetting completely about the kiss distracted by the monetary increase. He finally left. She placed her hands on her waist and sighed off the anxiety and exhaustion that comes with pleading with a man like Mbhekiseni. Her nightmare in a tattered suit came back.

"Nkosiyam ufunani manje?!"(What do you want now?)

"Yey CISHE, cishe ngakhohlwa. Qabula phela"(I almost forgot about my kiss), he pouted again and came closer. Evelyn slapped his approaching hand and backed away. Melokuhle appeared and Mbhekiseni opened his eyes at the sound of the door clicking open

"Gogo uright?"(Are you okay grandma?), he asked with his eyes lodged on Mbhekiseni, threatening him.

"Uhm, yes boy. I am fine. He was just leaving", Evelyn stated.

"I was?", Mbhekiseni asked and jerked his head back in surprise.

"Yes. You were", Evelyn gravely said and pushed him forward to give him a jumpstart for his journey. Melo's eyes travelled back and forth between the two. She wiped her hands on her dress and marched back into the house.

Chapter Thirty-One

Secrets are like decay worms. The more one tries to conceal them away, the impossible it gets by each minute, especially where blackmail has its oily nose deep in the can. Evelyn kept pacing her bedroom, not knowing where to start scratching the itching rash that is Mbhekiseni. She knew hard and well that he wasn't going to stop seeing her as an ATM machine at the corner of his dog house, for his consistent convenience. She dropped all her weight on the bed and stood up a second later, marching out to Manqoba's study.

"Ma?", Manqoba stood up from the chair behind his desk. She wasn't in the best shape of herself. He sat down on the couch next to her.

"What's wrong?"-Manqoba

"Son I'm in trouble"

"Surely it's nothing we can't solve. Tell me what's wrong?"

"Mbhekiseni knows about Mthokozisi"

"Let's start here, who is Mthokozisi?"

Evelyn swallowed before answering the question.

"Umntwana ka Muzi"(Muzi's son), she reported.

"You have lost me"

"Muzi has a son he doesn't know what. I am responsible for the conception of that son. All this happened 17 years ago, after Bab'Ngema told us that uMaDlamini was to fall pregnant"

Manqoba popped his eyes.

"Wait. What? Where is this son? Is he well taken care of? How come... ma?!"

"He is well taken care of. That goes without saying"

...

Enhle eventually arrived at Muhluri's place. She raised her good hand to knock but retracted it in doubt. She shortly demolished the doubt and went ahead to knock. He opened the door and welcomed her in with a smile, breaking all the walls protecting her forced calm and put-togetherness, leaving her feeling emotionally naked and exposed. She bent her lip, trying hard to convince her face that she was not internally falling apart.

"Heyyy, kas' what's wrong?", his question was laced with concern when he pulled her gently inside for a hug as an attempt to comfort her. The door closed itself when he let it go, then she wept like a little girl who got stood up by the tooth fairy.

"What happened?"-Muhluri, he questioned as he carefully broke the hug to inspect her hand.

"May I?", he felt he needed permission to undo the bandage. She nodded, with a mess for a face.

He proceeded to slowly and considerately remove it, easing up when she flinched of pain. He tensed his brows at the sign of the swollen hand. All this was being done in silence.

"Try to move your fingers ni vona"(...so I can see). She did exactly that. With pained difficulty, she was able to, except here index finger.

“Bend it into a fist”, he grimly instructed and she obeyed.

“You might have torn some tendons but I don’t think there’s anything broken. However, we will still need to do an X-ray. Can you see how bad the swelling is?”

She nodded.

“Let me get you some aspirin for the acute inflammation but first, we need to get you cleaned up”

He declared before gesturing with his hands for her to walk in the direction of the bedrooms.

Curiosity got the better of her.

“Where’s your wife?”, she asked abruptly, trying to avoid any surprises. He chortled to himself and continued walking behind her, amused by the weird look on her face.

“Uri ku endleke yin ka voko ra weh?” (What happened to your hand), he blatantly avoided the question.

“You forgot to translate”, she said before walking into the bathroom he directed her into.

“I smashed it into a mirror”, she divulged. He raised his eyes briefly to her as he squatted and proceeded to look for the first-aid kit in the cupboard.

“Why would you do that?”, he asked out of cooled curiosity and put on the latex gloves.

“I had argument with my husband, he walked out on me and I lost it”

He took her hand and washed it in the tub.

“Mind me asking what about?”

“Another wife. Well, that’s a portion of it. Remember the dress I was wearing the last time I came to your office?”, she asked and he nodded.

“I don't think any normal man would forget it”, Muhluri said and Enhle laughed. They continued trying to get the wound cleaned up.

“Yeah I happened to wear something similar, not knowing that Bab'Bayede was around”

“His father?”

“Sort of”

“Yikes”, Muhluri explained.

A brief, voiceless laugh left Enhle's mouth.

“I was actually hoping you'd have a different view”

“Why?”-Muhluri.

“I don't know. You're... not so patriarchal”

“Situations are different. The approach won't be black and white all the time”, he stated and handed her a towel to dry her hand.

“What do you mean?”

“There's an old adage that says, 'when you get Rome, you must do what the Romans do' ”, he said and stood against the wall.

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“It means, if you want to get along with Romans in their land, you need to become one of them. If you rebel against their way of living, you don't get to complain about their wrath”

“If you're not speaking in a language I don't understand you're speaking in riddles?”

Muhluri laughed. He went to sit on the edge of the tub with her. She still had the towel pressed to her wound for therapeutic pressure.

"Listen, your man is of royal blood right?"

"Y-yeah?"

"Each and every tribe has its own set of rules and ways of doing things. All this to protect the core of the culture and preserve their traditions. You can get away with doing as you please in the bedroom but the moment those habits are seen by your in-laws, I can almost guarantee you that your marriage will not last"

"A whole you, advising me to become the typical wife?"

"I did no such thing. I'm saying, if you want your in-laws off your back, you already know that what to do. If you feel it's not for you, excuse yourself from the mess but these two things cannot coexist if your husband does not stand up for you"

"Would you have stood up for me?", the question came out softly and ignited a mutual stare.

"You know I love my women open-minded, liberated. However, I am not a chief so I cannot speak for a chief's behalf. I told you, not everything is black and white when you want to be realistic", Muhluri explained and Enhle's phone rang. She declined the call from her husband and a message follows.

Are you okay?I'm seeing blood. Where are you?- Manqoba

Muhluri just watched her click her tongue wordlessly. When she raised her eyes, she realized he was waiting for answers. She wanted to speak but decided otherwise. He still kept silent. She had a burning urge to undress him so he rips her apart. She tried leaning in to kiss him but he pulled away with a slight inevitable smile.

"Uhm... I'm sorry. I just--"

"I understand. You're hurting and frustrated"

Brief silence. She eventually nodded. The moment was nothing short of awkward for her.

After rubbing ointment, dressing the wound and giving her pills for the pain and inflammation, Muhluri walked Enhle to the door when she decided she had to leave. They shared their usual hug but broke it slowly. Enhle did not give herself the chance to think about it. She just led her lips to his. Muhluri broke it and placed his hands on her cheeks. She shut her eyes closed. Covered in the liquid of shame.

"Go home and cool your head. If you still want this after that, call me. I don't want to take advantage of your vulnerability ", he stated lowly.

"Do YOU want this?", Enhle asked after opening her eyes to search for the truth in his.

"You know how I feel about you. You just refused to pay attention to it"

"Tintswalo?", she questioned about his wife.

"She died Enhle!", the words were already out before he could stop them.

"Oh...", she let out somberly.

"Yeah"

"When?"

"Three years ago"

"I just thought--, the ring?"

"Don't worry about that..."

He said before opening the door so she walks out. She tried reading the emotions on his face but he concealed them well. She stepped out and awkwardly and he pulled her back inside. He attacked her with a kiss, deepening it with each suck. She reciprocated. He picked her up and continued indulging in her lips, walking to the couch...

...

"I have to go", Enhle said with a smile as she laid on Muhluri's chest.

"I wish you didn't have to", Muhluri said as he played with her hair.

"We'll do this again soon. Plus, I need to pass by Woolies for some toiletries and ice cream. I have a feeling I'm going to need it"

He dropped a kiss on her forehead before she could get up to get dressed. He just laid there naked under the throw.

"You look half dead", she remarked and laughed. He laughed as well.

"You rode me like a fckking horse what did you expect?"

"You also ripped me apart don't play innocent" -Enhle.

She went down to kiss him for the last time. He pulled her so she sits on top of him.

"I've been meaning for a get-away and now I see the perfect opportunity for it...", he said seductively as he stroked her thigh. Her hand on was on his chest.

"That's quite risky"

"That's the whole point"

Enhle laughed.

"Unlike you, I am not an adrenaline junkie"

"Who says I am?" -Muhluri

"The first sign of an adrenaline junkie? The possession of a motorbike for no good reason", Enhle said and Muhluri laughed.

"Listen if I don't leave now, I might never", Enhle said and stood up.

"What? You don't trust me?"

"No. I don't trust myself to make sensible decisions around you"

...

When she got to the store, she pushed her trolley through a few aisles before bumping into Sphehlehle, also on a toiletry run. The atmosphere immediately reeked of all smells of awkward.

"Hello", Sphe greeted before pushing her trolley forward to move past her.

"Sphe!", Enhle called out and Sphe jammed in her steps.

"Yes?"

"I would like to apologize for what happened last time, me faking the bruises and stuff"

Sphe dropped her stiffened shoulders.

"It's okay"

"No it's not. See, I did all that out of jealousy. I shouldn't have"

"It really is okay Enhle. I think it's best we get along since we both can't run away from sharing him"

The "sharing" never sat well with Enhle. An image of Manqoba making love to Sphe invaded her mind and the worm responsible for her anger began drilling into her medulla oblongata, making it difficult for her to sustain her breathing. She forced herself to get a grip.

"Are you okay?", Sphe asked

"Sphe, me faking the injuries does not mean the abuse isn't there. I just had no bruises at the time and I felt I need to convince you"

"What do you mean?"

Enhle unwrapped the bandage carefully on her hand and extended it so Sphe sees it. Sphe had a vomit reflex but managed to send it back.

"I'm sorry I'm not good with bad wounds", she apologized for her reaction. Enhle dressed the wound again.

"He did that to you?"

Enhle nodded.

"I no longer care much about him getting married to somebody else. I just fear for both our lives. But then again, your funeral", with that, she left the aisle.

...

A few days later...

The policeman knock shot Betso up from her seat. Everyone else was in some part of the house. She approached the door to put a halt to the impatient banging.

"Okay okay! I'm coming, yesses", she said as she slid in her slippers. When she opened the door,

"Good day ma'am. Is this the Khumalo residence?", one of the officers asked. She nodded doubtfully.

"Can we speak to your husband?"

She silently gestured them in and promised to go call him. Muzi came down as she was about to go to him.

When you speak of the devil, be sure that he will appear. Bapedi bare gopola tshukudu o namele mohlare.

"Is everything okay here?"-Muzi

"Mr Khumalo, we have a warrant for your arrest in connection with the murder of Mr Khuzwayo and the disappearance of his wife", the policeman said as he approached him with handcuffs.

"You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say or do may be used against you in the court of law. You have the right to legal representation. If you cannot afford a lawyer, the state will provide one for you", he stated

as he handcuffed him. Muzi never said a word. Betso was looking at him for answers.
"I'll speak to you when I come back okay?"

Chapter Thirty-Two

He promised. He promised her never to take any more lives. Betso sat around the lunch table with her sons with uncomfortable silence as a guest of honor. Mxolisi eventually felt compelled to ask, regardless of his mother's mood.

"Mom?", he poked.

"Hm?", she wore a fake smile and made sure to master it.

"Are you okay? You're too quiet"

"I am fine. I'm just tired. I tire easily these days", she lied.

"Is the baby heavy?", he asked and Lwandile laughed lightly, forcing Betso to laugh as well.

"Not really but they do affect how your normal body functions"- Betso

"Are you sad that we're leaving?", Lwandile asked.

"No and yes. Of course I'm going to miss you but it's only for the weekend", she tried to assure. The last thing she needed was them finding out that their father was arrested for murder. The sooner they left, the better it would get for her to think of a solution to get him out of there.

"Okay. I'm trying to text dad so he can be here when we leave but he's not replying", Lwandile informed as he checked his phone. Betso swallowed her juice forcefully down her throat before she could reply.

"He's probably in a meeting. You know he doesn't want to be disturbed", she smeared her lie with more, already exhausted with wearing her normal self over what she was really feeling. The intercom rang and she stood up to attend to it.

"That must be your driver", she said before leaving the table.

"Aren't you burning in that jacket?", Lwandile questioned Mxolisi and laughed.

"Ftsek", Mxolisi sneered before laughing as well.

"You look like one of those girls who hide pregnancies under oversized dry macs", Lwandile continued to mock him.

"Couldn't you wear denim instead of that bomber jacket?"

"This was the first thing I found. Besides, it hides the arm well so...", he explained and Betso came back.

"Your car is waiting for you outside. Off you go", she informed and they both stood up to hug her.

"But I think it's time we drove ourselves mom. Don't you think?", Mxolisi tested her patience intentionally.

"For what good reason?"-Betso

"We're old now. Re banna nnou"(We're men now)

"Not in this house baby", she said and they all laughed. She hugged them both at once and kissed their cheeks, wishing them safe travels. Mxo wheeled out their shared suitcase as Lwandile walked in front of him. Betso waited for them to be completely out of sight before taking out her phone and calling Manqoba.

"Makoti", he answered. She began explaining everything to him, everything that was said during the arrest.

"I'll be there first thing tomorrow morning"- Manqoba.

"He can't sleep in there please come today"

"Muzi is tougher than you think you know?"

"Still. I won't be comfortable knowing he's spending the night in there. I am begging you. Besides, you have to leave before the boys get there to avoid having to explain to them what really went down", she sputtered unstopably. Manqoba exhaled. Then agreed. She thanked him and began looking for her car keys so she could go see Muzikayise. A picture of Bongiwe randomly flashed in her brain and she felt a cramp traveling down her tummy. She waited for it to end and continued with her business.

...

Enhle sat on her bed daydreaming about her stolen moments with the doctor. Some thoughts sent strong butterflies in her stomach and she pressed her thighs together to get her misbehaving lady bits in line. Manqoba walked into the room, gave her a loving "Hey baby" and went to the closet. Her explanation for her disappearance was that she had went to the hospital. He apologized for walking out on her and she accepted it. Her thoughts were rushing to be some place else. When she saw him walking in there, she followed him. She found him packing his clothes into a black gym bag.

"Going somewhere?"

"Yeah. Muzi has been arrested. I need to do some damage control", he divulged as he carelessly folded the clothes.

"Since when do you pack for yourself?"

"I do everything myself these days. Besides, your hand is hurt", he said and she was left wondering what the cold tone in his voice meant.

"You're sleeping at Betso's house?", she asked suspiciously as she learned against the door, wearing nothing but his shirt. He nodded and zipped up the bag. She admired how his muscles were flexing as he moved about. She walked closer to seduce him and he immediately said, "Not now". He then walked out and she marched to the bed to fetch her phone.

You better keep your hands off of my man since yours is not around. - Enhle

That's the message she sent to Betso before heading to the shower, preparing for an impromptu date with the good doctor.

...

"You're still not willing to talk?", detective Nkomo was running out of patience with Muzi.

"Why am I here exactly?", Muzi asked as he leaned back on his chair, also tired of being asked the same thing a million times.

"This is the third murder you're found in connection with. I'd be dammed if you slipped through our fingers this time"

"In connection with? Do you have the evidence to support this statement?"

"You were seen leaving with this man from his daughter's funeral"

"And?"

"There's a witness that saw you putting a gun behind you when you walked out of that room you were both in"

"I carry a gun everywhere I go Nkomo"

"What for?"

"Protection", Muza stated coolly and kept eye contact with the frustrated detective.

"What do you need protection from?"

"Not that it's any of your business but a lot is happening in this world"

"You mean the world you think you own just because you have money?"

"Please speak language I'll be able to understand"-Muzi

"What?"

"I do not understand a word you just said"

Nkomo gave him a threatening look"

"Detective, you and I both know that you have no reason to keep me here. Unlike you, I have better things to do so when can I get out of here?"

"Also, how did you manage to get this warrant you're always throwing in my face?", Muzi added.

"I'm not the only one who is tired of your crap"

"Touché"

"I am not the late detective Mangena. You will not play on my head boet"

"Understood.

When am I getting out of here before I take legal action? It won't be cute once I do. Trust me"

...

The boys eventually arrived. Melo was already outside to welcome them. They shared fist bumps and a couple of laughs. Evelyn heard the noise as she was watering her flowers at the back of the house and went to the front to go greet them. Laughter filled the whole yard as they exchanged raillery. Evelyn suggested that they walk inside the house and Mxo immediately alerted that he had to be elsewhere. He took off his jacket and handed it to her. She took it and placed it over her arm.

"But you just got here", Evelyn complained.

"I know gogo I'll be quick. I promise"

"Okay. Just be careful okay?"

He kissed her cheek and nodded. The rest of them walked into the house as he walked out. Darkness was beginning to adorn the sky. He called Ndalo to surprise her since she was only expecting him to arrive the next day.

"Hey baby"- Ndalo.

"Sthandwasami. U busy?"(My love. Are you busy?), he asked breathlessly, trying to catch his breath as he's been running.

"Ngigeza izitsha. Wena?"(I'm washing the dishes. You?)

"Where's your mom?"

"I told you that she's leaving nje"

"Are you alone?"

"Nope. I'm with my sister. Or babysitter if you like", she said and left.

"Can you come out?", he asked and she froze. Suddenly her brain stopped walking. It was easier just dating him over the phone.

"Ndalo?"

"Hm?"

"Ngicela ukuk'bona"(Can I see you?)

"Okay", she agreed voicelessly. He cut the call and waited against the ruins of an old and delapidated house.

With his direction, Ndalo finally arrived. She tried to speak but he greeted her with a kiss instead. This startled her but she closed her eyes when she finally grasped the gist of his actions. They both smiled when they broke the kiss. Mxo placed his forehead against hers and his hands on her waist. She felt the coldness of his skin due to the evaporation of his sweat, entangled with the smell of his applied scent.

"I missed you so so bad", he whispered and she giggled.

"I missed you too", she whispered back.

"I promised my grandma that I wouldn't be long but I just had to see you"

"So you're leaving now?", she sadly asked, hoping he would say something different. He nodded.

"Something bad recently happened in the fam so she has reason to worry, but I promise to take you out and we'll spend the whole day together. Okay?", he tried to pacify her and brushed her chin. She nodded in approval. He went in for another kiss and tightened the hug between them. She felt his growing erection and couldn't hide how alarmed she was.

"Yini?"(What?), Mxo asked.

"You're poking me"

He snorted and looked down.

"You had better get used to it. I am attracted to you Ndalo. My body can't help it. I legit have no say in this"

He explained and she laughed in a single breath, shyly. She was also trying to mask away how her own body was reacting in his presence. His phone rang and he took it out to have a look. 'Gogo Eve' was calling.

"See what I mean?", he said to Ndalo before answering the call. His other hand was still around her.

"Gog'?"

"Yeah I'm okay. I'm on my way"

"Sharp"

"I really have to go baby", he begged. She understood and he picked her up without any warning whatsoever. She screamed and laughed all at the same time.

"Wenzani?!"(What are you doing), she couldn't stop laughing.

He backed her against the wall and planted a series of wet kisses on her neck, with his hands holding on to her thick thighs.

"Mxo...", she was fast running out of breath. He put her down and pulled his jeans up, fixing their position over his briefs.

"Ngiyak'thanda Buhlebendalo uyezwa? Ngik'thanda enye into ayichazeki saan", he hoarsely stated while caging her in on the wall with his arms. She was about to respond when his phone rang again. He stole a kiss from her lips and walked her home. When he was sure she was in, he ran back home.

...

When Manqoba arrived at Betso's house, she welcomed him in and he placed himself on one of the bar stools in the kitchen, asking for food. She dished up for him and poured juice for the both of them. Manqoba stood up to go look for alcohol in her fridge. He knew it had to be there if Muzi lived in that house full time. He found a Heineken dumpie and went back to his seat. He then popped it open with his teeth.

"Uthi kwenzeken?"(What exactly happened?)

"The police arrived here and arrested him for the murder of some man. When I went there to visit him, they refused"

"Who refused?", Manqoba asked as his spoon dug into his plate.

"A detective Nkomo"

"Nkomo?"

"Yes"

His phone began vibrating before he could interrogate the matter any further.

"Gumbi?", it was one of the guards.

"E phuma? Ngale skhathi? Uphuma uyaphi?"(Going out? At this hour? Where is she going?), he questioned and checked his wrist watch.

"So nina nithathana nama bribe from unkosikazi these days?"(So you're now taking bribes from my wife now?)

"If it's not you then who is it?", fury was burning around his temples. He let out a very heavy breath.

"Okay. Thanks for letting me know. I'll reward you when I get home", he cut the call and threw the phone on the marble table top.

"Is everything okay?", Betso was afraid to ask but she did anyway. He raised his eyes to her once and took the phone in his hand again.

"B'thelezi. I need you to follow and find someone for me". Betso excused him and his phonecall but couldn't help putting two and two together, getting a perfect four...

Chapter Thirty-Three

Betso saw it best to excuse Manqoba, whose mood had turned to the smell of ruined milk. Now the SMS she decided to pay no mind to resurfaced in her brain. She initially thought it was just Enhle having one of her crazy outbursts that she always lives to regret later but the problem seemed to be heavier on the scale than it seemed. She sat on the bed and contemplated calling her to ensure that everything was okay. She dialled her number the moment she stopped thinking too much about it and waited for her to answer.

"Yes?", that was Enhle's intentionally rude reply.

"Are you okay?"

"I am perfect. Why do you ask?"

"Bathong Enhle what is the meaning of the message you sent to me in the afternoon?"

"I meant exactly what I wrote there"

"Why would you even think I'd sleep with your man? My husband's older brother? Are you insane?"

"Who are you calling insane Betso?! Child get off your high horse and stop pretending like your marriage is perfect. Muzi cheats like his life depends on it and you out here trying to act holier than thou", Enhle shot out with aggression.

"And where is that even coming from? Yoh yazin? Sorry I called. Bye", Betso put an immediate stop to the conversation. She brought the screen to her eyes and scoffed, in pure disbelief. When she stood up to go check on Manqoba, Muzi was standing by the door. Looking like the brand ambassador for exhaustion.

"Baby?"

"Sthandwasami", he replied before walking in.

"How long have you been standing there?"

"Long enough", he extended his hands, requesting a hug. She rushed into his arms and he tightened them around her.

"What message did Enhle send to you in the afternoon?", he asked steadily with his chin over her head.

Betso swallowed before answering, not sure that she should.

"She said I mustn't sleep with Manqoba just because you're not around"

He pushed her by her shoulders and frowned, with his hands still on her.

"What?"-Muzi

She nodded.

"To be honest I feel insulted", she lowly let out.

"As you should. No MQ must get his bxtch in line. She's going too far", he said with irritation. "What else did she say?", he added.

"That...", she almost told him what she said about him but decided against it. "Forget her. You must be hungry", she said, pulling him by the hand". He pulled her back.

"Aren't you going to ask me about the arrest?", he lodged his eyes on her. She dropped her shoulders.

"I'm really not sure I want to know", she loosened her hold on his hands. He didn't. They just sat there motionlessly lounging in his.

"Well I want to tell you what happened..."

"Would you have if you never got arrested?", she maintained eye contact, eyes filled with disappointment. He dropped his face.

"Khumalo, I am raising male kids here. You're a great father trust me, but that also has its cons. You know they see an epitome of perfection when they look at you. All three of them. They behave and talk like you do, more or less. Everything you do is correct in their eyes..." , she reprimanded with calm as he kept his ashamed face down.

"Ngiyaxolisa mommy. I am really sorry. I am sorry for being a potentially bad example but I am not sorry for killing that bastard", he said and Betso gave up.

"There's something I need to tell you", she began confessing and he raised his face from the floor. She led him to the bed and they sat.

"I did something"-Betso.

"Okay?"

"I... I bribed a policeman"

"What for?"

"Your son was arrested for assault. I had to get him out"

"The stolen accounts thing?"

"Yes. See why I don't want them seeing you get arrested, hear about you killing people and the likes?", Betso reluctantly agreed.

"Is that what you wanted to tell me?"

She nodded.

"It's okay", he said, looking at her suspiciously.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"-Betso. It took a moment before he could reply.

"Mm-mh nex. Let me go share a drink with the bro before I shower and we sleep okay? I promised him I'll be back", he said and she nodded. He got up to give her a brief kiss, which deepened with no intention at all.

...

THE NEXT DAY...

After Mxo sat his grandmother down to sweet talk her into borrowing him her car for a personal "errand" and succeeded in assuring her that he will be safe, he went behind the house to steal a few of her flowers for Ndalo, without permission. He placed them in the backseat and went past the shops to get a few goodies from Checkers and McD. He established that she loves the junk from the latter. She came to the car that he'd parked at a distance, in a simple jean-tee-Vans outfit.

"Aren't you going to open the door for me like they do in movies?", she teased as a greeting. He never saw her approaching, distracted by his phone. He laughed and she got in the car.

"You look cute", he complimented as he leaned in for a hug.

"Thank you. You look cute too", she said and he frowned.

"Ayikho indoda e cute"(There's no such thing as a cute man)

Ndalo laughed.

"Oh please. Who taught you that?"

"My dad", he said before leading his upper body in the direction of the back to get the flowers. She was about to stop him before she began sneezing. She gestured with her hands that he made a wrong move and that she did not want the flowers. She couldn't speak. The sneezes now had a more dangerous friend- wheezing.

"Baby what's wrong?", his panicked self threw the flowers on the dashboard and tried to get her to breathe. He opened all the windows with speed and tried to think. He wasn't able to think properly. Ndalo had her hands on her neck and occasionally beating her chest.

"Okay... okay...", he said to himself as he dialed his mother's number.

"Mama? My girlfriend is suffocating I don't know what to do"

"Yeah it's just us two. I gave her flowers trying to be roman--"

"Asthma? I don't know"

"Yes there is a paper bag in the car", he reported before putting her on speaker and emptying out the McD paper bag. One of the cups with a fizzy drink spilt on his jeans and the driver's seat. He couldn't care less about that at that moment he just had to get Ndalo breathing properly again. He put it over her nose and mouth and said "Breathe baby please". She was already breathing into it, trying to make the feeling of not being able to go away.

"Is she breathing?", a concerned Betso asked from the phone speaker. Mxo ignored, threw the flowers out the window, got out of the car and went to open the door to Ndalo's side. Her wheezing was calming down. He was brushing her back hoping that it also helps.

"Kopano?!", Betso yelled.

"Ma?"

"Is she breathing?"

"Yeah she's getting better", he reported. Her eyes were teary when she put the bag down, breathless with her chest moving back and forth.

"Baby?", Betso called out.

"She's talking to you", Mxo said to Ndalo before he could squat down outside of the car, on the sandy ground. Ndalo wasn't sure whether to speak or not.

"M-ma?", she replied.

"Are you okay now?", Betso asked from a place of concern. Mxo had his forehead on her against her thigh, still digesting the relief.

"Yeah I'm fine thanks"

"Are you asthmatic?"

"Yeah I am"

"Since when?"

"Since I was a child"

"Did he throw the flowers away?"

"Yeah he did"

"Do you have your pump with you? What's your name?"

"Ndalo Shezi. It's at home. I haven't had an episode in a while"

"Listen baby you must always have it with you okay? There won't always be a paper bag to save you"

She nodded and assured her that she'll never forget it.

"Ube right. Give Koppie the phone", she said lovingly and Ndalo shook him on the shoulder. He took it and stood up.

"I'll check on you later. Don't do things you aren't supposed to do", she commanded and he just said

"Okay", instead of giving her his usual naughty laugh. He cut the call and went back to the driver's seat. They both closed the doors and he began driving.

"Are you okay?", Ndalo asked.

"I almost killed you Ndalo there's no way I'd be okay"

She took his free hand and squeezed it.

"You didn't know baby", she said weakly, with her head against her seat.

"That wouldn't have mattered if you had died"

"I was scared too but I'm fine now because I didn't die. My mom always says that could've and should've shouldn't matter"

Mxo kept quiet and continued driving with the sombre look on his face. They were approaching a car wash and Ndalo suggested they get it cleaned up before he gets into trouble. He tried protesting but she was persistent. The place was combination of a 'Kota Kingdom' and 'Car Care Surgery', the names written on the huge board. The car wash has a 'Pay first' rule so they did that before Ndalo suggested they walk into the kota place, trying to pull Mxo out of his unpleasant mood. The place was pretty much empty since it was the late hours of the morning. Mxo dropped himself on one of the white plastic chairs and Ndalo went to order. She came back to sit across him. He took her hands and watched her till she was uncomfortable.

"Ungibukani?"(What are you looking at?), she said and laughed.

"Ngiyak'thanda Ndalo"(I love you). She blushed before saying, "I love you too Koppie". He laughed.

"Hayi yaboh manje?"(You see now?), he held out his hand in disapproval. The lady behind the black bars of the shop, embedded in a red wall yelled that their order was ready. Mxo got up and took out his wallet.

"I've already paid", Ndalo said and he dropped his hand in impatience.

"I thought I was the one taking you out?", he said. She giggled and said,"You are", then continued walking to get the kotas. He smiled and shook his head, placing his wallet back into his back pocket. They stepped outside and the guys said they were still finishing up.

"Where exactly are you taking me?", Ndalo questioned as they stood in the sun.

"I booked an air b'n'b for the day", he informed and placed a kiss on her cheek. The two gents cleaning the car went "Ola! Ola! Kwenzwa net kanje mshana!"(That's exactly how it's done), chanting and cheering him on. He laughed and Ndalo blushed onto his shoulder.

...

Melokuhle woke up missing Mthokozisi but he decided to ignore it. He hated him but he still lowkey loved him. He ignored the feeling and got himself cleaned up, wondering how they allowed him to sleep till that late and actually miss breakfast. He put on his shorts and opened the door for some air and yelled Mxolisi's name.

"Akekho!"(He's not here), his grandmother's disembodied voice yelled back. He remembered that Mxo mentioned he would be out for the whole day the previous night when they were watching the game.

Minutes later, Evelyn appeared on his door and stood against it with a smile.

"How did you sleep?", she asked.

"I overslept", he said and continued to pull the curtains open.

"Good. I've noticed you haven't been sleeping well these days", she remarked and his phone beeped.

"Yeah-I-guess-I-needed... it", he said in slurred speech trying to get his head to be in two places at the same time.

Lunch. Today. Two?-Mthokzs

He read and digested the text. What? He questioned it its motive.

"Are you okay?", grandma asked.

"I'm fine"

...

Enhle and Muhluri left the hotel after many of their steamed sessions to go get some food and fresh air. She wore sunglasses and wrapped a silk head wrap over her weave to conceal her obvious identity. They laughed their way into the parking lot and Muhluri's eyes were the first to meet with Manqoba's, standing against the bonnet. Enhle's followed and she almost tripped and fell. Muhluri held her by the waist so she doesn't hit the ground with her teeth.

"Baby? What are you doing here? You were only supposed to be here tomorrow?", she rambled in fear.

"You wanted me back so I came back. Your wish is my command remember?"

"I did?"

"Yes. Otherwise you wouldn't be doing wonke la manyala trying to test my patience", he sneered and she kept quiet. Muhluri forgot to remove his hand from her waist. She shifted it away.

"Get in the car", he commanded and left them there, getting into the driver's seat.

"Don't go he's going to kill you!", Muhluri pleaded with her. Enhle was already crying. She wiped her tears with her sweaty palms.

"He'd never do that. If I don't go he might kill you. Go back to the room. Keep my stuff and I'll come fetch them from you", she subtly instructed and he held her by the wrists, trying to stop her from leaving with her husband. Manqoba stepped one-foot-out of the car and yelled that Enhle was wasting his time. She pulled her wrists out of Muhluri's hands and sobbed, walking slowly to the car like a lizard suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Muhluri mentally noted the number plate with his photographic memory, frustrated with being caught between a rock and a hard place. Enhle got in the car and Manqoba drove off. She looked back to see Muhluri but her eyes fell on the 20 litres of what smelt like petrol after careful, sensory consideration.

"Manqoba?", she tried questioning him about it but he never replied, keeping his eyes diligently on the road.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Melokuhle dropped himself on the chair across where Mthokozisi was seated, who then raised his eyes from his phone screen with irritated eyes.

"Were you never taught any manners?"-Mtho

"Manners are subjective", he replied coolly and Mtho shook his head, raising his hand for the waiter.

"So, to what do I owe the pleasure of being summoned by Mthokozisi the great?"

His lunch partner released a heavy breath before speaking.

"I don't know. I just, can't we put everything behind us and move the fxck on? Like stop behaving lil bxtches?"

"You're the one with issues. Angeke ngidansele isiginzi sakho phela mina"(I won't dance to your tune),

Melokuhle stated and took out his phone.

"What issues?"

"Remember in grade 1 when--"

"Ahh!", Mthokozisi threw his hands in the air.

"No hear me out. I want to show you where your issues began", Melo said and couldn't stop himself from laughing.

"Show me"

"You dropped and broke my sharpener after I told you that my grandmother got it for me overseas. Remember that one with the glass container?"

"That was an honest mistake"

"If it was a mistake why did you not apologize for it? I actually don't remember you apologizing for anything"

"If I had apologized would it have put together your sharpener?"

"You're an a**hole Mthokozisi"

"So you're still holding on to a 12 year old grudge?"

"My car? Was that also a mistake?"

"To be honest, that was purely intentional"

"Why?"

"I was hoping it was enough to break you and Busi apart. You never deserved her and you know it. You could've treated her better but you chose not to"

"Uyanya and unya in abundance. What the fxck do you know about Busi and I?!"

"You don't cheat on the people you love Melo. I hated being the one to always pick up the pieces each time you broke her heart. Fixing your shxt all the way from the friendzone!"

Melokuhle shot up from his chair and pulled Mtho up by his t-shirt. Mthokozisi grabbed him the same way and they shared a death stare. A waiter arrived trying to break the altercation and Melokuhle hissed that he shouldn't hear Busi's name from Mtho's mouth ever again. Mthokozisi kept the stare of intimidation for a moment before turning to the waiter who had his hands on theirs trying to pull them apart. Everyone in the restaurant was watching.

"So we have to fight first before we can get your attention?", he jabbed at him and the waiter cleared his throat,

scratching behind his ear.

"What would you like to order Melo and Mtho?"

"We haven't decided. We'll call you once we do"-Melo said, still squashing the front of Mtho's tee the same way he was squashing his.

"Yoh rich kids!", he dramatically left the table. The two couldn't help but laugh at how they just took out their frustrations on the innocent waiter. They dropped back to their chairs. Melo signalled to him that he should bring two glasses of orange juice. His usual order. For a moment it reminded him of Busi but he shut down the thought before it could solidify.

"I'm starting to think you never liked me at all", Melokuhle confessed and Mtho pulled a frown.

"Me? Never liked YOU? You were the one who was always giving me a bad eye on the very first week of school because you definitely felt like I was competition. I never sucked up to you and licked your a** like all the other kids did just cause you're royalty. Until we had to pair up for that stupid numeracy activity and we were the only ones left without partners. If I hadn't come up to your desk you were never gonna come to mine. If there's anybody who never liked the other here it is you"

"Lies. I just loved working alone. I still do"

"Yeah msun whatever"

A light laugh escaped from Melo.

"So, this is your lousy idea of a truce?", Melo said with a mocking smile. The juice arrived and the waiter left with the black tray.

Mthokozisi stabbed him with a thin look before laughing.

"Yeah before that, I kinda need to get something off my chest. It's been bothering me for a while now", Mtho began confessing.

Melokuhle took a sip in his sunken position on the chair.

"Shoot"

"Don't get mad...", he said lowly and Melo sat up straight attentively.

"I'm not promising shxt. What is it?"

"Well, a week before Busi died, I kinda felt like I was running out of time or some crap. The feeling was mad weird like I was the one who was dying yabo? So, I... kinda shot my shot"

Melo laughed.

"What do you mean? You've been shooting your shot since third grade and she been rejecting your a** since then"

"If you weren't distracting her you know very well that she woulda been mine"

Melo huffed out a laugh.

"Keep telling yourself that charmer boy"

"But what I actually mean is, by shooting my shot... I... kissed her"

The friendly face Melo had on immediately disappeared before he sent all the juice in his glass flying to Mtho's face.

...

Mbalenhle continued trying to get through to her husband who wasn't having it. It felt like they spent a long time on the road. He adjusted his rear view mirror and kept grabbing a few glances when he saw the silver car that he was sure was following them. Enhle noticed this and realized that Muhluri was indeed following them. She began praying in silent Egyptian tongues that the whole situation does not get bloody.

"See anything interesting back there?", he sarcastically asked and kept his eyes on the road. She quickly shook her head in disapproval so much that her tears spattered sideways.

"Open that and load that gun", he further instructed, referring to the glove compartment.

"Why?", she voicelessly questioned in concern.

"Well, I was hoping he wouldn't dare me some more but I kinda knew he would"

"What do you mean?"

"Come on Enhle. He's a doctor. He's addicted to saving lives and he thinks yours is in danger so... and judging by your phone calls, he cares about you, which he had no business doing in the first place"

"But why--"

"Yekela ukungibuza into eyningi and do as I said"(Stop asking me a dozen questions...)

"Please don't involve him in this?", she begged.

"Me? Involve who? Your man insists on being all up in my business so I'm going to lay out the red carpet for him to the VIP section"

Enhle did not reply. She sobbed and wiped her tears.

"Khala wenza lento engithe uyiyeze"(You can cry and load the gun at the same time)

"But--"

"You had no buts when it came to juggling to men at once so why am I hearing one now?", he hissed and she opened the glovebox doubtfully. She slowly pulled out the heavy metal amongst the white envelopes and grabbed the bullets, still sniffing and sobbing at the same time. Manqoba digressed from the main road and drove towards the forest. He abruptly parked the car, opened the boot and got out. He pulled the boot door wide open and took out a new green spade. Enhle also opened the passenger door when she saw Muhluri's lights switching off after he parked behind them. Manqoba peeped in her direction and asked,"Us'shiyele bani leso sbhamu?"(Why did you leave the gun behind?). She slowly grabbed it from her seat and he closed the boot after taking the rope out. Muhluri stepped out of his car and stepped towards them.

"Are you okay?", he whispered when he got to Enhle. She nodded slightly, looking far from okay. If being okay was located in the North her emotions laid buried deep in the South.

"Man. I'm not here to start any trouble. I'm just pleading with you to let her go. She can take my car and drive away then we'll solve it without involving her. Please", he tried to negotiate. Manqoba was polishing the spade in his hand, occasionally blowing onto it for extra shine in the dark.

"Do you realise that this is MY wife? The mother of my kids?"

Enhle raised the gun with great doubt trying to scare Manqoba. A devious smile grew on his face and light bounced off his gold tooth. He spat on the ground and said,"Gabadiyakazi. Dubula..."(Shoot...). He waited.

She was trembling so the gun was unstable in her hands. He slowly stepped on the dried leaves which did not hesitate to make breaking sounds and approached her. He put his hand on the front of the gun, wrapped his fingers around it and calmly took it from her, their eyes glued in the pair of the other. He held the back of her head and kissed her hot forehead. It was burning from all the crying. Muhluri grabbed the gun from his careless hand and Manqoba pulled another one from the back of his belt, now both pointing to one another with the fatal and loaded weapons. Enhle began begging the both of them not to shoot. They weren't budging. She jumped in front of them without warning and a gunshot went off. All the birds in the trees flew off and away. She closed her eyes tightly hoping it was a miss. When she opened them, she realized that it was indeed a miss. Nobody was hurt.

"Enhle what are you doing? I almost shot you dammit"? , Muhluri was frustrated by this.

"Have you ever used a gun before? Give me that", Enhle said softly and tried to take it from him.

"I'm a lover Enhle. Not a fighter"

"I know. I shouldn't have involved you in my mess"

"Hey cut this Romeo and Juliet crap. Wena, walk!"-Manqoba

"I'm really sorry Muhluri", Enhle sobbed and suffocated on her tears.

"I said stoppeth thy bullshxt!", Manqoba said and dropped the hand that had his gun out of irritation.

...

After eating, Mxo stood up from the bed and walked in his socks to go throw away the empty plastics and cans, leaving Ndalo on the bed. He came back and dropped himself there, placing his head on Ndalo's thighs.

"You still good?", he asked. Ndalo nodded with a blush and played with his hair.

"Why did you tell your mom that I'm your girlfriend though? That was weird for me"

"Are you not?"

She laughed.

"I am but you could've said I'm your friend. I know that's what I would've said if that was my mom. Weren't you afraid she was going to take it negatively or something?"

"My mom is nothing like that. Yeah she is strict but she's realistic. She knows she can't stop me from dating but she doesn't want me dating multiple people at the same time. She'd also like it a lot if I was born hating sex", he explained and she laughed.

"She sounds cool. She also has an angelic voice. It was calming for me"

Mxo smiled.

"I know"

"She is hella pretty too. I remember seeing her in your kitchen for the first time. You look like her a bit", she complimented and he tried concealing a blush.

"That's one thing I can never be humble about. My mom is a flame", he bragged for her entertainment and she laughed.

"And your dad?"

Mxo raised his brow.

"What? You wanna know if he's a flame too?"

Ndalo exploded, laughing.

"No man. How is he? With your dating thing?"

Mxo laughed voicelessly.

"Who? Muzi? You mean the one who gives me tips on how to fxck you right?", he said in a high-pitched voice and Ndalo bursted out a laugh in disbelief, trying to pay no attention to the erupting butterflies in her belly.

Something about how he said that had an effect on her.

"Hayi unamanga!"(You're lying)

"On God. My dad doesn't mind us having sex. By us I mean me and my brothers. He just doesn't want us getting anybody pregnant. But of course my mom doesn't know this"

"Your family sounds colorful and interesting", she says with a smile.

"I guess. And you? What's your mom like?"

"Uhm... she's loving and protective. Strictest person you'll ever meet but it all comes from a good place"

"Your dad? What was he like?"

"Yoh. A sweetheart. Ever-smiling. He was the guy that greeted and held conversations with everybody on the street. He was everyone's friend but he was MY bestfriend"

"Nca. Sounds like he was cool people"

"Yyeah he was. Are you comfortable?", Ndalo wanted to make sure after shifting her position a bit. Mxo kept his eyes on hers, which were intentionally avoiding him.

"What?", she eventually questioned.

"Are YOU comfortable?"-Mxo

She puckered her lips and nodded.

"Are you sure?", he got up and approached her face. She began growing nervous. He gave her a peck and continued staring at her to gauge if she was comfortable with him continuing. He was hovering over her, balancing his weight on his palms. Her eyes were all over the place but her body language was saying all the right things. He went in for another kiss and her lips entertained his. She felt her body taking decisions on her behalf, making her feel fluids and pulses in places she has never before. Her hands were just laying on the sides of her head uselessly. They were both beginning to heat up. Mxo lowered himself to unburden his hands of his weight and they began traveling down her sides. They found their way inside her t-shirt and she immediately put a halt to everything.

"What's wrong?", he hoarsely whispered.

"I can't go all the way there"

"Why do you always think I want to fxck you?"Mxo, still whispering. She kept quiet.

"I'm not going to break your vxrginity unless you want me to. Okay? We can do everything else except that", he tried to convince.

"What's everything else?", she asked breathlessly.

"Hard to explain. Can I rather show you?"

She swallowed.

"It won't hurt I promise...", he whispered directly into her ear, seducing and sensitizing her nerve cells. Her body betrayed her and she nodded. He travelled her lips and neck with wet, cold and patient kisses. He pulled her t-shirt upward and made his lips pay attention to her twins, his eyes lodged on her to ensure that she was still comfortable. His kissing trail went across her moving belly as he undid the button to her jean. She shot her eyes open and almost sat up.

"Please relax?", he begged. She was doubtful. He kissed her below the navel and said another low "Please".

"Mxo..."

"I'm not going to hurt you baby I promise. Angeke ngab'thatha ubuntombi bakho ngaphandle kwemvumo yakho. I need you to be emotionally ready for that"(I'd never deflower you without your permission)

He defeated her verbally and she sat back, closing her shut eyes with her palms. He undid the button and pulled the zipper down. He then pulled the jeans off and she was left in her t-shirt, boy shorts and white half socks.

He kissed her thighs travelling up, still careful not to make her uncomfortable. He placed his fingers into the sides of the shorts and asked if she was ready.

A nervous giggle escaped her lips and she nodded twice. He took them out and lifted her legs, putting them over his shoulders, facing his second meal of the day.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Mxolisi laid chested against the bed while his mouth worked Ndalo. He took both her hands and held onto them as she hyperventilated with her eyes still tightly closed. He let them go so he could use his fingers to separate her bits even further. He kept expecting her legs to shake any minute from then but they weren't. He gave it a bit more effort with the tongue and finger-on-clxt combo and she sprayed on his face without warning, only then did they start vibrating. He lifted his head and smiled.

"Oh? Okay", he said as he admired the sight of it all. He pulled his t-shirt off, went back into the cave and continued with the job. That was his first time ever making a girl squxrt. Ndalo placed her palms back on her eyes when it wasn't stopping. She tried closing her legs to keep him out but he managed to keep them apart and went on with the double stimulation.

"Mxo...", she was now crying and begging for him to stop but her body wasn't. He listened eventually and raised his head to see her. He crawled up to lay by her side with her and she turned to face the other way.

He hugged her from behind and placed his chin on her shoulder. Her mood had changed and he noticed.

"What's wrong? Did I hurt you?", he questioned in concern.

She shook her head in disapproval.

"Then yini?", he questioned further and she did not reply.

"Ndalo!", he was slowly losing his patience. She sat upright and put on her underwear. He got off the bed, went round it to her side to squat in front of her.

"Tell me what I did wrong?"

"You did nothing Mxo take me home"

"I don't like being punished for stuff I know nothing about Ndalo tell me what I did wrong?", he pleaded with her.

"I'm serious. You did nothing wrong"

"Do you regret what just happened?", he made sure his eyes followed hers.

She nodded. His heart dropped. He scratched his fade and stood up. He sat next to her as she played with her thumbs.

"I'm sorry for not stopping even when you told me to. I just thought you were enjoying it"

"It's not that Mxo. I was enjoying it, until I peed. That was embarrassing for me", she confessed and he let out a light laugh.

"Don't laugh. In fact can we never talk about this ever again?", she was annoyed.

"If only you knew how proud you made me feel", he said and stole a kiss from her cheek.

"You're proud that I peed on your face?", she laughed. He laughed too and stood up, grabbing her jean and handing it to her.

"It's not exactly pee baby. I'll explain to your some other time. We have to go now. My brothers and I are gonna have a chill session tonight and I'm already late", he explained and kissed her hand. The sad face he always sees when they have to end a video call appeared on her face.

"I'll come see you again tomorrow. I promise I'm never going to leave before I see you. Okay?"

"What time are you leaving?"

"Six sevenish. I'm not sure. Qgcoka phela"(Get dressed). She laughed at his rushed tone and got up. He instead was the one to delay them by smooching on her lips and caressing on her body.

...

When Mxo got home, he ran into Mxo and Lwa already on the way out.

"Hawu, boJudas. Benizo hamba ngaphandle kwami vele? No call no text? Nothing?"(You were honestly going to leave without me)-Mxo

They both laughed and Melo took the car keys from him.

"Kahle ngehaba. We're just getting meat and the booze wena you should be setting up the fire so long"

"But we agreed we'll go together mus?"

"BEWUNGEKHO MXOLISI!"(You were not here!), They both yelled into his ears and walked out. He followed them.

"You could've called"

"You were with a girl. You know the rules", Melo said as they all climbed into the car. Mxo went into the back as the two took the front seats.

"Niyanya"

"In abundance?", Melo turned in his direction before he asked and they all exploded in laughter.

"Deep huis or throwback hip hop?", Mxo asked after he connected his phone to the bluetooth.

"Let's play RNB for a change"

"You want to depress us on a Saturday?", Melo asked Lwa laughed.

"Yey i-battery iyaphela la ngithi deep--" (The battery is dying)

"Hip hop mkhulu!", Melo said as he drove out. 'Tapout' by Rich gang began playing and they started rapping along.

"She got the million dollar, million dollar uh uh uh. And all I wanna do is touch it, make her tapout", they jammed to it on repeat with hand signs and all. When they got to the shopping complex, they parked the car and continued jamming to the track. They got out of the car and Melo started dancing with his knees bent- his signature. Mxo put his bucket hat on while Lwa was focused on his phone dancing only with his head. Mxo made Melo aware of the two girls walking in the direction. One was smiling at Melo's performance as he danced in front of the open driver's side. He stopped dancing and watched her as well.

"...max out all of them accounts on that azz

Million dollar checks, don't bounce on that azz

Pull up in that you can't afford this

Only rap bxtch on the Forbes list

Pxssy, jewellery make 'em say, burr man

Rubs hands like Birdman", she jumped on the song and he was impressed when she really rubbed her hands like Birdman with a smirk on her face. Mxolisi pushed Lwa so they excuse the two. Her friend was already walking

ahead of her. After a couple of minutes, Melo caught up with them with his lips puckered in, trying to conceal a smile. Mxo looked at him for a moment and went "Make her tapout!"

Melo followed with a "And Imma make her tapout!". They then all laughed as they walked into P'nP.

...

When they got to Manqoba's chosen spot, he handed the emotional Mbalenhle the spade and said "Start digging".

"What?", she asked, appalled. Muhluri sighed from exhaustion.

"Let me do it?", Muhluri offered. Both guns were in Manqoba's possession at this point. He placed one behind his belt and shot at a tree when their stalling was taxing his patience.

"How did you even get married to this person Enhle?"

Manqoba laughed in ridicule.

"Uyangaz?"(Do you know me?), the smiley face disappeared as the question rolled out in a threatening tone.

Enhle just knew it wasn't going to end it well.

"I'll do it!", she sobbed and tried to get a proper grip on the garden tool. She dug once and cried even harder.

Manqoba stood against the tree watching her with a distorted face. She took another attempt to crack the ground and screamed.

"What's wrong?", Muhluri questioned in alarm.

"My nail!", she exclaimed as she inspected the broken artificial nail on her ring finger. Muhluri rolled his eyes in frustration. He thought it was something more important. She raised her eyes to the silent and apathetic Manqoba. He definitely hadn't changed his mind about making her experience hard labour. She continued trying to find progress in her mammoth of a task, still in tears. She had no idea what Manqoba had in mind. She heard voices somewhere in that bushy hell and she stopped to listen where they were emanating from.

"Gubha!"(Dig!), Manqoba snapped. She resumed her duty and he felt she was too slow. He noticed Muhluri calmly and unsuspectingly trying to pick up a rock from the ground.

"I'd think carefully about that if I were you"-Manqoba. Muhluri straightened his posture but inevitably kept the bored and tired look on his face. Enhle, one whose hands were strangers with a shovel, kept digging. Manqoba's shoulders and eyes wore heavy. He shut the eyes trying to reset them to default settings.

"You really don't deserve this woman", Muhluri remarked and Enhle stopped, slowly raising her face in his direction. The sincerity in his voice hugged her heart. She wiped her left cheek and remained speechless.

Manqoba was still trying to get his self together. Enhle noticed he was distracted.

"Please run", she warned Muhluri.

"And leave you here?"

"Why are you so relaxed about this? You could die Muhluri please run"

"I'm not afraid of death Enhle. I'm just afraid of what he might do to you when--"

Manqoba sneezed and they glared at him. After a moment, he took a look at his wife. She immediately remembered that she was supposed to be digging. She went back at it. Muhluri shook his head annoyance, with

his hands on his waist.

"Leave that", Manqoba instructed and caught her by surprise. Manqoba rarely changes his mind. He suddenly looked tired. When they were about to get settled in their relief, he put the gun down and picked up the rope. Enhle saw some odd light at some distance behind the trees. She tried to look carefully but was distracted by Manqoba's "Woza" to Muhluri. He didn't argue. He just backed himself against the tree bark and MQ tied him up from his shoulders down. He did the same to Enhle at another tree opposite to that of Muhluri.

"Baby what are you doing?", Enhle asked while he roped her up. Manqoba kept quiet. After he was done, he picked up his gun and spade and walked towards his car.

"You're just going to leave us here? What if there are wild animals here Manqoba please. Zikode!!! Khumalo!!!", she screamed with all the strength in her chest but he never looked back. A couple of minutes after he drove off in light speed, they both heard something howling, a disembodied wild threat. Enhle widened her eyes as her heart ran a marathon.

...

Manqoba got home and went straight to the shower. He was hurt but refused to entertain the pain. He needed something stronger than alcohol to numb it. After he was done and clothed, he drove straight to Sphe's house. When he called her and was surprised why his calls were getting rejected. He sent her a text telling her to pick up the phone. He did not want to disrespect her father by walking into the house. She eventually did and came out. She stepped into the car and the first thing she asked was what was wrong.

"Why?"-Manqoba

"I don't know. You look... unlike yourself"

"Forget that. Why were you not answering your phone?"

She looked away.

He cupped her chin and brought his face in his direction.

"I am not in the mood to be playing hide and seek. Why were you not answering your phone Sihle? You also did not reply to my text yesterday. I just didn't want to pressure you"

"I can't... the wedding is off", she informed. He thinned his eyes and frowned.

"Off or postponed?"

"Off. You come with a lot of baggage"

"You knew I was married when you agreed so what's this?"

"Polygamy I can deal with. Not abuse"

"Huh?", he questioned. "What abuse?"

"You literally sliced your wife's hand Mtungwa. I don't want to be a statistic"

"She sliced it herself!"

"That's not what she had to say. Why would she do that?" Why would a sane person slice their own hand?"

"Are you two friends?"

"No"

"Do you know me?", he asked and she dropped her face.

"No", she subtly and lowly said.

"But it's easier for you to believe that I'm an abuser but not that she's psychotic?", he questioned and she kept to her silence.

"You'll call me when you finally decide what you want", he coldly said and opened the door to the passenger seat. She stepped out and he drove away when she was in the yard safely.

...

The boys set up the fire for the braai with a speaker outside, far from the house and by the golf course in the yard, playing Bryson Tiller's 'We both know'. Melokuhle was now responsible for the playlist. They made sure to hide the booze from their grandma but kept laughing about what they'd do if she were to walk out of the house and come to them as they sat on camp chairs. Lwandile and Melo were already in shorts but Mxolisi was still in his afternoon outfit. He was busy chatting with Ndalo as Melo checked on the meat. He couldn't stop thinking about her and what happened in the afternoon.

"Hamb' uyogeza you're ruining the vibe", Lwandile said and Mxo laughed, releasing all the humbly smoke onto his twin's face. Lwandile laughed as well and wafted it away.

Mxo: When is your mom coming back?

Ndalo: Tomorrow in the afternoon.

Mxo: Mind sleeping here? I can't handle missing you anymore

Ndalo: You can come see me

Mxo: I want you to sleep in my arms. Please baby? Ngiyak'cela sthandwasami?

Ndalo: Okay then. If you'll bring me back very early in the morning

He downed the little cider that was left in his bottle and stood up with a smile. He checked the time and it was 20h32, way past his grandmother's bed time.

"And then wena?", Lwandile asked. Mxolisi walked in reverse, retracting and sticking out his tongue rapidly.

Melo laughed and said "Mbulazi!", cheering him on. Mxo laughed and ran to the house to take a shower and get himself cleaned up. He changed into a vest, cargo shorts and slide-in sandals. Before he could head out, he went to check on Evelyn if she was indeed asleep. He peeped through her door and she switched sides on the bed.

"Gogo?", he tested the waters and walked closer.

"Hm-mm I've already watered them", she replied in slumber.

"Hm? The plants?"

"No the bears"

"Bears?"

"The pink mountain friends at the funeral", she went on and Mxo was having a hard time suppressing his laughter as he tiptoed his way out.

Chapter Thirty-Six

After confirming that Evelyn was indeed half-dead, Mxolisi drove out without notifying his braai mates. He arrived and parked outside Ndalo's place. He then sent her a text telling her that he's outside and waited. After a few minutes, she came out with just her cellphone in hand. He was standing against the car waiting for her.

"You smell nice", he admired as they hugged and he inhaled her fruity, feminine fragrance.

"Mh! You smell like vanilla...", he complimented and smooched on her neck. She laughed and lightly placed her hands on his waist.

"Let's go before somebody sees us"-Ndalo

Mxo understood and opened the door for her. He then went back home with her.

When they got there...

"Wait here so I can go check on grandy okay?", he said to her, referring to Evelyn. She nodded and he got out of the car. He found her still very much asleep and went to go get Ndalo. The guards rarely make a big deal of the boys bringing girls over. He walked to the back of the house holding her hand and went straight to where his day ones were seated. The speaker was still at work but they'd already eaten. Melo was having a cold one whereas Lwa was drinking apple juice.

"Are you sure we won't get into trouble?", Ndalo questioned while Mxo walked behind her with his hands around her tummy.

"Please relax", he softly said.

"San'bonani", Ndalo greeted the chilling duo.

"Sawubona nawe Mrs Bafo", Melo greeted back and Ndalo blushed. Lwandile simultaneously said "Heyy" warmly. Mxo led her to his chair so he could dish up for her.

"Mara kubo bonke abafana wa khetha ukuqoma le mbuzi?"

, Melo teased and they all laughed, including Mxo.

"Bhatata, don't start a war you won't be able to finish. Ngizokhipha amafile kuzonuka i-stametta nomsunu?"(I'll take out your files and it'll get ugly), Mxo threatened as he handed Ndalo the plate.

"Hayi yobe bafo. Ayidle izishiyele", Melo apologized while laughing. Ndalo turned down the food and said she already ate.

"Letha ngidle mina ngob intombyakho iguard ifigure"(Bring that here so I can eat. Your girlfriend is guarding her figure), Lwandile said and Mxo laughed as he handed him the plate. They all saw Manqoba approaching and Ndalo instantly wished she could teleport herself home and disappear.

"Aniwalanga amafesterr, you did not feed the dogs and your parked the car outside knowing very well how your grandma feels about that nifuna ngithini ngempela?"(You didn't close your windows... what do you want me to say?), he reprimanded and all their eyes were looking for hiding spot. No reply.

"Sawubona?", he said to Ndalo.

"Hello", she greeted back meekly.

"Does your mother know that you're here?", he questioned. She slowly shook her head in shame. He just stared for a mini moment. He wasn't himself and whoever was occupying his body wasn't pleased.

"Angikuxoshi, I just don't want trouble. Otherwise, feel at home. Mxolisi, ngilandele"(follow me), he commanded and left.

"And then?", Lwandile questioned Manqoba's mood. Mxo shrugged and Melo watched him walk back to the house.

"I really don't know. All I know is you need to get your a** in there before he comes back and starts barking at us for hell knows what", Melo said to Mxo before he stood up and kept talking as his phone rang in his hand.

"Hello?", he answered it and walked away. Mxo sighed and stood up. He kissed Ndalo's cheek and told her he'll be back in a sec. She nodded.

"Jelly babies?", Lwandile offered with a smile and she laughed in a single breath, taking the yellow packet. She couldn't help but stare.

"There's no way you can tell us apart. Just saying", he said without raising his eyes from his screen and she laughed.

"I'll just rely on the tattoo on his arm", she stated. "And his bucket hat", she quickly added.

"Well I'll also go get both for the hell of it"

They both laughed.

"I'm joking. I'm Lwandile. Mxo is naturally rude so don't expect him to come back here and introduce you to us. That's Melo", he said and raised both his brows to 'point' at him talking on the phone at a distance.

"I know him. It's nice to meet you"

"Nice to meet you too doll!"

Mxo walked into Manqoba's open bedroom and his uncle came out of the bathroom wiping his wet hands with a towel. The flushing sound of the toilet was fading behind him.

"What's up?"- Mxo

Manqoba opened his drawers and took out a box of Durex condoms. Mxo laughed before he took it.

"Come on MQ I have these"

"Yey angisafun ukubona enye idrama la endlin. If you'll go all the way then don't make any babies"

"Haa..."

"Goodnight!", Manqoba said and pushed him out even when he was reluctant to walk out of the room. Manqoba ended up laughing.

"Phuma man Mxolisi"

"Okay okay ngiyaphuma manje", he promised and Manqoba stopped pushing him by his shoulders. Mxo turned around to face him again.

"Are you okay?", Mxo asked. Manqoba sighed.

"I'll be good boy"

"Sure?"

Manqoba smiled.

"Sure!"

Mxo left with his doubts and went back outside.

...

Muzi patiently massaged Betso's swollen legs with oils as they sat on the couch watching television.

"Mh! Just right there...", she moaned and pointed. He smiled and said "This moment was so innocent yazi".

Betso shot out a laugh.

"Ah baby you're the one with a busy mind", he said and poured a chunk of popcorn from her hand into her widely open mouth. Muzi continued working her feet. She was in his shirt and her panties.

"I miss the boys but this feels right in their absence", he said and she smiled.

"Don't let them hear you say that", she said absentmindedly as she admired Bongiwe's new Instagram post.

"But baby this woman is beautiful aker?", she said to Muzi.

"What woman?"

She turned her phone in his direction and he lifted his hands only to drop them again

"Bongiwe? Again? Last night you asked me if she was in at the office. Is this some kind of a trap or something?"

"What do you mean?"

"No you're always fishing for some kind of comment from me about her. Let's just put this bed right now because it is really getting awkward for me. Do you suspect that I want her or something?", Muzi asked and placed his hand on top of her glistening and glowy feet.

"Bathong baby. No. Can't I just admire another woman for nje?"

"It's getting weird. I didn't even know that you follow her on social media"

"I came across one of her posts and recognized her. She's an influencer?"

"Hayi. Asazi nkosikazi. Ngempela asazi"(I really don't know)

Betso laughed and said "Oho", digging her hand back into the box that held her popcorn.

...

Mxo took Ndalo to his room after negotiating with Lwa that he sleeps in Melo's bedroom. He dished up the samp and turkey meal that was had for dinner in the house, took some juice and a packet of Lays then delivered the goods upstairs.

"But baby I told you ukuthi ngidlile mus", Ndalo complained when he placed the tray on her thighs. She was busy with the remote choosing a movie before he came along.

"You can always eat again", he kept a straight face. She laughed as she held the tray in place while he climbed on top of the bed.

"I'll have juice", she said and tried to pick up a glass.

"Ha-ah. Mi", he declined and handed her the spoon.

"Baby can we please skip the stages where you don't want to eat with me, where you're afraid to fart in my presence and stuff? Can we skip all that?", he pleaded impatiently.

"It's not that. Ngidlile"(I have eaten), she stated and he took a spoonful off the plate and said "Here comes the plane. Durrrrrrrr. Say haa?", he went on as he directed the spoon to her mouth. She couldn't stop laughing. She finally gave in and they eat, watching 'Love, Simon'.

"But you're not watching wena", she said when the movie was halfway and he was on his phone while laying with his head on her thighs, topless. Her back was comfortable against the continental.

"I am baby", he lied and never bothered to raise his eyes to the screen. Ndalo laughed at his blatant deceit and let him be. She couldn't help but allow her eyes to scan who he was talking to since his position allowed her easy access of that. Once she established that she had nothing to worry about, she took her eyes back to the movie.

He stood up to go to the bathroom and the pack of condoms dropped from the careless back pocket of his shorts to the bed. Ndalo only noticed it when she heard the sound of his urine constantly hitting the water. She was taken by the movie. She picked it up and studied it.

"What's this Mxo?", she asked when he came out of the loo.

"I know what you're thinking and it's not like that", he went over to the laptop to switch off the movie and play music.

"Is this all you want from me?", she questioned. He approached and she dropped her legs off the bed.

"I thought we spoke about this?"

"Yeah I clearly was talking to a wall", she crossed her arms.

"Ibonda usho mina?"(I'm the wall?)

She kept quiet and pursed her lips. He lifted both her legs like he would to a wheelbarrow and she immediately laughed.

"Stop what are you doing?!", she was still laughing. He was pulling her slowly off the bed.

"Uban ibonda Ndalo?", he threatened as she screamed for him to stop.

"Say all the shxt you been saying a minute ago", he continued to threaten her.

"I'm sorryyyy", they were both laughing at this point. 'Temperature rising' by Tory Lanez was playing around them. She wrapped her legs around his waist so she doesn't fall. Her dress fell back to her tummy and exposed her underwear and a part of her tummy. He placed his hands under her back and pulled her towards him. She inevitably wrapped her hands around his neck. He laid her back down on the bed gently as he kissed her with passion.

"Ngiyak'thanda Ndalo", he managed to whisper in between the kiss, standing between her bent legs. One hand was on her boob, another paving a way into her underwear while his lips worked her neck. The rate at which her breathing was rising at that point should be illegal. Her bean was twitching out of control.

"Don't you feel safe with me?", he asked as he worked her into submission.

"I do", she replied voicelessly

"Don't you love me? I know I do?"

"I love you too"

"I want you Ndalo. I can't stop thinking about you. You drive me crazy sthandwasami. You can't be this hot and expect me to do nothing about it", he went on. She didn't reply when his finger touched the surface of clit.

"Who do you want me to fxck if not you? Ngivumele ngidle ukudla kwami ngiyak'cela baby..."(Allow me to have my food), he rubbed her gently and she confessed that she's afraid.

"Of what?",

"The pain?"-Ndalo

"I'll be gentle. I don't want to hurt you I want to make love to you. Please trust me?", he then went down on her. She pulled him up and asked him to switch off the light. She found him irresistible. His heart was dancing when he went over to do as instructed. He then changed the song responsible for the mood to 'Make you feel' by Alina Baraz and Galimatias. On repeat.

He walked barefoot to the bed and climbed on top of her. He kissed her for a moment and then stopped. He balanced himself on his palms as if doing push ups and watched her in the dark.

"Yin?"(What?), Ndalo asked.

"Remember when I told you that you tense up when I'm around you?", he said and she turned her head to the side. He laid on top of her and turned her face to look at him. He squeezed her cheeks and gave her multiple consecutive pecks on the lips until she laughed.

"Please relax? Ngiyak'cela? If you're stressed you won't enjoy this and it's gonna hurt when it's not suppose to", he explained and rubbed his nose against hers.

"Okay?", he added to ensure that she understood. A blush fluttered off her face and he pulled her dress off. He went around planting kisses on different parts of her body as she wrapped her one hand over her boobs. Her took off his shorts and was left in his briefs. He pulled down her underwear and she was left completely exposed. He lifted her legs and placed several kisses on her vulva as his hands travelled her sensitive thighs. He stuck his tongue in there and allowed it to travel and trail up to the clit, circle it and back. He knew he was doing something right when her juices of arousal kept slithering out. He continued with this till he felt she was wet enough to receive him.

He travelled up using the same kissing route that got him down there.

"How did that feel?", he asked and she shrugged with a blush.

He took off his underwear and tenderly removed her hand from her boobs, directing it to his shaft. She was doubtful to touch but she eventually did.

"Are you ready?", he whispered and shook her head in disapproval.

"What's wrong?"

"I don't want a baby Mxo"

"Ngeke ngik'mithise"(I won't impregnate you), he promised and sucked on her neck. She felt that stinging but pleasure-filled pain that comes with hickeys.

"Okay", voicelessly, she agreed. He found the box of condoms on the bed and took out one.

"Wanna do it?", he asked her if she wanted to put it on herself. She laughed and shook her head saying no. Both her hands were covering her breasts even in the dark. When he was done, he positioned himself in between her legs and aimed his pleasuring rod towards her entrance. The head hit a wall as he buried his head on in neck. He pushed once and he heard her exhale and gasp with fear. He went in with another push and she grabbed onto his shoulders.

"Kub'hlungu?"(Does it hurt?) - Mxo

"Kancan"

He kept gently hitting on the obstacle multiple times to drill a hole in it for about a minute till he felt some progress and was a bit in.

"How about now?", he asked and kissed her neck with he held on to her legs to keep them apart.

"Painful but bearable"

"I'm gonna give it one last strong push but it's gonna hurt. After that it'll all be over okay baby?", he gently conditioned her to what was about to come and she swallowed a lump then nodded. Her gave the minor gentle thrusts first before gritting his teeth and smashing into her all at once. She almost screamed in anguish but he quietened her with a kiss. He served a few strokes and watched for her reaction.

"Mmh!", she exclaimed of pain and placed her hands on his abdomen.

"Should I stop?", he asked and she didn't reply. He stopped thrusting but didn't pull out.

"Baby?"

She shook her head to indicate that he shouldn't. He continued thrusting back and forth in her canal.

"Ngiyak'thanda uyezwa?", he assured into her ear and she said it back

"Fxck Ndalo uyashisa I'm not gonna last!", he exclaimed as he increased the pace of his and shortly came, collapsing on top of her.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

The couple slept in the dark after their session, cuddling. Mxo's phone began vibrating on the pedestal and he answered.

"Yeah?", his sleepy self answered hoarsely.

"Man I need your help. I'm stuck in Braam can't you come fetch me?", Kabelo shouted with music playing loudly behind him.

"I can't hear you KB move away from there", he slid out of bed, not to wake Ndalo. He stepped into the bathroom and closed the door.

"I am saying, I'm stuck at some party in Braam. Come get me"

"I am nowhere near Joburg right now"

"Shxt!", Kabelo said and Mxo laughed.

"Exactly. What are you even doing in Braam anyway?"

"I honestly have no idea how I ended up here. We were in Bluelights then drove here. So now I can't find my people. I was gonna request but there's nothing in my account. Tonight was wild"

"Aii I'll request for you. Sharp I'm busy"

"Sne?", Kabelo asked and Mxo laughed.

"Yaz if this phone was on loudspeaker you were going to land me in a lot of trouble. Sharp man KB we'll talk", he then cut the call and washed his face. After requesting a car for his friend, he went back into bedroom and forgot to be careful with the door, waking Ndalo up. She squinted her eyes and raised her hand to protect them from the light coming from the bedside lamp. He went over to cuddle her up again and apologized for waking her up.

"It's okay. What time is it?"

"Few minutes to twelve"

"Can I please have some water?", she politely asked and he got out of bed, putting on his shorts and slides. He went out for a couple of minutes and came back with two bottles of water and a tub of yogurt. She was coming from the loo in his vest and underwear.

"Thank you", she said before taking the water and having half of it. He handed her the cold tub and she took it.

"How are you feeling?", he asked.

"It stings when I pee", she replied and took half a spoon of the delicacy into her mouth.

"A lot?"

"Nah but I do feel like something was in there", she continued eating. He laughed.

"And how did having that something in there feel?"

"It hurt like crazy when you shoved all of it in like that"

"I'm sorry", he lowly apologized before kissing her forehead, with his hands on her sides on the bed. She was seated while he stood.

"But it'll hurt more if we don't do it again soon"

She laughed at him trying to trick her.

"Unamanga"(You're lying)

"I am serious. Uyavaleka as we speak"(You're closing up as we speak), he said and they both laughed. She kept digging the spoon in the yogurt in and out playfully. He kissed her forehead and she closed her eyes. Her nose followed as he took the tub along with the spoon and placed it on the pedestal. He then gave her lips a long, patient kiss while caressing her hips. He took off the vest she was wearing and gently pushed her so she laid on the bed, one hand fondling one boob as he latched on another. The other hand was buried in her underwear as his middle finger tenderly went in and out of her flaming canal. The multitasking had her body confused. He pulled the underwear off and continued.

"Ngicel' ungivulele baby"(Please open up for me), he whispered before trailing her neck with his breath. She separated and spread her legs wider. He undid the button to his shorts and allowed them to fall, taking himself out of them. He pushed her knees to her chest and entered her sacred opening. She hissed in pain. He pulled one of the pillows and placed it under butt to elevate her butt for full view of her innocent vag.

"Look at me", he softly said and she did. The orange lamp was an easier setting for her instead of lighting up the whole room.

He began thrusting very slowly and watched as his tool continually got adorned and greased up in her slimy releases as he eased it into her. The path was getting easier with each stroke. He dropped his thumb to her clit and circled it while fucking her with patience. He began hitting the right side of her canal.

"Mxo...", she let out a moan.

"Hm?", he replied and she kept quiet with her eyes closed. If she was enjoying it then he knew he had to keep at whatever it was he was doing right. He kept at it and his lady released short spurts of hot squirt.

"Damn ungichaza kabi mase wenza kanje"(I like it when you do this), he said as she closed her eyes with her palms. Tears were running to her ears when she lost all control of her own body.

"Squirt for me baby don't stop", he encouraged and vigorously rubbed on her clit.

"The bed..."

"Ndalo I said squirt for me I didn't stutter", she was still releasing the liquids as her legs kept shaking and she continued crying. He stopped and asked her to kneel on the bed. She did and he knelt behind her and pressed down her back so her upper body lays flat. He separated her legs with one of his and entered her from behind without warning. Her mouth hung open and he served her long strokes from the back while holding on to her ass. Her hand went behind her to get him to slow down and he did.

"Kub'hlungu?"

"A lot", she alerted. She felt his full length in this position and wasn't enjoying it.

"Let's change positions then", he suggested and got her to lie on her side so he could enter her from behind. He lifted her one leg and slid in.

"Mmm!", a soft moan escaped her lips and he continued thrusting slowly. He kissed her shoulder and cupped one of boobs.

"Shxt Ndalo umnandi baby fxck!", he groaned and continued invading her insides with his dxck.

"Umuhle futhi", he continued to compliment her as she moaned.

"I'm never gonna let you go sthandwasami", Mxo reassured.

"Promise?"

"I love you and I'm gonna spend each day of my life proving it"

He said as he felt the waves of his orgasm emanating from his core. He rammed his rod into her and she gasped, her mouth wide open.

He rammed it in again and she gasped again.

"Shiiit!!!", he exclaimed when he felt his soldiers running to his head it took everything in him to pull out and he came on her inner thigh. It immediately hit her that they never used protection.

"The condom Mxo!", she panicked.

"I said I'm never gonna get you pregnant Ndalo, at least not now. Trust me", he said and kissed her back. He got up to go find a towel and came back to wipe her clean. He could see she was worried. He dropped the towel on the floor and cuddled her.

"If it will make you feel any better I'm gonna bring you morning afters later on. Is that okay?"

She nodded. He pulled the duvet and they slept. She kept shifting her bxtt so his dxck doesn't touch it. He laughed to himself and let her be.

Ndalo's alarm for 4:00am went off and woke the both of them up.

"It's time for me to go home", she said in her snuggled up position on his chest, with his arm around her. He was still very much sleepy.

"What time is it?", he asked.

"Four"

"I'll take you at 5", he assured in slumber and she shook him.

"Mxo wake up"

He dropped his head to her neck and muttered out muffled complaints. She laughed and told him to get up. He kissed her neck and she knew where it was going.

"Mxo no let's go...", she declined with uncertainty. He slid his finger into her warm and moist quim, still kissing on her neck. He already knows that it's her biggest weakness.

"Do you really have to go?", he asked and nibbled on her earlobe. His finger was still buried in her. She didn't reply. He got on top of her and directed his cxck into her.

"At the rate ungidla ngayo uzongiqeda"(... you're fxcking me you'll finish me), she said and they laughed but he never stopped working her neck. Both hands were caressing and squeezing on her boobs.

"I'm not the one with a fire pxssy blame yourself sthandwasami", he said before he kissed her on the lips. He sucked on her lower lip and slightly bit on it.

"Condom Mxo..."

"Baby ngizochithela phandle"(I'll pull out). She could feel every inch of him sliding in against her vaginal walls. She stopped kissing back when the feeling took over and he went back to her neck. He held her hands and restrained them above her head while fxcking her missionary. Everytime he moved up his skin rubbed against her bean.

"Mxolisi...!"

"Hmmmnn?"

"Mmm!", she moaned harder.

"Khuluma nami kwenzenjan mama?"(Talk to me)

She never replied

"Fxxck this pxssy is so good!", he groaned and kept the steady pace he started with, his chest rubbing against her boobs.

"Fxxxck Ndalo ungenzan?!", he groaned when her vxginal muscles involuntarily spasmed, grabbing onto his dxck. He couldn't help but increase his pace. Her lips were parted in an O-shape at the pleasure of it all.

"Ngiyak'thanda Mxolisi. Please don't break my heart for the fun of it", she begged lowly while he pounded her up. Her vulnerability made him slow down. He tightened his hold on both hands, pinning them above her head and kissed her neck gently, still making love to her. She came and he spoke to her while she convulsed at his mercy.

"Ngizok'shada Ndalo. Angizang' ngithande umuntu the way ngik'thanda ngakhona. I just wish you'd fully trust me. Please trust me?"(I'm gonna marry you. I've never loved anybody the way I do you), he whispered into her ear and she nodded. He let of her hands and they went on his back. He continued with his strokes till he pulled out and came on her stomach.

"Let's go take a bath?", Mxo offered and Ndalo was already getting.

"I'll bath at home Mxo let's go"

He didn't want to argue so he also got dressed. He opened the door and they walked out while he held her hand. The whole house was still asleep except for Manqoba, who was gazing into the dark and empty atmosphere all night in his office. Mxolisi took Ndalo home and they arrived shortly.

"Oh no!", Ndalo immediately exclaimed in panic.

"What's wrong?", Mxo asked as he parked the car.

"The door is open. My mom is home", she alerts in pure fear.

"Maybe it's your sister?"

"My sister never wakes up this early. The first thing my mom does is to open the door Mxo she's going to kill me", she began crying. Nomcebo marched out of the house with a wooden spoon in one hand and a wet dishcloth in the other. Ndalo already had tears streaming down her face.

"Stay in the car", Mxo said to her when she saw the weapons in her mother's hands.

"No Mxo you're gonna make things worse. Go home I'll be fine", she said and opened the door. Mxo was already out.

"Lolo yazi ngizokusakaza ngenye into uzobona bonke abathakathi bala esgodini in broad daylight uyangizwa? Ubuyaphi?!"(I'll smack you so hard you'll see all the witches in this area. Where were you?!)

Nomcebo spit fire with the spoon pointed at a crying "Lolo" who kept playing with her hands.

"Mama ngiyaxolisa"(I'm sorry)

"Sawubona ma. Ngicela ungamshayi. Ngcono ushaye mina ngoba iphutha elami"(Please don't hit her. Rather hit me because I'm the one at fault)

Hearing Mxolisi's voice infuriated Nomcebo even further. She smacked Ndalo on the neck with the damp dishcloth and she screamed. Mxo jumped in front of Ndalo and shielded her from behind with his hands. Ndalo couldn't stop sobbing.

"Mxolisi. Le ngan eyami. Eyaka Nomcebo lengan aksiyona into yokudlala for abafana base bukhosini. Ngizwile ngo Melokuhle nezinto enizenzayo kodwa hayi kweyami ingane!! Ndalo! Ngena endlini!", she shouted and followed her. Mxo rotated with Ndalo and continued trying to plead with Ndalo's mother.

"Ma ngiyakucela uNdalo ngiyamthanda futhi ngeke ngidlale ngaye"

"Umthanda umthandani?Umthanda ukunya? Ndalo ngithe hamba endlin Jolina!"(What do you know about love?)

"Ma please--"

"Ngike ngithole ukuthi uye wazitika nge nkomo ka nina Mxolisi, hm! Ngithi hm!!"(If I discover that you broke her vxrginity...)

Ndalo tried to walk to the house but she felt another thrashing hit on her thighs. Nomcebo was already on her tracks with the spoon. She ran into the house and Nomcebo shouted from where she stood.

"Ugijimela ubala. Uyeza ugog'wakho uzokuhlola namhlanje!"(You're running for nothing. Your grandmother is coming to check if you're still a vxrgin today)

Mxo had no idea what to do in order to put out the raging fire.

...

"Don't you die on me Enhle wake up!", Muhluri yelled, still tied on his tree. Enhle had her head dropped and hanging.

"Enhle!", he shot out. She jerked up in panic, only to realise she was still in the bush, famished and tired. Thirsty too. The rope was uncomfortable on her skin. Muhluri sighed from relief. The sun was out. Birds were chirping. The air smelt fresh and represented everything to do with serenity. They'd have the thought to appreciate it if it was in a different setting.

"Why did you wake me up?"

"I don't know, seeing you like that..."

"We're gonna die anyway so you had better accept it soon", she licked her dry lips.

"Do you think there are hot baths in heaven?"-Enhle

Muhluri laughed. She smiled.

"This is no time to be yourself"

"You know you're the only person who thinks I'm funny. I'm starting to think you see me as a joke", she said and continued laughing.

"There's only person who doesn't take you seriously in this life and it's not me", Muhluri remarked and Enhle swallowed, the smile regretfully disappearing from her face

"For what it's worth, I don't regret what we have. I'd do it all over again", Muhluri said. She gave a dry smile.

"He's not that bad you know?"-Enhle

"If we somehow manage to get out of here and you go back to him, don't ever contact me", he stated and looked away.

"There's no way we will. If we don't get mauled by something we will definitely die of thirst and hunger", she commented and he scoffed. When he brought his eyes back to her tree, he saw it slowly slithering down the bark occasionally hissing and sticking out its fork tongue.

"Holy shxt!", he said and she laughed.

"This is not the time for your random compliments Muhluri"

"Uhm... Please try your best not to move okay?"

"Huh?", she was confused but she noticed he was looking above her so she did the same. Her eyes landed on the green leaves high above. She couldn't see it.

"Dammit Enhle I said don't move!"

"You're freaking me out. What is it?", she asked but shortly heard the hissing when it got closer. She cautiously angled her head so she sees properly. Her heart collided with her rib cage. She brought her face back and shut her eyes in grimace, trying her best not to breathe.

"Baby don't move okay? Maybe it'll give up and leave you alone", he begged. She heard the hissing again and couldn't keep it together anymore. She let out a very loud and ear piercing scream.

"Enhle!", Muhluri tried to calm her down. She never stopped. They heard ruffling from some direction in the bushes and Sabelo appeared. Her heart immediately sighed of relief.

"Thank God I was starting--"

"Fseg!", Sabelo shot out without turning to look at him. "Be still", he said to Enhle while aiming the gun at the snake. He was late. The creature was already gliding down her shoulder. Enhle had tears rolling down her cheeks. She had a hard time keeping silent and still. Sabelo continued aiming and stepped to her side.

"We are gonna have to wait for it to raise it's head", he said, still aiming.

"I know you take shooting as a hobby but you're gonna hurt me Sabza!", she tried to yell and simultaneously keep as still as possible.

"Do you want my help or not?", he dropped the hand with the gun in it out of impatience. She kept still and he continued aiming. This took a few minutes Enhle was already tired of trying to controlling her breathing. Then with no warning whatsoever, the gun went off and she shut her eyes in intensified fear. The snake tumbled down tail first and she could finally breathe. Sabelo lifted his pants and put his gun back on his leg. However, when she dropped her eyes to see it, the snake wasn't there. Odd. Very odd.

...

Manqoba eventually fell asleep on his chair in the morning when his brain was tired of overthinking. He started dreaming but felt like the dream was depicting reality. It didn't feel anything like a product of his imagination. He was wearing the same clothes, seated on the same chair when he saw his tall father walking into the office. He had a wooden rod in his hand and his hat in the other, his greyish-white hair exposed.

"Nathi", he greeted him and Manqoba greeted back, busy on his laptop. His father closed it and sat down.

"Mntungwa, ubuyaphi?"(Where are you coming from?),he asked as if he'd last seen him in the morning or something.

"Esbayeni. Ngifuna ukukhuluma nawe ngolunye udaba"(The kraal. I want to speak to you about something)

"Khumalo. Ngilalele"(Speak I'm listening)

"Ngizamile ukul' khuluma izolo kodwa nje ngemihla, uhlelekile ukungizwa ngoba uhlezi unezinto eyningi emqondwen wakho"(I tried speaking to you last night but as always, you failed to hear because you can't concentrate)

Manqoba kept quiet and continued to listen attentively.

"Asisayifun lento yakho yokuchitha igazi ngathi ubulala iynkukhu zomshado. Uyinkosi manje Nathi yekela ukuvumela imizwa yakho ukuthi ikulawule. Awuyena umfazi"(You must get rid of this habit of yours of spilling blood like you're killing chickens for a festivity. You're a chief now Nathi stop allowing your emotions to control you. You're not a woman)

He nodded.

"Hamba uyolanda umakoti wethu lapho umshiye khona esgangeni nilungise umshado wenu nje ngabantu abadala. Idlozi lakhe lithukuthele kabi ngalento yoku mlalisa esgangeni, engadlile. Umtshele no Sabelo ukuthi bekungafanele ayibulale leya nyoka. Limthusile lona ngoba akayijwayele lento yokuvakashelwa yilona kodwa okwenzekile kundlulile. Wena hamba uyomlanda umlethe ekhaya. Siyezwana?"(Now go fetch your wife from the wild so you can fix your marriage like adults. Her ancestors are very angry about you leaving her in the wild. You must also tell Sabelo that he wasn't supposed to kill that snake. Yes it scared her because she is not used to getting visits from her ancestors but what's done is done. Now go get her and bring her home. Clear?), he commanded and Manqoba nodded. Khumalo Senior then stood up and left. Manqoba woke up and felt as though he was really there in person and that he indeed just left. He digested everything he was told and understood that none of that was a dream. He then grabbed his car keys and headed out.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Manqoba arrived at the spot where he'd left the 'illegal' couple, still pretty much tied up. They were talking but Enhle pulled out of the conversation when she saw her husband approach. He took out a pocket knife and approached Muhluri.

"Manqoba please don't!", Enhle begged when it appeared like he had ill intentions. Manqoba ignored her and went to cut the rope behind the tree in silence. Muhluri rubbed his wrists when he was set free.

"I don't ever want to see your face again even if it's on missing person poster siyezwana?", he pointed the knife at him as he hissed in his face. Muhluri stared back unfazed. He was about to reply when Enhle begged him not to fuel the fire. Muhluri turned his face to look at her and scoffed a short moment later.

"Why am I not surprised?", he asked in ridicule and she looked away. He picked up his phone from the ground and left. His car was still parked where he had left it.

"I'm sorry", Enhle apologized as Manqoba sawed through the rope behind her tree to set her free. She rubbed her wrists and the rest of her arms, itching where the rope had found home. Her lips were ashy and dry like hard ground void of water. She found balance on the bark when she was supposed to be walking. Manqoba stopped and went back to pick her up.

"Are you going to finish me off?", she laughed, weakly. He never replied. After placing her in the passenger seat and getting on his side...

"What changed your mind?"

"About?"

"Ending me"

"I wasn't going to", he replied and started the car.

"You left me out to--"

"If I wanted you dead Sabelo wouldn't have been here", he continued driving.

"And the grave?"

"Your stupid boyfriend got lucky"

"So you were planning to bury him and still tie me up", she asked and he did not reply.

"And the petrol?"

"Yekel' ukungibuza iynto eyningi Enhle I am tired"

She just stared as he drove home.

...

"Baby?", Betso shook Muzi out of his afternoon nap.

"Baby?!", she shook him further.

"Hm?", he finally woke up and raised his face. She was hugging his waist behind him. His nap was so deep and good he even had pressed stripes on his face.

"I'm hungry", she pouted. He instantly knew she was having one of her crybaby days. He dropped his face flat on the pillow he slept hugging by his arms.

"Ha ah Khumalo wake up", she continued nagging.

"What do you want to eat?", he asked with zero enthusiasm. His body wanted to go back to sleep.

"Sss that oily chicken from Zama's chicken", she began salivating.

"Baby you seriously want me to wake up from here and drive all the way to the township, now?", he complained.

"Yes"

"I should have never introduced you to that place", he continued to complain. He desperately wanted to go back to sleep.

"You should have never put a baby in me in the first place. These cravings are all your fault!", she stormed off the bed and went into the bathroom, slamming the door behind her.

"I didn't mean it like that!", he yelled when he heard her sobbing, sobbing from the top of the toilet seat. He stood up to go knock.

"Baby?", he pacifyingly called out from outside the locked door. She never replied.

"Sthandwasami?"

Still no reply.

"Ungidinelwe kant mommy? Ngiyaxolisa"(Are you mad at me? I'm sorry", he continued talking to himself. He apologized even when he felt like she was being hormonal and overreacting.

"Ngizoya ngiyoyithenga ichicken yakho. Ngicela uphume ke?"(I'll go buy the chicken. Please come out?"

He stood and waited. She unlocked the door and came out.

"Askiies aker?", he imitated how she always tries to coerce him into things sometimes. She laughed and he wiped her tears with a smile.

"You promised to go get my chicken"

"I will go get it just now", his horny self whispered as he kissed on her neck, caressing her bxtt.

"Tsamaa nnou baby man"(Go now)

"One round k'phela baby? Just one?"

She could feel his erection against her in his jeans.

"Ha ah baby man. You promised",

They were conversing as he made her walk in reverse to the bed while kissing on her neck.

"Ngithe ngizoya makoti wami ngicela just...", he stopped talking and kissed her on the lips and dry-humping on her. She wasn't reciprocating. He noticed.

"Ma weyngan zami?"

"Hm?"

"Ngicela ukuvakashisa inyoka emgodin wayo?"(Allow the snake a visit to its hole?)

"I'm not in the mood"

He dropped his head on her shoulder as she laid on her back looking away. He had no choice but to relinquish

his quest. He got up and pulled his t-shirt off the single couch next to the bed and slipped it on then grabbed his car keys. His disappointed self kissed her on the cheek and left to go get her food.

...

Mxolisi bumped into Evelyn in the kitchen drinking milk in her silky ankle length robe.

"Uphumaphi ekseni kangaka wena?"(Where are you coming from so early in the morning?", she asked and placed the glass in the empty sink.

"Gogo I'm so fxcking tire--"

"Language!", she scolded.

Mxolisi was in no mood for a court session.

"A friend of mine needed me to take his gran to the hospital"

"Aw. Is she okay? What was wrong?"

"A little stroke here some arthrisis over there", he said with disinterest.

"Huh?"

He kissed her on the cheek and said, "I didn't sleep much gogo can we please talk later?", his hands firmly on her upper arms. She smiled.

"Okay my boy".

He gave a weak smile back and paced upstairs. He found Melokuhle's door wide open and walked in.

"And then?", he asked when he found him sweeping.

"What?"- Melo. He shrugged and continued giving short pushes consecutive to the broomstick.

"It's 15 minutes to 6 in the morning and you're cleaning?", he was genuinely surprised.

"What time am I allowed to clean wena cleaning executive?"

Mxolisi walked in, closed the door and took the broom from him. Melo sighed. He knew a lecture was coming.

Mxo pulled him so they go sit on the bed.

"What am I to you Melokuhle?"

"My best friend. You know this"

"Melokuhle what am I to you?"

"Tsek you're my day one", he said and laughed.

"Nobody knows you better than I do. What's up?"

Melo sighed before dropping his back on the bed and placing both his hands behind his head.

"I can't stop thinking about Busi bro. Remember that girl at the complex?"

"Only rap bxtch on the Forbes list?", Mxo quoted Nicki's line since the girl was rapping to the song. Melokuhle laughed.

"Yeah. Saw how hot she looked in those shorts? Those curves? That waist?", Melo asked and Mxo huffed out a laugh.

"I tried not to. What about them?"

"Guess what?"-Melo

"What?"

"Mina wonke is not interested. I was at first sight but I just can't bring myself to call her. I also turned down Hlubi offering herself on a silver platter jo. What if I never heal from this?"

Mxo exhaled and also dropped himself in the same position on the bed.

"So all this cleaning? You're somehow trying to keep her out of your mind?"

Melo nodded. "The busier or distracted I am, the better"

"I think you're rushing into it. You want it to be over as soon as possible but I'm sorry to be the one to tell you that it won't happen overnight"

"Outchea sounding like a pastor"

"A fxcking bishop put some respek on my name", Mxo said and they both laughed.

"Eish Mxo. It gets better as days go by but it still hurts. What hurts most is that I could've saved her had she allowed me to. Somehow"

"I also don't get how depression and suicide work but I saw this other thread on Twitter I don't know if you saw it?"

"The one about how we shouldn't make other people's suicide about ourselves saying they were selfish and shxt?"

"Yeah that one"

"But this is way different"

"It's not. Stop fighting the pain or else you'll spend the rest of your doing just that. Those are your dad's words. Not mine"

Melo sighed.

"Ngiyakuzwa Mxo. Anyway, what went down last night?", he asked and got up. Mxo got up too and buried his face in his hands.

"What? Akaku nikang' ikhekhe?"(She didn't give you the cookie?)

"No that she did. My problems only started this morning"

"She regretted it and cried that you take her home?"

"Awuthule and listen. Ever had an addictive fxck?"

"That for me was with Busi bro"

"So you know what I'm talking about. Cool. Her alarm rang in the morning and she wanted me to take her home. I couldn't without one last fxck so we did that. Mthathe phela umbuyisele ekhaya Mxolisi. Guess who we find when we get there?", he raised his face to Melo and waits for him to actually guess. Melo immediately gets it.

"Fxck no!"

"Fxck yes! She was LI-VI-D. Yoh Ndalo got such a mean beating with a wooden spoon and a dishcloth I felt my heart break"

Melokuhle laughed.

"Uhlekan?"(What are you laughing at?), Mxo asked with a bored expression pasted on his face. Melo contained himself.

"Askiies nawe I only ever hear about these things I never thought they'd be so close to home"

"Ask me what she said?"

"What?"

"She was on some 'Mxolisi ngizwile ngoMelokuhle nezinto enizenzayo hayi kweyami ingan' "

"Hayi yabo manje? Ngifakelwan mina kuyo yonke le nyongo?"(Why am I being dragged into this mess?)

Mxo laughed and shrugged.

"Wait, she called you by name? So Ndalo told her about her?"

"Uyahlanyin? There's only one explanation for this. Her sister either cracked or she willingly snitched. Now bazomhlola if they're not doing it already"

"I hate how these parents think it's okay to do whatever with their kids. Bayomhlola bathole inkomo idliwe and then what?"(They'll test her and find the hymen broken and then what?)

"Ngizohlawula obviously. MQ is going to kill me. But that's the least of my problems. How do I get the morning afters to her? I don't think they'll allow her out she's not even replying to my texts"

"You fxcked her raw?"

"You're a fine one to speak. Ngazenz ngcono ngami"(Goody two shoes)

"I'm not. I'm just worried about her getting pregnant. If she does uzofela nezono zami uzokubulala ufe nya uMuzi"(Muzi will punish you for my sins as well)

"But I don't think she'd catch I pulled out each time"

"Do you know that precum can contain live sperm? I found this out when I was in a frenzy when Busi told me she was baking"

"The fxck?"

"Yup. I don't want to lie. In my case I never pulled out that one time. I just hoped for the best and that was stupid. But if dad finds out that Ndalo is pregnant he won't be open to hearing your nywai pulled out stories. You need to find a way to get those pills to her otherwise, you're a dead man walking", Melo stated and stood up to take his phone from the charger. Mxo's head was spinning and buried in between his thighs in frustration. He called someone and put the phone on speaker as it rang.

"Hello?", a sleepy feminine voice answered.

"Hey Zee unjan?"(How are you?)

"Who's this?"

"It's Melo. I need a favour"

"If Mxolisi sent you to come look for love backs from me umtshela ngiyamzonda uyezwa Melokuhle?!"(Tell him I hate him you hear?), she was now sounding like a person who was wide awake. Mxo kept his head buried.

"Kahle. Bheka man I need you to deliver some pill--, stuff. I need you to deliver some stuff to uNdalo"

"Pills?"

Melo ran his hand down his face. She's the only friend to Ndalo he knows otherwise he would've called somebody else.

"Yes"

"As in, morning after pills? You broke Ndalo's virginity Melokuhle?!", she shot out in complete shock. Melo did not reply.

"How could you?! If you break her heart I swear...!"

"Can you or can you not get the pills to her Zanele?"

"Mciim. Niyangicika nina cos you think you own this place. Ndalo did not deserve to be on your hit list and you know it"

"Ndalo is on nobody's hit list. I'll pay you ke?"

"How much?"

"R50"

"Angiyona ingane Melokuhle ngizomenzan u fifty randi?"

Melokuhled exhaled from impatience.

"R150?"

"R400. Take it or leave it."

"Zee yaz the way umuhle ngakhona awujumpisi ukuthi uyahlanya"(Your beauty is deceiving. One could never tell that you have a few marbles short).

"I said take it, or somarr leave it"

"Yoh this is a rip off and you know it. Let's meet at Sengwayo's garage then we'll go to the complex together.

It's closer much to your house. There's an ATM there right?"

"Yeah. Let me take a bath first"

"Zee there's no time for that!"

"Okay okay. I'm on my way there"

"Sharp"

Melo got up and went to got dressed. He came back to put his sneakers on and grabbed his wallet.

"Ngiyarojwa la ngenxa yakho"(I'm getting robbed here because of you), he said with his finger pointed out.

"Thanks man", Mxo said and they bumped fists.

"I got you, lil bro", he teased and Mxo laughed.

"Little? Wayimosha"(You ruined it). Melo laughed harder and ran out.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Manqoba was behind Enhle when they walked into the bedroom in silence. He took the direction of the bathroom and Enhle the closet. They both changed their minds and almost bumped into one another when they wanted to switch directions.

"I'll just..."-Enhle

"Yeah you..."- Manqoba

Awkward. They then passed one another and Enhle went to take a hot bath. Manqoba went to take off his clothes and dropped himself on the bed in his underwear to appease his exhausted mind of the many hours of rest he'd deprived it of.

When Enhle finally came out in her towel, she found him dead and gone. She would've also died for some sleep but her stomach was rumbling. She put on her robe, dressed her hand and left for the kitchen.

"Nokwanda. Portia...", she greeted the two ladies conversing in the kitchen. Nokwanda looked like she had just arrived as she was tying up her apron over her new blue uniform. They greeted her back and exchanged eyes, surprised by the bandage and eye bags.

"Ingimele iwashin sisi ithi ngikushiye"(The laundry is waiting for me let me leave you), Portia said and left Nokwanda in there. Enhle took out a punnet of grapes then pulled a chair out.

"Madam, ukahle?"(Are you okay?)

Enhle raised her face and swallowed the grape that was in her mouth. She nodded with a weak smile. Mam' Nokwanda dropped her eyes in doubt and Enhle looked around to see if anybody was coming. She gestured with her hand that Nokwanda should sit. Nokwanda was agile in her white Tommies as she reached for the chair. Enhle trusted Nokwanda's advice. Out of all the helps in the house, she's the only one that evidently distanced herself from gossip and never spoke of things she saw but wasn't supposed to. She's also the one who had been there the longest.

"You've been married long before I even knew you right ma?"

Nokwanda shifted her head back slightly, surprised at the question.

"Y-yes"

"What's the recipe for a successful marriage?"

Nokwanda placed her palms on top of the black marble counter.

"Phew. I really do not know. Imendo ayifani. For me, I'd say... respect. Iyahlonishwa indoda bangaku khohlisi. Lezinto zama 50/50 aysebenz emshadwen"(Relationships are not the same. You should respect your husband don't let them deceive you. Equality does not work in a marriage)

"Kodwa ma I can respect my man and still have a say in my marriage isn't that so?"

Nokwanda slowly shook her head.

"Hayi uma ushade nendoda yomZulu and especially efana neyakho. UMBulazi was 18 when I first arrived here. I was 24. Ukhulele la phambi kwamehlo ami and in all those years, I've grown to realise that he wants to have the final say. Always"

Enhle sat and digested what Nokwanda had just said.

"I don't know if I won't be disrespecting you by saying this but..."

"No please khuluma ma"(Speak), Enhle held on to her robe on her chest attentively.

"Okay. I understand that you're independent and uyakwazi ukuzikhulumela however, ngesinye iskhathi nami ngiye ngidumale ngalendlela umphatha ngayo umnyen wakho"(... you're outspoken and can defend yourself... sometimes I get disappointed by the way you treat your husband), Nokwanda stated and Enhle dropped her face in shame.

"I remember this other time angisa khumbuli which year was it kodwa umthethise kab'hlungu phambikwami no mam'Eve angazi waye khohlwe ukubuya nani eytolo. The way ngadumala ngakhona I even remember that day like it was yesterday"(I don't remember... you lashed out at him for forgetting something at the store. I was so disappointed I even remember the happenings of that day like it was yesterday)

"Nini ma?"(When?)

"Angisa khumbuli kahle kodwa uLuhle was in primary school that time. Maybe standard 6 or 7 somewhere khona lapho"(I don't remember well but...)

"I honestly don't remember"

"Ubab'wakho bekakhona ngalela suku but he was outside noMtungwa"(Your dad was around that day, outside with the chief)

It then hit Enhle.

"Oh! Ngiyakhumbula manje. Kodwa ma I wasn't shouting I was just telling him how unhappy I was"(I remember now...)

Mam'Nokwanda took Enhle's hands.

"I am telling you this as a mother. Stop taking advice from abangani bakho who think they can head households kukhona obaba endlini. If you don't give your man the respect he needs he's is going to out and look for it elsewhere. He needs to feel wanted but most importantly, he needs to feel needed. If you start with your twenty first century ini ini and start behaving like a bull he will definitely leave you in his kraal usale uziphatha. You can have a say in your marriage but humbly so ngenhlonipho. There's a reason why women are the ones who work hard to be chosen for marriage and amadoda just do the picking if they feel you qualify. If awufuni umshado kulungile kodwa if uyawufuna you have to accept this and live with it because it will never change myskat"(Your friends who want to head households while they have husbands in those houses. He will leave you in his kraal so you can do as you wish... if you don't want to get married it is fine. But if you do want to get married, you have to accept this fact and ...), she advised and tightened her hold on the silent Enhle before standing up to leave.

...

Mxolisi found Lwandile in one of the guestrooms making the bed.

"Other half", he teased and Lwa laughed as he waved the fitted sheet up and down with both hands at one corner.

"I'm not your half I'm your replica dummy"

Mxolisi laughed lightly before grabbing a chair and sitting with the backrest in his front.

"I thought you were sleeping in Melo's room"

"Relax I told grandma we fought. I don't want any stitches", he said and rolled his eyes. Mxo laughed.

"No I wanna know why you didn't?"

"Didn't what? Sleep in Sonke's room?"

Mxo nodded.

"I didn't want to make him uncomfortable"

"Un-comfortable?"

"Yeah. You know..."

"But he doesn't know that you're..."

"Still. What if I cuddled him in my sleep or something? It was just safer this way"

"I think you're overthinking this"

"I am?", Lwa questioned and dropped his hands.

"Yeah"

"Melo is not like you Mxo. He has that KZN villagelity about him I doubt he'd take it as nothing if something weird was to happen"

"Village what?", Mxo laughed.

"Urgh you get what I'm saying"

"Is this why you were the first to suggest to dad that we get separate rooms?"

"Don't be silly. I did that because YOU started making things uncomfortable for me when you wanted to have Neo over. Or was it Charlotte?", Lwa teased.

"Fseg", Mxo laughed.

"My point is, you were a bit wild when you first started having sex and the secretive up and downs weren't working for me. And besides, we were sleeping on a bunk bed so..."

"Mm. If you say so. What happened to Quinton anyway?"

"Ah. He became distant after that whole Mzwanele saga. He's too deep in the closet so it made the entire thing weird for him I guess"

"Don't take him back even if he falls out of that closet"

Lwandile laughed.

"I met someone yesterday though"

"Where?"

"I took a young walk when you were out"

"And?"

"Yoh. He's... I dunno. Arrogantly handsome. He's... I didn't know I had a fetish for men with cute feet and hands till I met him. Oh my God Mxo he's... yoh"

"Weeeee", Mxo exclaimed, mimicking Manqoba and Lwandile shot out a laugh.

"So... are you two like dating now or...?"

"Nah he's straight. Remember angisheli mina ngiyashelwa so... he didn't make a move. We were just walking together since he also needed some fresh air. He likes taking walks like me but I hated how he kept referring to me as "mjita" I was like duh?! Hello?!"(I don't make moves on guys. Guys make moves on me), he went on a continuous rant and Mxo couldn't stop laughing.

"He's cute yena shame. I hope to bump into him on social media if not in person again"

"You didn't get his number?"

"So he could punch me in the face?"

Mxo stood up.

"You need to learn how to shoot your shot", he stated and tried to leave. Lwa threw himself on him and gave him a tight hug. Mxo lifted his one hand and placed it on Lwa's back, surprised. Lwa's hugs are random but not THAT random.

"You okay?", Mxo asked. Lwa nodded.

"Thank you!"-Lwandile

"For?"

"Accepting me as I am"

Mxo huffed out a laugh.

"Did I have a choice?"

"I just thought you'd maybe distance yourself from me thinking my sexuality will somehow taint yours too", Lwandile explained, still holding onto him. Mxo broke the hug.

"What? That you're gay then it'd mean I'd be gay too?"

"I thought you'd think that's what people will conclude"

"Bro I eat pxssy!", Mxo exclaimed and Lwa chuckled.

"Look, people who think in that manner are either afraid that if they interact with anybody in the LGBTQ community, they'll also be forced to confront the mirror OR they're very stupid and I have no business stressing about what morons have to say about me", he said and made Lwandile smile.

"I get you. Now help me make the bed"

"Awunyi? I don't love you that much", Mxo said and left. Lwandile shot out a laugh and threw the pillow he had placed on the floor at him. Mxo quickly closed the door laughing before it could hit him.

...

Betso fell into deep sleep after Muzi left the house. Her mind took her to her mother's old sitting room, where she grew up.

"Kgantsho man there's a lot of space for you to sit stop rubbing up on me!", she yelled in irritation to her sister. Kgantsho laughed and continued cuddling her up, just like she used to do when she was still alive. Her pregnancy bump was clearly visible. Kgantsho brushed it in adoration. The two were surrounded by fading white fog.

"If anything was to happen to her I'd lose all peace", she said and continued brushing Betso up.

"Kgantsho go mogote man go sit over there!"(It is hot)

"Ah ebile ka tsamaa. Tshwara"(I'm leaving. Take this)

She said before presenting her with a potion in a little brown bottle.

"What's this?"

"It is for protection. Bago leka mara nna ke batla ngwana anne safe. Enwa moo but because moleko ontseng yana tshwanetse o bereke gongwe, expect problems in your marriage. I am prioritizing the baby's health right now. Tse dintsi retladi bona"(They're casting spells on you I want the baby to be protected from that evil and be safe. Drink that but because such a spell has to fall and work somewhere, expect problems in your marriage... We'll deal with the rest afterwards). Betso saw herself drinking in grimace due to the bad taste and slightly shaking her head. When she looked to her side, her sister was gone. She woke up with her hand on her chest and immediately called out, "Kgantsho!", lowly.

...

Zanele made her way to Ndalo's house after they got the pill. Before she could knock, she heard Ndalo's mother shouting.

"Vula amathanga Ndalo!"(Spread your thighs)

Zanele carefully walked in and saw Ndalo lying on the reed mat crying while her grandma patiently waited for her to cooperate.

"San'bonani", Zanele greeted and old woman greeted back. Nomcebo continued trying to get the stubborn Ndalo to open up.

"Ngifuna ugeg'wakho abone la manyala la uba busy ngawo mengingekho!"(I want your granny to see the crap you do when I'm not here)

Ndalo continued to cry.

"Awume nawe"(Stop it already), Ndalo's gran said and pulled Ndalo so she sits up. She then hugged and tried to comfort her. Nomcebo was furiously pacing back and forth with the broken tree branch in one hand.

"Lolo?", gogo called out and wiped her tears with her pinafore.

"Gog?", Ndalo sobbed. Zanele was still staring and standing there like an invisible ghost since no one was paying any attention to her.

"Usayi ntombinto?"(Are you still a virgin?)

Ndalo sobbed and wiped her own tears.

"Khuluma!"(Speak!), Nomcebo shot out furiously.

"Awukahle Cebo ulibel ukubanga umsindo kube NAWE wangihlaza una 16 kanje!"(Stop making noise because you also embarrassed me when you were the same age!)

"Ma ngizama ukuvikela ingane yam--"(I am trying to protect my child--)

"Ukumthethisa kuyosiza ini?"(What will shouting help?), she asked with her hand around Ndalo's head.

"Lolo, ngithe ngowakuphi lomfana?"(Who is this boy?)

"Kwa Khumalo gogo"

"Khumalo straight ebukhosini?"(The royal house?)

Ndalo nodded.

"Nili sebenzisile ijazi lomkhwenyana?"(Did you use a condom?)

Ndalo kept quiet. Nomcebo sighed heavily.

"Yaz ngisebenza kanzima ukuthi ungene iskolo esibizayo esise zingeni eliphezulu ukuthi uzokwazi ukufeza amaphupho wakho ungafani nami kodwa wena wenzani?Ungikhafulela ebuswen? Waze wangiphoxa Ndalo yezwa?"(You know I work hard so that you get quality education so you can fulfill your dreams and not be like me but you spit in my face. You have disappointed me Ndalo do you hear me?), Nomcebo dropped a tear. The branch followed and she left. Ndalo couldn't stop crying inconsolably.

"Yekela ukukhala nawe ngoba ugangile. Ithi ngiyo khuluma naye"(Stop crying because you were naughty. Let me go talk to her), her granny said and stood up with difficulty. Zanele helped her up and she thanked her, then exited the house to go look for Nomcebo.

"Haibo. Ceboo?!", she limped out as her plump lower body swayed sideways.

Zanele placed herself on the mat alongside Ndalo.

"Babes", she greeted her and placed her arm around her. Her eyes landed on the red marks of punishment on Ndalo's thighs.

"Kodwa nawe oe. Uvuma kanjan ukuthi la bafana laba bakwa Khumalo badlale ngawe?"(How could you allow the Khumalo boys to play you like this?)

"I've had an earful from my mom I don't need more from you too"

Zanele raised her hands in surrender. She straightened out her palm and handed Ndalo the wrapped pill.

"Melo is bad news Ndalo stay away from him before he gives you a baby and leaves you with it"

"I'm not--, wait. You sound...the two of you have history?"

"No I dated Mxo I don't know if you know him ngoba akahlali la. He's also no different"(He doesn't live here full time)

"What?"

"Yup. UMxolisi yinja shem I don't think I'll ever forgive him"(Mxolisi is a dog...)

"What did he do?", Ndalo questioned with pinched brows.

"Wangicharma wangicharma umfana hee. I was head over heels ngingasa kwazi nokulala. Sajola for like the whole of December last year and he had to go back to Joburg. The same day he arrived, I called him and a girl picked up the phone wangithuka wangibiza ngofarm Julia saying ukuthi ngiyislima and that uMxolisi bekangi user. I think she said her name was Sne or something. Hey! Ngikhale ukuthi umama angibuze ukuthi ngishonelwe yin. Ndalo?! Mciim"(The boy charmed all sense out of me... I couldn't even sleep. We dated for like... she insulted me and called me a farm Julia saying that I'm a fool and that Mxolisi was using me. I cried so hard my mom asked me who died), Zanele explained and Ndalo felt a knot tying up in her throat, pulling in all the nerves in that vicinity.

"Mi na"(Take), Zanele said and gave Ndalo the pill. She took it and stood up slowly, still engulfed by shock over countless layers of regret. She went into the kitchen, passively listening to Zanele complaining about how

bad the Khumalo boys are. She stood by the table for balance as Mxo's words replayed themselves in her head, interchangeably with her mother's sharp and piercing ones.

Chapter Forty

Enhle eventually went back to the bedroom and found Manqoba still asleep. She bit her lower lip doubtfully before approaching him. He was hugging onto a pillow sleeping flat on his stomach. She climbed the bed and led her hands to his back, then sleeping on top of him. The touch grew into a hug and she sobbed ruefully. He raised his head with squinted lazy eyes, surprised at the what was suddenly weighing him down in his sleep. She let go and sat up awkwardly. He sighed and turned over so he lays on his back. He shut his eyes before opening then again to look at her.

"I'm sorry", Enhle apologized, twiddling with her thumbs. Manqoba bit the side of his lower lip and fixed his gaze.

"I'm willing to start from scratch. To try again", she went on and he sat up. Eyes tired, painful and heavy.

"I want to book us a weekend away so we can talk things through. I really--", Manqoba's phone began vibrating from the top of the pedestal, interrupting Enhle. He looked towards it before languidly picking it up. He swiped his thumb across the screen before placing it on his ear. Enhle sighed and looked away.

"Yebo?"

"Mm", he coolly agreed to whatever he was being asked.

"Hm?"

"Kuphi?"(Where?)

"Wenzani wena lapho?"(What are you doing there?)

"Okay mama ngiyeza"(I'm coming), he said and Enhle brought her face back to him. The only time she ever heard him saying "mama" to anybody is when he is talking to her. He cut the call and pulled his legs off the bed.

"Mbulazi", she softly called out.

"Hm?", he replied as he gathered the strength to stand, burying his face in both his hands.

"Are you leaving?"

"Yes"

"When are we going to speak about this?"

"About what?"

She stood up from the bed and went round the bed to go kneel in front of him.

"Wenzan manje? Sukuma"(What are you doing now? Stand up), he pulled her teary self up with her hands clasped together.

"We will talk. Just not now. I don't have the energy", he let go of her and his feet led him to the shower. She wiped her tears with her mouth slightly open. She scratched her head and dropped her whole weight on the bed, frustrated.

...

"She's still not replying to your texts?", Melo asked a sullen Mxo after walking into the living room, drinking juice. He sat down next to him and Mxo switched off the television.

"I'm worried about her now"- Mxo

"Surely she's fine. Now that indaba ye morning after indlulile, how are you going to deal with her finding out about Zee?"(... the issue with the MAP has been dealt with...)

"Ey yabo leyo. My head is even hot"(See that one...), Mxo said and dropped the very hot head on the sofa.

"And also, her mother could walk in here any minute now"

Mxo was about to reply when his phone rang. He quickly answered it when he realized that Ndalo was calling.

"Baby! Uright?"

"Kuphi? Are you okay?"

"Okay I'm coming "

He dropped the hand with the phone and turned towards Melo.

"She knows?", Melo asked. Mxolisi shrugged and stood up to leave, after throwing on his black bucket hat in a hurry.

When he arrived at the ruins of the house they once met at, he placed himself on a rock under a tree, waiting for her. She finally arrived. He stood up to hug her and she hugged him back. He leaned in for a kiss but she pulled her face away. She broke the hug completely and took out her phone from the pocket of her jean skirt. She handed it to him and he asked, "What's going on?"

The expression that hung over her face wasn't mad neither was it happy.

"It's over Mxolisi", she finally said. He frowned.

"Over?"

"Yea"

"What do you mean? I'm sorry your mom had to beat you that hard because of me I--"

"What happened between you no Nele?", she interrogated. He gently held her by her wrists.

"Zanele was a mistake baby--"

"WHAT happened?", he was taxing her patience.

"Before I tell you, won't your mom be mad that you're here?"

"She's already mad and disappointed kyafana"

"Ndalo..."

She threatened with her eyes and he knew he had to start talking.

"Okay. Zanele and I met at Lungelo's 16th birthday. She was initially supposed to be Melo's but his girlfriend showed up without warning and I had to save his a**. One thing led to another and we ended up dating for a few weeks"

"Did you sleep with her?", she interrogated further and he momentarily dropped his eyes.

"Yes"

"Were you her first?"

He nodded in approval, biting his lower lip.

"So, I was just another Zee to you?"

"Ha ah baby. I told you I love you Ndalo and I meant every word. Please don't do this?"

"Sne is your main angithi? You just entertain yourself with us here then you go back to your real girlfriend"

"That's not true. I officially ended things with Sne after I met you. She and I are over baby", he explained and placed his hands on her cheeks. She looked away.

"I chose to ignore everything that's being said about you, believing that you actually love me. I had my doubts when she called when we were in the car but I still allowed you to make a fool out of me"

"Please believe me Ndalo I really do love you. You're not Zanele. I know I was a jerk with her but that doesn't mean I'll treat you the same. Give me a chance to prove myself. Give me the benefit of the doubt.", he begged and she shook her head.

"I don't think I will ever be able to trust you Mxo. This won't work. Also, the last time I saw my mother cry was after my dad died. I've hurt her. Badly. I don't want her to give up on me like she did with my brother. I'd die. I made reckless decisions because I can't think straight where you're involved. There's just a lot of reasons why we can't work. If Nele finds out that I'm dating her man she'll go crazy"

"I am YOUR man Ndalo nobody else's!"

"If I knew you were her ex I wouldn't have dated you. I don't want to be that kind of friend"

"So in other words, you're choosing her over me?", he asked and she shrugged.

"Your reasons are not good enough for me. I'm not gonna watch myself lose you over nonsense"

She yanked her hands away from his grip.

"My mother's tears are nonsense to you Mxo?"

"That's not what I mean but I want you to fight for us Ndalo because I know I'd do the same. She is well within her right to be mad about this and I don't blame her but she will see how serious I am about you as we grow", he held her shoulders and gazed into her eyes intently.

She kept shaking her head in disapproval. He tried to kiss her but she drew her sad face back. He sighed.

"Ngiyak'thanda Ndalou. My daydreams are filled with imaginations of us as a married couple one day, of you heavily pregnant with my babies, of us travelling the world together. I want you in my life. BUT, if there's one thing my father taught me when coming to women, it's consent. I am not going to force you into anything you don't want to do. Tell me now and forever that awungifuni and I'll immediately leave you alone. In the short space of time we've known and spent with each other, I believe I never missed a chance to tell and show you how much I love you. If you refuse to see it, I am not going to over-explain myself ngikhuluma into eyodwa engapheli"(... now and forever that you don't want me... saying the same thing over and over again)

"Ndalo!", an exasperated voice called out before charging to the two. Ndalo rolled her eyes at the boy Melo once rescued her from.

Mxo's eyes reposefully moved from him to her. Then back to her.

"Ubusy uthi awujoli kanti uyafeba?!"(You keep saying you don't do relationships but you're out here being a whxre)

"Ngifeba nobani Sthe? Angizangi ngithi kuwe angijoli. Ngithe angikufuni!"(Who am I whxring with? I never said I don't date. I said I don't want you)

Mxo continued watching in silence.

“Kodwa uyayifuna le cheeseboy? Ngowakuphi yena lo?”(But you want this cheese boy. Where is he from anyway?), he scanned Mxo from top to toe before grabbing Mxo’s bucket hat and throwing it on the soiled and dusty ground. Mxo scoffed, taking a moment before picking it up and dusting it of the dirt.

“Ngithi ungubani Danone ? UNdalo ngowami hamb’ uyofuna eyakho icherry!”(I asked you who you are. Ndalo is mine go look for your own girlfriend), he stated before spitting on the ground and waiting for a reaction.

Mxo lost all of it and pushed him against the tree trunk. The rough surfaced collided with his back in a flash as Mxo strangled the disrespectful life out of him.

“Mxo no uzombulala!!”(You're gonna kill him!), Ndalo yelled and cried as she looked around to see if there wasn’t any elder to help. The streets were clean and uncaring.

“Ubiza ban ngoDanone? Unganginyeli ngoba awungazi angikwazi. Angaz uqhamukaph’ kodwa ngizok’posa back to the correct address ngempama eyodwa uyezwa?! Unganginyeli”(Who are you calling as Danone? Don't shxt on my head because you don't me just as much as I don't know you. I don't know where you come from but I'll post you back there with a single slap?), he hissed as Ndalo cried for him to let Sthembiso go.

“Hade mfethu. Hade bra”(Sorry bro), Sthe breathlessly tried to convey his apologies. Mxo dropped him when he remembered how he almost killed Mzwanele and Sthe coughed out.

He turned his sight towards a freaked out Ndalo and she handed the phone to him since she wanted to leave that approximate of a crime scene.

“U serious?”, he questioned with a straight face.

“She nodded as she sobbed her tears away”

He looked away and bit his lower lip in brown study.

“Take it or else ngizoy shiya phansi!”(... I'll leave it on the ground), she threatened and he just looked at her blankly before extending his hand to take it. He turned to see what Sthe was up to and he was gone, he looked ahead and saw him walking away with his hand on his neck.

After Mxo took the phone, Ndalo distorted her lips regretfully before walking away.

“Ndalo!”, he called for attention and she kept walking.

“Ndalo!”, he called out again and she stopped before turning in his direction.

“This is it vele?”, he questioned and she nodded. He dropped his face and brought it back up again.

“Okay. Can I at least have one last hug?”- Mxo

She pursed her lip undecidedly before turning back to go fall in his open arms. He still had his hat in one hand and her(or his) phone in the other.

He held on to her tightly and she broke the hug after a moment too long.

“Bye Mxo...”

“Sharp...”, he voicelessly let out.

...

Betso was still trying to piece the dream together while waiting for Muzi to come back. She remembered that she saw Kgantsho in the dream but couldn't remember the correct contents of that dream. She heard the door open and went into the kitchen to go meet him.

"Hey baby", he greeted with a smile and placed the plastic bag on the counter. She hugged him before they shared a brief kiss. He tried to deepen it but she cut it short. She peeked into the bag and saw an oily brown paper bag encasing the full chicken. She also saw a tub of her favorite ice cream- Country Fresh, Blueberry flavored. She screamed and hugged him some more. He laughed and rubbed her chin adoringly. She was already indulging on the chicken when he informed that he was going up to freshen up.

"Going out?", she asked as she settled down on the chair.

"Yeah Mandla, the guys and I are going to have a couple of drinks in Randburg"

"Okay baby. Please drive safely? And drink responsibly", she said and he smiled before kissing her on the cheek.

"Ngizwile mkami"(Noted my wife), with that he left her singing along to the tune of the deliciousness of the chicken.

...

Manqoba arrived in Phosingwenya and waited at plaza as instructed by Sphesihle. He called to let her know that he'd arrived and that she should come. He continued to wait until he saw her approach. He opened the door for her from the inside. She hugged him and he hugged her back.

"You smell good", she complimented and he gave her a faint, small smile.

"Thanks I guess", he said and pushed the dangling strand of hair behind her ear, lovingly brushing her chin with his thumb.

"Let's go", she said and he sighed heavily before igniting the engine.

"You look tired. Did you get some sleep last night? Turn left", she questioned with her light frown on her face. He shook his head and kept his eyes on the road as he drove with one hand over his mouth and another on the steering wheel.

"Why?"

"There was just a lot happening at the house"

"Being inkosi can't be easy?"

"Yeah. It's not", he said as he took another corner. They shortly arrived at the rooms and he parked outside.

"No drive in. There's always space for parking inside when the landlord is not here", she said as she got out of the car to go unlock the padlock to the larger gate. She pushed it back with both hands as a means of opening it. It was a bit heavy so it needed the strength of both arms. He couldn't help but admire lustfully at her behind in her short but not-so-short two-step frilly summer dress. It was just above her knees. Her brown legs were shiny and glowing. He reprimanded himself as he drove in. They were a decent set of rooms, painted in light brown with a touch of neat maroon, electric fencing and all. A few of her stay mates were seated on camp chairs having their booze on a chilled Sunday. He greeted them and they greeted back. He put his arms around Sihle's waist as

she walked in front him, marking his territory. They conversed lightly, sharing a laugh. One of the two ladies coughed and nudged the other, admiring Manqoba. The other one laughed silently and one of the guys seated with them shook his head nonchalantly with a little smile.

Sihle unlocked the burglar door and they walked in. She had left the wooden one on the inside slightly open. The smell of the citrus air freshener welcomed him first. The room was a typical feminine single room, just larger- fit for a working adult. The windows were open, allowing the curtain to fly freely in the fresh air. A sense of peace flew about in the room as well. Something that has grown unfamiliar to him.

“Make yourself at home”, she said to him as she went out with an empty bucket for water. He sat on the bed and took off his shoes. He then laid comfortably on his back, waiting for her to come back. To absolutely no intention at all, he fell asleep. His military green tracksuits contrasted badly against the color of her violet bedding.

When she came back, she found him in deep sleep. She smiled to herself and shook her head. She got down to cooking as she had initially planned, playing RNB, perfect for a Sunday.

When he eventually woke up, the sun was already setting and leaving for other parts of the world. She closed the window and he stood up from the bed.

“Morning sleepy head”, she teased and he laughed.

“What time is it?”, he questioned and stretched.

“7 am”, she continued and he laughed harder.

“I would’ve believed you if I was 8. Ikuphi itoilet laykhaya?”

“Step outside and walk straight to your right uzoy’bona ekugcinen”(You'll see it towards the end)

She said while packing away the dishes she had washed. He went out.

“You don’t enjoy staying at home?”, he questioned as he stood against the door with his legs crossed. She was dishing up. She turned briefly to look at him before she answered. She was busy slicing the dumpling.

“Not really. I used to stay here to be closer to my job. I can’t bring myself to let go of this place. We’re all family here”, she said with a warm smile.

He walked in.

“Bewusebenzaphi?”(Where were you working?)

“I was a manager at the Boxer store that just closed down”

“The one ePlaza?”

She nodded in agreement as she wiped the white small bowl for the stew. She combined her dumpling with meat on her plate but separated the two for Manqoba’s. She put the food on a tray and empty glasses then went to put them down on the small table in front of her double couch. He went over to sit as she fetched the juice and bowl of warm so he could wash his hands.

“This looks and smells good. Ngiyabonga mama”, he brushed and she held her hand. She smiled and asked if he prays for his food. He laughed and said no.

“Do you mind if I pray?”, she asked and she said, “Not at all”, while washing his hands. She did as she requested. They then started eating after her ‘Amen’ officiated the end of the prayer. After she swallowed, “I’m sorry for how I spoke to you the other day. It’s just—”, she was struggling to piece construct and together a sensible sentence. She dropped her hand down on her plate.

He stopped chewing and looked at her, concerned.

“What is it?”

“The whole thing brought back a flood of bad memories. I was drowning in them so bad that it made it difficult for me to think straight”, she confessed. He placed his plate down, wiped his hands and turned in her direction.

“Talk to me”, he said and took her hands in his.

“5 years ago, I was in a relationship with some guy...”

“Some guy?”

“Dumisane. Ngeke umazi”(You wouldn't know him)

"Dumisane who?"

"Mzobe"

“Okay. What happened?”

“We were happy initially. Until 8 months into the relationship when we were trying for a baby”, she explained and he listened attentively.

“We tried many times but I just wasn’t falling pregnant. He took me to a doctor and the doctor said he sees nothing with my womb or ovaries. Initially he thought I had ovarian cysts due to my paralyzing menstrual cramps but after tests , he said I was fine. Dumisane’s patience was wearing thin. He began emotionally--, verbally...”

“Emotionally verbally what Sihle?”, he questioned anxiously.

“He began saying stuff like I am barren because I did multiple abortions and I was being punished for it. He said he wouldn't marry me before I could give him a child. He called me loose and—”, she couldn’t bring herself to continue. She dropped a lone tear and he wiped it with his thumb.

“He eventually hit you?”, he questioned.

She turned her head to show him the scar she had at the back of her ear.

“Ikushaye ngani le mbungulu?”(What did this bastard hit you with?)

“A screwdriver. I was in hospital for two weeks”, she explained and wiped her consistently falling tears.

“I’d never lay a hand on you Sihle”, he stated and she never replied. He sighed and leaned in for a hug. She let all her bottled emotions rip and fell apart on his firm shoulder. He tightened the hug. Her music was still playing.

After a while, when she finally collected herself...

“I’m really sorry I wasn’t there to protect you”, he said in a raspy voice since he’d been quiet for a long time.

She smiled and brushed her hair back.

Eugene Wilde’s ‘Gotta get you home tonight’ started playing.

“Woza”(Come), he prompted her to stand up so they dance.

“Hayi Mbulazi”, she said no reluctantly while laughing, but standing.

“You want to dance for the public but not for your husband?”

She shot out a laugh.

“...to be”

“Same difference. Yidonkey nehhashi. Six no nine. Konke k'yafana”(It's a donkey and a horse. Six and nine. They're all the same) he said as he held both of her hands and they danced. He made her twirl and she couldn't stop laughing. They danced facing the same direction, his hands on both of hers over her stomach as Eugene excelled in setting the mood in the room. He turned her around and pulled her towards him closely, way too closely. She got completely lost in his gaze. He bit his smiling lower lip and she grew shy then dropped her eyes. He cupped her chin and brought her face back, leaning for a kiss to seal and wrap that intense moment in gold.

Chapter Forty-One

As their bodies communicated in that dance, Manqoba eventually stopped when he felt tired and she threw her head back on his shoulder as his hands harmlessly kept themselves on the sides of her waist. He slowly stopped his lips on her neck.

"I'd never hurt you", he whispered, a whisper that coldly travelled in between her body hairs like a snake slithering in wet grass. She closed her eyes and he gently pushed her hair to her other shoulder. He lightly placed a feather-like kiss on the surface of her soft neck.

"I want to love you Sihle", he continued planting those kisses. A soft moan left and floated off her lips. His fingers travelled to her curves.

"I need you to trust me", his one hand was now on the strap of her dress, dropping it off her shoulder.

"Mbulazi...", she softly called out. He was about to speak when his phone rang and crushed that serenading moment. He sighed before taking it out of his pocket and answering it. Enhle was calling.

"Yes?"

He pinched the top of his nose bridge as he spoke.

"Ukhalelani?"(Why are you crying?)

"Does it have to be now?"

He exhaled deeply before saying "Okay".

"Kuzofanele ngihambe mama. But I meant every word I said. I just need to go and sort out a few things so we can start off our relationship well on a good note. Okay?", the last part came out in a hushed tone, a whisper. She nodded when he placed his hands on her upper arms. He put his index finger under her chin, pulled her closer and allowed his lips to embrace hers. He made sure their foreheads met when they broke the kiss and placed his hand behind her head, the other held her hand.

"I love how light my shoulders feel when I'm around you", he coarsely stated, staring earnestly into her eyes. She puckered her speechless lips, blushing. She tucked her lower lip in between her teeth and he shut his eyes briefly.

"Eish ithi ngihambe before ungifaka emilingwen maNkosi"(Let me leave before you make me fall into temptations), he said before he could squeeze his misbehaving member. She laughed as he hugged her, both feeling the deadly chemistry in between them that could ignite and set the sheets on fire if they allowed the reaction to occur. He pressed his lips onto her cheek for a lengthy moment and said his goodbyes. Their hands slowly untangled from one another as he walked in reverse. He then left.

...

"Mm! Look. At. That. A**!", Lwazi grimaced lustfully at the waitress walking away from their table after bringing another bottle of their cognac. The gents all laughed at their idiot of a friend.

"I thought we agreed that tonight is about us and catching up as igenge, not getting into trouble?", Mandla said as he sipped on his drink slouching lazily on the red leather couch rounding their table. The bar was dimmed but

not too dark for them not to see what was going on around them, even things they were not supposed to see-well according to their wives.

"Haibo. I never promised that I'd lose my eyes in my vows mina", Lwazi defended. Muzi laughed under his breath and shook his head. He was on his phone with his drink in another hand, his back against the couch. He yawned and shut his eyes, trying to squeeze the tipsy out through his eyelids.

"Haaa ha. Look at you getting old...", Duncan said to him and they all laughed. Including Muzi.

"Eish mfeth. I'm exhausted I think I should head right home to my wife now"

"Exhaustion my left paralyzed foot. You just miss a** wena", Mandla mocked and they exploded in laughter again.

"Ah kuphi?"(I wish), Muzi said and Mandla downed his drink and frowned in curiosity.

"Eh bra. Trouble in paradise?", Duncan asked.

"See why it's no sin to go eat outside, wipe your lips clean and go back home?", Lwazi continued trying to get his point across.

"In which bible?", Duncan asked before he could laugh.

"The PDF I have on my phone"- Lwazi

"Ay se niyanya manje nina awuthi ngihambe izobonana"(You've started with your crap. Let me leave I'll see you guys), he said as he laughed it off and stood up. He picked up his phone, car keys and wallet from the table and they bumped fists.

"It's only going to eleven and you're already leaving? I'm disappointed", Lwazi complained as he brought his fist forward for a goodbye. Muzi laughed but did not reply.

"I blame uMandla for suggesting we come here. Remember the initial plan was to hit the club triple X?"

"I wasn't in the mood for that busy environment. We're too old for that shxt", Mandla stated and put empty glass on the table, amongst the many ones that had shots. A young waiter approached them with a single whiskey glass and serviette.

"Sorry sir, that lady over there says hi", he said to Muzi as he was about to leave. The gents all stopped talking to see the lady, including Muzi with a confused look on his face.

"Gaddamm!", Duncan exclaimed into his fist, trying to be discreet as possible.

"Yesses!", Mandla shortly went after him. Lwazi was just there with his jaw hanging. The lady crossed her long legs sitting on the high bar stool and waved at Muzi with a smile, cocking her head to the side. He didn't know which was longer- her single-strap snake skin stilettos or her flowy weave. The black, frilly see-through top she was wearing moved side to side as she waved. Her short leather skirt had climbed up her curves. Muzi was flattered but he had zero plans to indulge. The waiter was just standing there with a smile, waiting for him to react.

"Yise. Do the lady some justice", Lwazi said as he glared at her covetously. Muzi grabbed the drink off the tray, downed it all at one go, frowned at the sharp taste, placed it down and said to the waiter, "Tell her I said hi back", then left. The gents were roaring in disappointment as he smiled his way out, trying not to laugh at how Lwazi was roaring the loudest.

"At least take the number!", Duncan yelled waving the serviette in the air. Muzi could hear Mandla's irritating

laughter behind him.

"Muzi! Bra!", Lwazi kept yelling. Muzi did the salute sign to his friends without looking back and kept walking.

He searched for his car amongst the many that were parked outside the bar and eventually found it. He unlocked the car and it notified that it was open. He was about to climb in when he heard a vomiting sound behind one of the other cars. He couldn't see where it was coming from but his senses assured that he could find its source if he followed it. He took out the one leg that was already in the car and closed it. He searched in between the spaces and eventually found the person behind the vomit. She couldn't stop. She was vomiting so much it sounded like she was running out of breath.

"Miss. Are you okay?", he asked and she did not reply. She kept gagging and vomiting without ceasing.

"Is she with you my guy?", a voice appeared from the side. He looked in that direction and just stared. Trying to decipher the whole situation.

"Why do you ask?", he questioned.

"No I'm just asking. We could take her home if she's not with you"

"Who's we?"

"Me and the gents", he said and pointed in their direction, sitting on the bonnet of a green tazz and smoking. The bunch appeared dodgy to him.

"Yeah she's with me", he kept a straight face.

"You sure?"

"Boy get the fxck outta my face", he said with severe irritation and the guy left. The lady had her hands on her knees trying to accumulate the strength she just vomited out back.

"Are you here with someone here?", Muzi asked.

"Please leave me alone. I'm not interested", she said in a throaty voice. The muscles around her trachea tired.

Muzi raised his face to the guys at the car. When they saw him they turned their faces away pretending like they didn't and started a pointless conversation. He went towards her, putting her arm over his neck- her hand hanging over his shoulder.

"Come let me take you home. And I wouldn't be stubborn if I were you. That's if I still wanted to see myself live", he said and walked with her in that position. She was seemingly in pain when she placed her hand on her stomach, hissing in anguish. He led her to his car and put her on the passenger seat.

"So, where do you live?", he asked the lady as she grimaced in pain. She gave him the address off her head and asked if he doesn't have any water. He shook his head as he stared then looked for a bottle in the backseat, where he usually keeps his water. He twisted the lid open and handed it to her. She drank up slowly.

"You don't usually drink do you?", he asked as his speech lowered in speed, fixing his gaze on the side mirror.

The guys were now inside their car but they weren't moving. He opened the glove box and took out his gun. She popped her eyes, slipping into panic mode. He could see her sobering up.

"Please. Please don't kill me. You can do whatever with me just don't hurt me", she begged and he shot her a look.

"Why would you--", he was about to ask why she would suddenly think he would do anything to her, before he

could remember that he was a complete stranger to her, a complete male stranger with a gun.

"Look. I am not going to hurt you. I just want to make sure you get home safely. I don't want to wake up to you trending as a statistic tomorrow when I could've done something to prevent it. Alright?", he tried to make her understand. She swallowed hard.

"You could be working with them for all I know", she said.

"Okay. Let's say I am. Your best bet of survival is with me because the moment you run out of this car they'll be on your tail. There's three of them. I'm by myself. So what is it gonna be?", he asked and she looked back to see their car.

"Just take me home please", she begged when she felt herself backed tightly against a corner. He then drove off trying to keep a friendly face as possible, trying not to freak her out...

...

After the penalties at the end of the match, Melokuhle ran out of the soccer ground breathing like a dying horse and sweating like he just walked out of a waterfall. He got under the tree and found three of his teammates there complaining about how they lost the match.

"It's that stupid Genja lomjita holds on to the ball way too fckng long and doesn't pass it. He plays like he makes up the whole team eyedwa! There wasn't going to be a draw had he used the opportunity he had to pass the ball to Fikani so he could score!", one of them hissed furiously as Melo poured down the remaining water on top of his head after drinking half of the one litre. They continued complaining while he tried to catch his breath. He dropped himself on the grass and laid on his back after taking off his soccer boots. When he looked to his side, he saw the girl he met at the shopping complex, the one he promised to call. He admired how she cute she looked in her simple all black outfit. Her jean tightly suffocating the curves that were the very first thing that pops into his mind whenever she walks across it. She saw him too but looked away without a wave or a smile. He immediately knew he was in trouble. Lungelo noticed he was staring at the group.

"The one in the short black dress right?", he said and Melo dropped his face and laughed at how his friend saw incorrectly through him. He shook his head.

"Black jeans"

"Bashisa boy'2 kodwa"(they're both hot), Lungelo said as he stood up after Melo. They walked towards the five girls and the lady in black tried to walk away at the sight of them. Melo paced up and held her by her wrist. Her face wasn't happy but she looked away.

"Ima kant yin?"(Wait for me what's up with you?), he said with a smile. She continued looking away.

"I know what I did wrong and I'm sorry. It's just, a lot of things happened since we met but I never forgot about you", he tried appeasing her.

"A lot of things like what?"

He had to think fast.

"Umsebenzi weskolo ngapha no kulusa iynkomo"(Schoolwork plus herding cattle)

She laughed at the exaggerated exhaustion in his voice.

"Mciim", she tried to fight the smile that was insisting on stretching her lips as she looked away. He gave a closed-lip smile too. Lungelo was busy chatting up the girl he thought Melo was admiring as the others gave the two couples privacy.

"I'm forgiven, right?", he said and stepped closer. She brought her face back and nodded.

"I'd hug you for that but...", he was referring to his sweat and water and situation by the trailing silence.

"Ja no. Rather don't", she said and they both laughed.

"Asambe ke ngiyogeza so you can get your hug", he teased. He was still holding onto her wrist.

"Haibo!", she laughed even harder.

"Kunani?"(What's wrong with what I'm suggesting?)

"So uzozeza phambikwami?"(You'll bath in front of me?)

"Bewufuna ngigeze nawe? Na lapho ayikho inkinga"(You wanted me to bath with you? There's also no problem there). He said and continued cracking up.

"Uyagula wena"(You're crazy)

"Ngiguliswa wuwe"(You're the cause of that)

"Mciim suka", she blushed.

"Ngizok'fonela namhlanje ebsuku yezwa?"(I'm gonna call you tonight)

"Would you have called if you didn't see me?"

"Hawu kant yin manje? Siyalwa mina nawe?"(What's wrong?)

"Ufuna ukulwa wena?"(Do YOU want to fight?)

"Angaz. Wena uyafuna?"(I don't know. Do you?)-Melo. He asked with his brow raised above a threatening smile.

"Ngizolwa if ngiyaphoxeleka"(I will fight if I have to)

"Iympi zami ngizilwa embheden phela mina"(I fight my battles in bed)

He said and immediately shut her up. She laughed and said, "Bye Melokuhle!", trying to pull away from his grip.

"Uyaphi manje? Angikhumbuli ngithi uhambe mina?"(Where are you going? I don't remember saying you should leave)

She jerked her face back.

"Ngeke ngizwe ngawe phela mina"(I don't take instructions from you)

"Ngempela?"(Really?)

"Ehhena!"(Yes!), she vehemently shot out.

"Soke sibone"(We'll see), he said and let her go with his charming smile. She clicked her tongue and laughed, then walked away.

...

Muzi arrived at the block of apartments that the lady directed him to. He got out of the car and helped her out. He handed her her shoes and locked the car. They walked in and took the elevator to her room. He did all the

unlocking and asked her if she knew those guys. She shook her head and walked in languidly.

"What were you doing there by yourself anyway?", he asked in irritation as she climbed onto the couch and pulled the throw over her legs, also pulling the cushion and stuffing it under her face.

"I was waiting for my boyfriend. He stood me up as always"

"You and your boyfriend do dates in bars?", he asked in a surprised tone as he looked around. She nodded. He got the impression that she worked a decent job from all the appliances and furniture he saw in that place, unless of course the place was her man's. He thought to himself.

"Look. I have to go now. Stay safe", he stated and walked towards the door.

"Please stay!", she shot out, she shot out with her head raised from the cushion desperately.

"Unfortunately I can't. My wife is waiting for me at home", he informed and she fell back, disappointed with fear in her eyes.

"I can get someone to guard for tonight though?", he offered courteously.

"You'd do that?"

He huffed out a laugh.

"It's no big deal. But it's just for tonight. If you feel you're being followed go to the cops", he said as he typed on his phone.

"I'd really appreciate that"

...

Melokuhle walked home in his soccer gear bored out of his wits even though the soccer ground wasn't that far from his place. He didn't have his phone with him since he had nowhere to place it. Bringing it along each time would be too much admin. He raised his head and saw a familiar face. The girl was carrying two seemingly heavy plastic bags in each hand.

Londiwe Gumede? He questioned himself to make sure. He'd last seen her when she was in grade 7 and him 9. She looked a bit different. Plus the setting sun did no justice to his sight.

"Hawu Melo!", she also recognized him as they approached one another. She put her bags down carefully and she ran over to hug him. He was happy to see her but not about the hug and it showed. He still lifted her off the ground still.

"Hawu. Awujabulelanga ukungibona?"(Aren't you happy to see me?)

He laughed.

"No I am. It's just... I've been sweating and--"

"Hayisuka!", she slapped the air in nonchalance.

"Wow. You look... you look really beautiful", he complimented.

"Mus' ukudlala ngami wena. YOU look cuter than the last time I saw you!"(Quit playing with me), she shot out. He bowed his face and let out a single breath of a laugh.

"What are you doing here?"

"It's my grandmother's birthday so I thought I'd do something special for her. Plus shoot some vlog content for

my YouTube channel", she explained.

"Are you here to celebrate her birthday or are you using her birthday as an excuse for content?", he teased and she hit him on the chest playfully. He laughed.

"No like seriously. I wonder about you vloggers sometimes"

"Uyabheda yaz. While we're at it, subscribe to my channel wena"

"Why?", Melo asked and she thinned her eyes at him.

"Convince me. Why must I subscribe to your channel? I don't do make up. I don't watch vlogs and what else do you girls do on your channels?"

"Storytimes. You'll watch those ke please subscribe? And tell your friends to subscribe also", she stomped her feet twice on the ground, consecutively, begging.

"I'll tell them. But count me out", he said and fetched her plastic bags, noticing that there's cake in one of them. She offered to take one but he refused.

"Ithi ngik'phelezele"(Let me accompany you home)

They then walked to her house while she rambled about how life is Limpopo, where her mother is married to a man from the Balobedu clan.

"Are those the people that speak--"

"Yoh I swear if I hear one more 'Khelo khela ka mabane khe omphileni khona' I will die!", she shot out and he laughed.

"Now what the fxck is that?!", Melo continued laughing.

"Arg. It's just something people like to say when you tell them you're from that side"

"Nah man I wanted to ask if they were the ones who emphasize their Ts when they speak"

"Nah that's Batokwa. There's too many types of Pedi in this country", she explained. He nodded. They got to the gate and he put the bags down. She took out her phone and asked him to save his numbers, which he did. After that, she stole another hug and he laughed.

"If I didn't know better I'd say you enjoy the smell of my sweat", he teased.

"Maybe...", she said with a bit of attitude and picked up her plastic bags, walking in. He closed the gate for her with a smile as he watched her walking in, feeling the crush he once had on her rising from its ashes.

Chapter Forty-Two

"Sawubona", Manqoba greeted after he walked into the kitchen filled with the smell of chocolate. Enhle had an apron on, baking muffins and brownies. He was clearly surprised to see this.

"Sawubona baba", she said calmly and went to take the second tray out.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm baking for ma's biweekly meeting with the ladies", she informed and took off the baking gloves. He noticed she had new nails but a way, way shorter length compared to what she always gets installed.

"Are you okay?", Manqoba asked as he slowly placed his phone and car keys on the kitchen counter. She nodded with a smile and approached the fridge.

"You weren't half an hour ago", he remarked.

"I really am fine", she assured as she took the litre of milk out of the fridge.

"Okay...", he had no choice but to stop pushing. She continued being busy. He was surprised at how the person he spoke to on the phone was a completely different version of what he was seeing in the kitchen. He walked past and she quickly said "Your food is in the oven. Please come back to eat?"

Now he was asking himself several real questions. The cliché "Who are you and what did you do to my wife" question was circling his mind. He just nodded and continued with his journey upstairs.

...

When Muzi arrived home, he found the boys watching TV and greeted them, asking when exactly they arrived. Mxolisi was sunken down on the couch watching TV with his hands in his pockets.

"And then wena? Ulunywa yin?" (What's your problem?), Muzi asked. He could see he wasn't quite himself.

Mxo shook his head and Muzi knew he wasn't going to win even if he forced him to speak. He stored the matter for tomorrow then turned to Lwa, who was on his phone. They conversed for a bit before he retired to his bedroom. Betso was asleep in the dark with her hand on her tummy. He switched on the side lamp and sat on the bed, taking off his sneakers. He got up to go wash his face and came back to take the rest of his clothes off, left only in his underwear. He got under the covers and hugged his wife from behind, kissing her on the neck. She woke up and turned towards him with a smile. A kiss landed on her lips.

"Hey baby", she greeted.

"Ninjani?" (How are the two of you doing?), he asked.

"We're fine. Did you enjoy your night out?"

"I missed you the whole time", he informed and she smiled, checking the clock on the pedestal.

"Is that why you're back? I wasn't expecting you back at this time"

He nodded.

"How long have you been asleep?" -Muzi.

"Since nine I think"

He was already caressing her breast and kissing lightly on her shoulder. She knew what was coming and was

absolutely in no mood for it. She allowed him to continue, trying not to be rude. She bent her neck to allow him working space. He turned her so she lays on her back, getting on top of her. He raised her silky nightie and lifted her left leg while kissing on her lips. He then suddenly stopped and sighed.

"What's wrong?", he questioned.

"What do you mean?"

"Awuyifeeli lento engiyenzayo la. Baby when was the last time we had sex? Ngempela ngempela ngizophila ngath anginaye umama la endlin? Okwe s'shimane?"(You're not feeling this... Am I honestly going to live like a bachelor while I have a wife?), he asked and she looked away. He released a heavy breath out and got off of her. He went to take a cold shower and came back to bed. She was already asleep by the time he was done. They slept with their backs facing one another. He wondered himself to sleep.

...

Manqoba was seated in his office when Enhle knocked and he allowed entry. She fixed her headwrap and walked in. He was watching the sunset on the balcony but walked back into the office when he saw her. They both knew they had to talk at some point. He went over to the couch and sat. She went to sit next to him.

"Mbulazi...", the conversation had to start somewhere.

"Mama...", he answered. The way in which he said it gave her hope.

"I'm sorry. I honestly don't know how to apologize in a way that will make you see the regretful state my heart is in"

He sighed and took her hand. She dropped tears from both eyes.

"Going back and forth with you is going to be a complete waste of time. I am mad yes but on my drive back home today, I had a thought and even laughed at myself. I realized that how I'm feeling right now, is exactly how you felt the multiple times I went out to cheat. Siyafana mina nawe so It'd be hypocritical of me mengizoku khomba ngomunwe"(We're no different... if I were to point fingers)

"You went out because I was a bad wife..."

He distorted and exercised his upper lip so it meets his nostrils and shook his head.

"It's no use pointing fingers now. You're here to stay just as much as Sihle is. You're both ancestral wives. I want peace. I need it. I am in fact desperate for it"

"I really thought you were going to kill me"

"I can't say all is forgotten but I'd never do that. I don't know why you always fail to understand how much I actually mean it when I say I love you Bianca", he said and she laughed at how he referred to her. He barely calls her by her second name.

"So, angazi. Asenze lento yakho sibone ukuthi izo silahlaph"(Let's do this thing of yours and see where it takes us)

"Yin leyo baba?"(And that is?)

"Itherapy", he said and waited for her to reply.

"Ngempela?"(Really?), there was a twinkle in her eye.

He nodded.

"On one condition though...", he added.

She looked at him with an expression that said 'Carry on'.

"That you also have individual sessions with the therapist apart from our joint ones?", he said and she took a short moment to digest what he'd just said. She then nodded and he tightened his hold on her hand. She leaned in for a hug and he hugged her back. She was doubtful about kissing him when they broke the hug. Manqoba is the most unpredictable person she knows and that was the foundation of her doubt. She ultimately resigned from that idea when his phone rang. He answered it, only to be alerted that there is somebody outside who was there to see him.

He got up to go attend to the matter. He stepped out the house, using the opportunity for fresh air.

"Mbulazi", the man greeted.

"Ngikusiza ngani Shelembe?"(What can I help you with?)

He was squashing his hat in his hands as he stepped a bit closer in his worn out Chuck Taylors.

"Sine nkinga la emphakathin. Siyangenelwa ezindlin ebusuku. Konke loku kwenzeke ngesuku elilodwa"(We have a problem in this community. We're getting robbed at night in our houses. All of this happened in one day)

"Amaphara?"(Drug addicts?)

"Angazi. Kthiwa bashisa udonsi lwempisi ukuthi silale sife khona bazo ntshontsha kahle"(I don't know.

Apparently these people burn a hyena's tail to make us fall deeply asleep so they can steal well)

"How many houses so far?"

"Five. Kune two eykhala ngeymbuzi"(Two households are complaining about goats)

"Zenze njan iymbuzi?"(What about the goats?)

"I don't know kodwa bathe mebevuka bathola ezimbalwa zishonile"(When they woke up they found a few of them dead)

"Dead not stolen?"

He nodded.

"Zibulawa yin?"(What kills them?), he asked in a very baffled tone.

"Akekho owaziyo. Kodwa mina ngicabangela isilwane. Inyoka maybe?"(Nobody knows. But I suspect an animal of some sort. Maybe a snake?)

Manqoba felt a headache trickling to the forth of his head, worrying about his livestock as well.

...

TWO MONTHS LATER.

After they came back from school, Lwandile informed that he was going to take a nap, leaving Mxolisi and Rorisang in the living room. She placed her backpack on the couch and sat, waiting for Mxo to come back with their juice. He did and came to sit next to her. She took out her math workbook and study guide, along with her

large pencil case.

"I think we should go to my room. This table is too low for me my back is gonna hurt", he said as he stood up.

"You know how your mom feels about that"

"Do you see her anywhere?", he questioned, a voice full of irritation.

"Yoh okay. No need to bite my head off", she packed her things up and followed him, leaving the bag behind.

They got there and he offered her the chair. He went out to go get Lwa's from his room. Lwa just looked at him suspiciously when he was wheeling the chair out.

"What?"-Mxo.

"You're asking for trouble", he warned and Mxo snorted.

"Trouble loves my company. Not the other way around", he said and Lwa laughed in defeat.

"Anyway, is it me or your parents are acting hella weird these days?"- Lwa.

"Ey Kanyo you know I never want to involve myself in their mess it fxcks with my peace", Mxo continued taking the black chair out. Lwandile rolled on the bed to get a better position to sleep in.

Rori tossed a jelly tot into her mouth when he walked in and it disturbed a completely wrong pipe. She started coughing out while hitting her chest.

"Are you okay?!", Mxo rushed to help her. She shortly stopped and swallowed, trying to stabilize her breathing.

"I'm fine but...", she said as she searched the floor.

"What are you looking for?"

"My contact lens. It fell out now my sight is trash", she informed as she continued searching. He helped her scan the grey carpet for it.

"Are you winning?", he asked if she's making progress in finding it.

"I don't see shxt", she said and they both raised their faces to look at each other, before exploding in laughter after realizing the pun in her statement. They continued searching as they laughed.

"Man I can't lose them I just got these yesterday"

"Here...", Mxo found it next to one leg of the bed. She took it.

"How do you put these things on anyway?"-Mxo.

"I'd show you but I can't put it on now. It's probably contaminated I'll have to put it in solution first", she said as she took out the other one as well, putting them in their small case that was in her 'Hello Kitty' pencil case.

"I am officially blind", she said and laughed. He laughed lightly as well.

"You really can't see? As in totally?"

"I can. But I can't see anything at a distance. I'm myopic", she informed.

"You used to wear glasses. Where are they?"

"In my bag. I hate feeling blind but I hate them twice as much"

"Well you need them now", he said as he got up to go fetch her bag, loosening his tie around his neck. He came back with it and handed it to her. She took the casing out and put the glasses on.

"How do you feel now?"

"Much better thanks", she said and smiled. He smiled too and took his seat. She paged through the study guide

to find the section on trigonometry and showed him the question she had the most trouble with. He was still trying to figure out the direction of the question when she suddenly said "But I don't feel comfortable being in your room man Kopano"

"I don't bite", he said without raising his face and picked a pencil out of her stationery bag.

"Your mom wouldn't hesitate to cross these two streets to go tell my dad that--"

"My mom is for me to stress about"

He said and she sighed.

"This is simple. Remember, when you have sin and whatever angle it's no different to having one over the cosec of that angle? Which ultimately means that a cosec is actually an inverse of the sin that you have? Same goes with your cot and tan. Do you remember this?", she pulled the chair closer to listen attentively.

"Look this equation might look long and complicated but it's actually not. Yours is to convert, substitute and shift a few things around lemme show you"

He pulled the notebook closer and worked it out. He got stuck on one of the steps and sat back on his chair to think.

"See? It's not as easy as you made it out to be", she said and he kept quiet, biting his upper lip thoughtfully.

"Wait. Sin 30° is half right? So we can discard of this and substitute that here", he said and allowed the pencil to do all the work under the instruction of his mind passionately. She kept stealing glances of him, admiring him flowing in his element.

"Aaaand Bob's your uncle!", he cheered when he came to the very last equal sign.

"No way. It can't be that easy", she laughed. He laughed too and attended to his ringing phone on the table.

"Marshmallow", he answered his brother's call.

"Mxo. Can you talk?"

"Sure. What's up? Why so serious?"

"I bumped into Ndalo KwaDiliza. Remember that tournament I told you about? When I asked her what she's doing there she said she lives there and ran off. When I asked Zee what's going on, she went off at me about how much of an ignorant boyfriend I am and asked how come I don't know that Ndalo got kicked out"

"She got kicked out? Did Zee say why?"

"Eish Mxo. U spat uNdalo mfethu"(Ndalo is pregnant), Melo said and Mxolisi's lip dropped in slow motion.

Chapter Forty-Three

"Tell me you're joking?", Mxo said as he stood up from his chair, carelessly placing the pencil on the table that it came rolling down. Rori picked it up with her eyes on him, filled with concern.

"I wish I was. Call her and ask"

"I can't. She gave me the phone back remember?", he was now pacing the room with his palm on his forehead.

"Then you'll have to find your way here", Melo said and Mxo cut the call so he can think properly.

"Bathong Mxo what's wrong?", she questioned.

He took two steps to the desk to go pack up her things.

"Eish Rori retla bua kgantele I need to attend to something real quick"(We'll talk later), he then handed her stuff to her and she saw it best to let him be. She packed them into her bag and zipped it up. When she stepped out of the room, she saw Betso coming in her direction on the corridor, all her concentration engulfed by her phone screen, dragging her feet in her slippers.

"Oh shit", she whispered to herself and turned back to look at Mxo.

"And then?", Betso sharply asked when she finally raised her face.

"Uhm hi Mrs Khumalo. I know what you said about not coming up here but--"

"I'm the one who insisted we study in here. Nothing happened ma", Mxo informed when he appeared.

"Di kae ditsebe?"(Where are your ears?), she asked, fuelled by fury.

"NOTHING HAPPENED! Jeez...", he snapped.

"You're speaking to me, like that?"-Betso.

Lwandile came out of his room, obviously irritated from his sleep gwtting cut short by the noise.

"What's going on?", he asked.

"I think... I think should get going...", Rori said and gently pushed her specs back, then tightly held on to the straps of her school bag.

"I think you should!", Betso shot out and Lwandile lowly said,"But ma..."

Rori took urgent steps, trying to get out of there as fast as possible. Mxolisi banged the door and locked it, giving no opportunity for Betso to shout in his ear any further.

"Ngwana ke yo!"(This child doesn't listen!), she yelled before marching to her room in her short purple dress and black leggings. Lwandile heaved a sigh and knocked on Mxo's door.

"It's me. Open up", he softly said. Mxo unlocked the door, opened it slightly and left him there to decide whether he still wanted to come in or not. Lwa walked in and closed it again. He went over to sit on the bed next to him.

"I know for a fact that, that wasn't just about Rori being in here"-Lwa.

"What are you talking about?"

"If it was, you would've just laughed it off when mom overreacted and tried to smooth talk her. You wouldn't have reacted like that", Lwandile probed into the matter and Mxo kept staring ahead. If solutions came from looking at walls, his would've probably been demolished from that stare.

"Ndalo is pregnant", he notified.

"Chile wait. What?", Lwandile's shook pulled his hands to both his cheeks. Mxo nodded.

"You're a giving new meaning to the word messy"

"Can you not?"-Mxo

"Askiies. So what, you're gonna tell mom and dad?"

"I first need to confirm this. I don't even know how and where I'm going to find her"

"You don't know where her house is?", Lwandile asked in a confused tone.

"She doesn't live there anymore. Apparently her mom kicked her out"

"And she doesn't have a phone. Shxt. Is your source reliable?"-Lwandile.

"Melo bumped into her KwaDiliza"

"And Melo wouldn't lie. So she told him herself that she's pregnant?"

"Nah. She didn't want to speak to him. He got the info from Zee"

"If I'm calculating correctly, she must be two months pregnant now? Unless if you fcked her at the thanksgiving ceremony last month"

Mxo ran his palm down his stressed face, braking it on his mouth.

"I never spoke to her since she gave me the phone back"

"So what are you going to do?"

"I don't know. I just know I can't turn my back on her when she needs me the most"

"It doesn't sound like she had any plans of letting you know otherwise she would've found a way to"

"I made a mistake by letting her go the first time. I'm not doing it again"

"You're gonna force your love down her throat?"

"No. I'm gonna fight for her. Like I should've in the first place. If I fail then I'd have failed but my kid is not going to grow up with false knowledge that I abandoned him or her"

"So you want this kid?"

"I didn't plan ukum'gqwalisa isusu but it happened"

"She's so innocent yaz. And I like her. I kinda hate you for this"

Mxolisi tucked his upper lip into his teeth, distressed to centre of his core.

...

"Knock knock!", the lady knocked with a shut-lip smile. Muzi raised his face and told her to come in with a smile that matched hers. He initialed the contract that he was busy signing before she got in and placed it back into the brown envelope on his desk.

"I'm surprised you still remember my face", she said and he offered her the chair across him.

"A man barely forgets a beautiful face", he complimented and dropped the envelope in his desk drawer.

"Oh stop. How are you?", she asked and sat back comfortably on her chair.

"I've got no complains. How are you? I never thought I'd seen you again. How did you even find me?"-Muzi

"That night, when you told that scary lesbian Belinda to come guard me? I asked her about you"

Muzi laughed.

"So today, I felt I should come and show my gratitude"

"Took you long bo"

She shot out a quick laugh.

"Were you expecting me?"

"Not at all. But three whole months pho?"

"It's actually two"

"Still", he said and pulled his laptop screen up.

"I was embarrassed haw!"

"So the embarrassment has worn off now?", he raised his brow with a slight smile. She laughed and looked away. He huffed and dropped his eyes back on the keyboard.

"I'm kidding man. Three days ago, my neighbor's daughter went missing", she somberly informed.

"I'm sorry to hear that. Was she found?"

"Yy-yeah. Dead though"

"Eish...", he ran speechless.

"Apparently she was gang raped. They slit her throat and cut off her boobs. That could've easily been me if it wasn't for you", she said.

"It really was a pleasure. My sister-in-law suffered the same fate. Hope your man is done standing you up at night. He placed your life in danger"

"Oh he's done alright. I broke up with him the next morning after that day. If a complete stranger could prioritize my life then he clearly does not deserve my time Vusi", she stated.

"Vusi?", he was confused.

"Isn't your name Vusimuzi?", she asked and he laughed lightly.

"No. It's Muzikayise. But I get why you would think that"

"Oh my God I really thought--"

"What's YOUR name?", he partially closed the laptop and waited for her to reply.

"Andiswa", she let out. He nodded.

"So... you're the boss around here?", she said in an impressed tone.

"Nah I'm just standing in for someone", he said sarcastically and she laughed.

"Nxn. So what do you guys do?"

"A lot of things"-Muzi

"Define a lot of things"

"Well, we make bricks and concrete and sell them. Or use them to build. We make roads, bridges, the works. There's small divisions like house plans and marketing somewhere", he explained.

"Mmkay...", she nodded with her lip bent, admiring his office.

"And what do you do, An-di-swa?", he asked and she giggled at how he pronounced her name in cuts and slices.

"I am a microbiologist", she informed.

"I don't remember telling you that I'm a civil engineer"

She chuckled.

"Arg okay. I work at Bioxlab. I work with specimens from various healthcare institutions for diagnostic analysis. I'm also a part time student"

"So you work with urine, blood and all that nasty?"

"There's nothing nasty there. Just a couple of compounds and molecules just like water and whatever else. You'll have a lot of peace if you think about it that way", she briefly 'drumrolled' her fingers on the desk playfully before falling back on her chair again.

"I'd rather not think about them at all", he said and they both laughed.

"You said you're a part time student?"

"Yeah. I'm busy with my masters"

"Oh yeah?", he cheered in a fascinated tone.

"Yeah. I'm doing research on receptor-specific medication for neurological diseases"

"Yyy-yeah let usss stop right there before my head starts spinning"

She shot out a laugh.

"Why do I get the feeling you don't like biology much?"

"Your feelings are spot on. I'm more of a physics and math kinda person"

"I see"

"What were your majors kant?"- Muzi

"Genomics and microbiology", she said.

"Interest-ing", he said as he dialled on his office phone, wanting to order his lunch.

"What can I get you?", he asked as he waited for the canteen to pick up.

"Just juice thanks"

He frowned.

"Yes. Can I please have two chicken mayo sandwiches and two orange juices please?", he ordered and she shook her head with a smile. "Yeah that will be all thank you", he politely said and put the phone back.

"Miss bacteria", he teased and she shot out a sharp laughter.

"And how did we get there?"

"I don't know. The point is, we are here", he stated as he ran the chapstick on his lips.

...

"Hi. My husband said he booked me an appointment for one o'clock?", Enhle asked the receptionist when she got to the spa.

"Hello. Let me check for you quickly. Your name please?", the receptionist said and sped her fingers on the keyboard. Enhle realized her name tag said "Noni"

"Enhle Khumalo", she said and looked around, admiring the green and serene vibes she was getting in that place.

"You may go right through that door. It will lead you outside then you'll follow the big footsteps on the ground

to your correct destination", Noni said with a smile.

"Thank you", she hung her brown Neverfull over her shoulder and left the reception area. She took out her phone to attend to her texts and bumped into Sphesihle who was also focused on tying up her spa gown.

"What are you doing here?", Enhle asked.

"UMbulazi uthe... wait, did he book you here also?"

Enhle sighed from being pxxsed. Manqoba should've known better than to try and set them up for friendship, she thought to herself. She turned to leave and Sihle stopped her.

"No. Stay. I'll be the one to go"

Enhle scoffed.

"Oh you wanna play the good wife card?"

"What?"

"Ungizwe kahle"(You heard me well)

"I'm not playing any cards. I don't gamble. You never liked me and it showed from the start. I've accepted it. Stay out of my way, I will stay out of yours"

"You want to destroy my house and you expect me to welcome you with warm arms?"

Sihle sighed.

"I know your type. Ni pretenda ngathi nisweet kanti yall are snakes slithering under the sheets of married people"

"This is getting exhausting. Uyalazi isiko lwethu I don't know why you're acting dizzy over this. I'm not pretending to be sweet. I am sweet but not sweet enough to be repeatedly taken for a fool. You're a Zulu woman married to a royal Zulu man. Please start acting like one", Sihle snapped and Enhle slapped her across the face. She held her burning cheek with her mouth open. She got another thrashing slap on the other cheek when she was still trying to digest the other one. She also lost it and sent a fist under Enhle's jaw, causing Enhle to bite her inner cheek and bleed. She jumped on Sihle and led her straight to the ground on her back.

"What the hell is going on?", Noni came out of her section of the spa. They were busy screaming and tackling one another on the grass. Sihle ripped Enhle's glued on wig off and threw it in the pool.

"Haibo! Jessica!!", Noni screamed for backup. Enhle was strangling Sihle to the ground. Sihle managed her over so she'a underneath. Enhle bit her on the shoulder and she screamed in anguish. Noni tried pulling Sihle off but she instead got an elbow on her chest, making her feel a brief asphyxiation. Jessica finally appeared and they managed to pull the two apart. They were both breathing heavily from all that royal rumble.

"Please go call Mr Khumalo to come fetch them?", Jessica, the owner said from a deep place of irritation. Two other clients were watching from afar, with questioning looks on their faces.

"The massages are off?", Noni asked.

"I no longer want to see them here"

"But these are very rich and important peo--", Noni tried to whisper. Enhle tried to push Sphe into the pool but Sphe pulled and took her with. They both splashed into the water and Jessica screamed.

"NONI DID YOU NOT HEAR WHAT I SAID?!"

...

Mxolisi's phone rang on his way to KZN.

"Where on earth are you?", Betso asked, trying to keep as calm as possible.

"I'm sleeping over at KB's today. His mom is away on a business trip so I figured I should keep him company", he said in the tone he always uses to emotionally blackmail and convince her. She kept quiet and exhaled.

"It's a school day tomorrow"

"I took my uniform with. I will be at school"

"Promise?"

"I promise", he lied.

"I hate it when we fight Koppi. The tension in this house is already too much I don't want to add onto it"

"I hate it when we fight too my love"

"I'm sorry for how I reacted with Rori. Please send me her number so I can apologize to her"

"She lives two houses away. You need the exercise", he teased and she laughed. He had parked the car on the side of the road so he didn't risk her picking up that he's driving.

"Mciim okay. I love you boy okay?"

"I love you too homemaker"

"Sharp skhokho", she said playfully.

"Sure ntanga", he said and they both laughed. They cut the call and he sent a message to Lwa, tipping him on what to say should she ask. He then continued with his journey.

When he finally arrived at 21h47, he went to pick Melo up at a short distance from their home so no ears are raised. When Melo got in and sat on the passenger seat,

"Baby daddy", he mocked him the same way Mxo used to mock him. Mxo laughed and dropped his forehead on the steering wheel while Zaka by Mas Musiq subtly played in the car.

"Se njen"(I'm in shxt)

"I know EXACTLY how you feel", Melo said and Mxo shook his head several times due to stress. He got the car started and joined the road. The plan was to get Zanele to show them where Ndalo lived. Whatever mess that was to happen after that was to be solved when they got to its bridge- Mxolisi's words. Melo had already called Zanele.

When they got to her house, he sent her a text that she should come out. She eventually did but was not happy to see Mxo there.

"I am not going anywhere with him", she said and Melo opened the door to convince her.

"Zee please. I'm begging you I really need your help", he said softly and she frowned with her hands shoved under her armpits. After a moment of consideration...

"Okay fine. But he goes to the back I wanna sit on the passenger seat", she dished out her orders and the eyes in

Mxo's heart rolled but he obliged. Melo took the wheel, moving to KwaDiliza. Mxo focused on his phone while the two conversed about nothing, eyes hidden under his hat.

They finally arrived 13 minutes later. Zanele took out her phone.

"Who are you calling?", they both asked.

"Ndalo. I call her on her grandmother's phone when I need to talk to-- Hey babe. There's someone who needs to talk to you here", she said to Ndalo on speaker.

"Who is it?", Ndalo lazily asked.

"Hey Ndalo. It's Melo. Please come out?"

"What? What are you doing here?"

"Come out. Or else we're coming in?"

The line went quiet.

"Okay", she agreed. Melo then turned his head towards anxious Mxo and back to Zanele.

"Zee, before she comes out, I--, actually Mxo needs to tell you something". Mxo looked up and sighed.

"What is it?", she questioned, her eyes jumping from one brother to another.

"I'm sorry for this but, Ndalo is actually in a relationship with me. Not Melo", Mxo said and Zanele's big eyes grew wider.

"Wenja?!"

"I'm really sorry...", Mxo apologized again and she scoffed in utter disbelief. Ndalo came out in a gown and slippers. They all got out of the car and Zanele tried running to kick her ass. Melo quickly caught her and she cussed her out while kicking her legs in the air.

"Ungijwayela kabi sfebe ndin ulala nendoda yami! Fxck you bxtch I thought you were my friend! No fxck you a hundred times! Fxck you Ndalo shem! Fxck you very much!" (You're too familiar with me. You're sleeping with my man?!) she continued yelling as Melo carried her slender self away so she's far from the houses, avoiding drama. KwaDiliza houses are rural and build apart from one another

"I'm sorry Zee I didn't know how to tell you. I also didn't know that he's your ex when I dated him", Ndalo said emotionally.

Zanele was also crying.

"If I knew that you were sleeping with my man I wouldn't have switched those pills!", Zanele shot out.

"You did what?!", they all simultaneously asked.

"Yeah vele! I switched the pills and gave you my grandmother's pill for high blood. Ingan we're always being compared to you how you're smart, nywe nywe good girl nywe nywe. UNdalo uyapheka. UNdalo zange a faile. UNdalo uyacleaner. UNdalo akajoli. Nywi nywi nywi uNdalo nwyis nwyat. I was sick of it!", she confessed.

"Wow!", Ndalo was speechless with tears streaming down her face.

"Have you ever met satan Zanele?", Mxolisi asked.

She shook her head with attitude with her pretty nose raised high up in the air, still restrained in Melo's arms.

"That's because uyintanga yakhe. You're walking parallel with him", he said and Zee clucked her tongue. Ndalo was still busy feeling the pieces of her heart break. Mxo pulled her to his chest and held her head, hugging her

tight. She cried harder. Melo carried Zee away because she was fighting for him to let her go.

"I'm sorry baby. Please don't cry Ndalo ungiphul' inhliziy" (You're breaking my heart), Mxo said as she kept taking short bursts of breath uncontrollably as her chest moved up and down. He dug his fingers deeply into her relaxed hair and kissed her forehead.

"Askiies sthandwasami. I'm sorry you had to go through this alone but I'm here now angithi? Please stop crying ngiyak'cela?"

Chapter Forty-Four

Ndalo's emotions had no choice but to get tired and calm down eventually. She was still secured against Mxolisi's chest in silence. The door to her grandmother's house creaked open and light emanated from the inside. She came out limping from old age, her old bones threatening to retire from sustaining her weight. Ndalo pulled away from Mxo's arms and wiped her tears. Gogo was slouching forward and approaching, with the aid of her walking stick. They both just stood there waiting anxiously till she finally arrived. Mxo had a bolt of remembrance that he was supposed to take off his hat and he immediately did just that.

"Sawubona we Mxolisi", gogo greeted.

"Sawubona gogo"

"I know who you are because I know my grandchild. She wouldn't be in the arms of another boy than the one she told me about", she said and stabilized her rod on the ground. Mxolisi went speechless. He just nodded instead.

"Come in so we can talk. My bones can't handle this cold wind", she instructed and never gave neither of them a chance to reply. They followed. She had trouble getting onto the low stoep before the doorstep. Mxolisi stepped on it quickly and took her hand to help her out. She allowed him to.

"I hope you're going to do right by her. Her relationship with her mother is in complete tatters because of this", gogo went on. Mxolisi kept his head bowed, taking his seat on the couch. She went to settle on the reedmat and appease her snuff cravings. The two were still silent as if they were both not in the room, seated on the same couch.

"What are your intentions with this child of mine?", gogo asked and grimaced as the tobacco hit the spot, her two fingers pinching into the black container. Mxolisi's hand found Ndalo's, who panicked and tried to pull away. Mxolisi held on tight.

"Ngiyamthanda UNdalo gogo. Kakhulu futhi. I'm going to pay all the damages I owe, for breaking her virginity and getting her pregnant. We'll raise our baby together and when we're at the right age, I have every intention of making her my wife", he assured and cleared his throat. He was so nervous it was suffocating him. Ndalo could not resist smiling and tightening the hold on his hand.

"Have you told you parents about this?"-Gogo

"Not yet. But I will tell my father first thing when I get home"

He said and gogo continued paying attention to her snuff. She snorted and closed the container with the yellow lid.

"Ndalo, what about school?"

"I don't know gogo. Mom is no longer paying so... maybe I'll move to a government school?"

"There's no need for that. I'll handle it", Mxo butted in.

"What? No Mxo I can't--"

"I don't mean that. I will take over and pay for your fees. What I was asking is if you're willing to go to go to school with a bump na? You could take a year off if you like?", gogo lovingly said.

"Ah gogo. They'll laugh and get over eventually. I really want to go to matric next year. If I stay at home I might

get comfortable and never want to go back to school"-Ndalo said.

Gogo smiled.

"That settles it then. I'll...", gogo said and got on her knees so she can stand. She heaved a sigh after she managed to get on her feet.

"I'll speak to Themba and we'll see what we can do about reporting your pregnancy to the royal house"

"I don't think he will agree. He's also disappointed in me"

"Themba is my son. Leave him to me. Ngisayo lala mina you'll lock the door when he leaves"(I'm going to bed)

"Gogo?", Ndalo let out, from a place of shock. The gogo she knows wouldn't leave him with a boy in her house.

Gogo picked up what her tone meant.

"Usumithi Ndalo. What more worse can you do really?"(You're already pregnant), she asked and Ndalo dropped her face smeared in the sticky clay of shame. Gogo walked away steadily to her bedroom.

Mxolisi stood up and asked her to walk him out so they could talk outside. She did as requested of her. He wondered where Melo and Zee ended up but shoved the thought to the back of his head. They stepped out into the dark, walked towards the gate and he stood right next to it.

He exhaled before taking both her hands.

"Sthandwasami?", he gently initiated the conversation.

"Hm?", she replied.

"Ngibuke"(Look at me)

She raised her face and he stepped closer. He placed his forehead against hers.

"I'm genuinely sorry", he whispered

"For what?"

"Complicating your life"

She shrugged. He took it as her communicating "It is what it is to him".

"Kodwa ngicel' into eyodwa baby"(I'm asking for only one thing)

"What's that?"

He turned her so his arms could wrap around her tummy.

"No matter how tough it may get, ngicel ungayikhiphi ingane yami. I'll fix this I swear"(Don't abort my baby)

"I won't. I've never even had that thought"

"It didn't look like you wanted me to know though. Why?"-Mxo.

"I just told myself that God is gonna make everything fall into place somehow"

"So if you hadn't bumped into Melo you were going to raise my baby uyi one?"

"I don't know Mxo. This is my first pregnancy. I'm only 16 give me a break!", she snapped.

"I'm not shouting so why are you?", he calmly asked with his chin on her shoulder. She sighed and deflated her chest. Melo came back dabbing his middle finger on his ripped lip.

"What happened to you?", Ndalo asked, concerned.

"Arg Zee ran off and I chased after her because I didn't want her walking by herself at night. She got to this house screaming for her "uncle" to come out.

"So he moerr'd you?", Mxo asked, with an urge to laugh. Melo laughed first.

"Uyahleka and ngifela izono zakho la"(You're laughing and I'm paying for your sins here), he continued dabbling to see if he was still bleeding on the side of his lip.

"Askiies. Did he hurt you?"

"Not really. I managed to run and lose him. I even got lost. Zee is a nutcase she claimed she didn't know me. Nihamba nijola Mxolisi"(You sometimes date really questionable people), Melo explained and Mxo couldn't hold it in anymore. Ndalo hit him lightly on the chest. She was genuinely concerned.

"Uthini manje because it's your fault I ended up with her?", Mxo couldn't stop with the silent laughter. Melo also couldn't resist laughing as he pointed his finger out to his brother.

"Fseg wen uyezwa? Fseg", he said before he could take out his phone.

Mxo still had his arms around Ndalo. Melo turned on the flashlight and turned it in the direction of his lip, asking Mxo how bad the damage was"

"Not that bad. Just a single cut. You're no longer bleeding"

"Aight. You'll find me in the car", he informed before he could bid Ndalo goodbye and walk away.

"Mciim yaz wena. You shouldn't be laughing at this", Ndalo tried to reprimand.

"He's a big boy he'll be fine", he said before dropping a quick kiss on her neck. She just laughed and shook her head.

"I'm not here to stay my love I just had to come and see you"

"When are you leaving?"

"I don't know. All I know is I need some sleep right now and they haven't confirmed my booking at that BnB we used the last time"

"You're going to sleep there?"

"Yeah. I can't go home. I lied to my mom so if I set foot there she's going to know"

Ndalo nodded.

"I wish you could come with", he sulked. She laughed, lightly.

"Maybe I could", she teased.

"You just want to add onto my fines wena bese uzojika uthi uyangithanda"(Then you'll be outchea claiming to love me), he said and she shot out a laugh.

"I'm proud of you yaz baby"-Mxo

"You're proud I fell pregnant?", she asked in a surprised tone. He laughed.

"I'm proud that you're still focused about school and stuff, not allowing yourself to be deterred from your goals. Kinda motivated me to start taking myself seriously", he confessed. Her speechless self blushed and allowed her head to fall back on his chest.

"Wanna hear something crazy?"-Mxo

"I'm not sure I do", Ndalo replied and he laughed.

"Remember I told you I used to daydream about you being pregnant for me but when we older?"

"Yeah?"

"Now that you are, don't get mad, a part of me can't wait for you to start showing. I think you'll be really cute", he stated and she couldn't stop herself from laughing.

"Mciim some women get mad ugly during pregnancy. Especially if it's a boy"

"Angiwaphuzi amageu mina futhi angiy bhemi insangu isperm sami asinayo ireason yokunga kwenzi ukuthi ugwlowe"(I don't drink mageu and I don't smoke weed my sperm has no reason not to make you glow"

A quick and sharp laughter left Ndalo's throat. He then remembered the goodies he got for her on his way there. He told her to wait by the gate and went to fetch the plastic from the car. He found Melo snacking on one of the chocolate bars while seated comfortably on the reclined car seat, on his phone.

"None of these were meant for you man bhatata!", Mxo shot out.

"Benefits of being an uncle. If this child was already born and walking he would've gladly given this chocolate bar to me", he said and continued destroying the caramel center. Mxo clucked his tongue and closed the door. He walked back to Ndalo and handed her the bag.

"I didn't know what you might be craving so I bought a bit of everything", he said and she smiled.

"I don't have those yet but thank you", she took it and hugged him. She peeked into the full plastic bag to see what he got. He had placed her phone deep in that mess. He pulled her by the shoulders and allowed his lips to take over hers. They shared a lengthy kiss and Melo flashed lights at them. Ndalo laughed.

"I don't know who's more annoying between you and him

"I just know that it's one us and it's definitely not me"-Mxo. Ndalo laughed defeatedly.

"Now that you're here, this no longer feels like a burden. I don't know, it's just feels doable...", Ndalo said and wrapped her hands around his waist. He smiled and pulled her head to his chest.

...

Manqoba sat on his driver's seat as Enhle dried her natural hair with a towel. She was in one of the branded gowns they provide clients with at the spa. Manqoba just stared with his hand over his mouth.

"What happened?", he finally asked.

"She started it!", she shot out and put her ear against the towel so the hot water comes out.

"How could you set me up with her like this? I genuinely thought you wanted me to enjoy myself?", she started venting.

"I did", he calmly.

"And?"-Enhle

"I should be asking you that"

She thinned her eyes and looked out the window. Sihle left before Manqoba could arrive.

"I really don't like what you did Mbulazi. I really don't", she let out.

"What can I do to make you feel better?", he asked and waited for her to reply. She wasn't expecting that.

"Why are you not mad about what happened?", she questioned and stopped rubbing the towel onto her hair, dropping her hands to her thighs.

"To a certain degree, I somehow expected something like this to happen. I just hoped it wouldn't". She kept

quiet.

"Please take me home so I can bath"

"From there?"

"From there, I'm gonna sleep", she said as she searched for her phone in her bag. He exhaled and started the car. He went to drop her off at home and told her he was going to see Sihle.

"Tell her that I'm not done with her!"

"Haybo ayipheli kant?"(Isn't it over?)

"She almost ripped my skin off. My hairline is aching right now. I lost two nails. Two! My fingers hurt like crazy I'll never forgive that woman Mbulazi"

He had an urge to laugh but quickly pushed it back. He took out his bank card and offered it to her. She wanted to take it but she also wanted the allowance to remain angry at the same time.

"Go to Sherbet so they can fix your nails", he said while packed outside the royal house.

"It's Sorbet Mbulazi!", she let out a giggle. He smiled.

"Oksalayo ungizwile futh ngeke ulahleke"(The bottom line is that you heard me and you won't get lost). She shook her head and took it.

"Can I go shopping afterwards? I need some retail therapy after what that woman of yours put me through", she sulked.

"Whatever makes you happy thembalami", he said and she blushed. How she said "that woman of YOURS" gave him hope. He saw a direction she didn't see. Something about that moment in the car ignited a young spark and they both felt the reminiscence of old times. She stole a kiss on his cheek and stepped out of the car. He drove off to go look for an apology gift for Sihle, who wasn't replying to his texts. The road led to her place when he found it, the gift.

He arrived at the rooms and found one of the guys who was seated with the ladies the last time coming from the tap to fetch water. They greeted one another and exchanged lightweight conversation. Manqoba then asked if Sihle was there and the guy confirmed her presence.

"She's very mad though I must warn", the guy said.

"Is it?", Manqoba asked like he had no clue what's going on

"Yeah. Whatever happened must be big because she rarely gets mad", he said and reinforced the lid closing his big bucket.

"Let me go see her then", he said to the guy. They politely parted ways and he entered into his room. Sihle's burglar door was locked whereas the one on the inside was slightly open. Manqoba knocked a couple of times before she could open. Her eyes were full of sleep and she was dressed for the occasion in her pyjamas. She rubbed them and unlocked the door to let him in.

"Why are you ignoring me?", he asked. No greeting.

"I wasn't. I got here and took a bath then went straight to bath. I don't remember the last time I checked my phone", she said and sat on the bed.

"You look tired"

"Water makes me tired", she said, trying to mask away the irritation that insisted on chaperoning her voice. He sat on the bed next to her. He handed her the small paper bag and she asked what was it.

"You'll know um' ungayivula"(if you open it)

She took it and inserted her hand into it, taking out the small grey box. She opened it and was immediately in awe.

"Oh my. These are beautiful...", she admired the platinum earrings embedded with sparkly diamonds pleasant to the eye.

"Uyawathanda?"(Do you like them?)

She nodded with a smile and kept her eyes riveted on them.

"I'm sorry about today", he sincerely apologized.

"Zikode?", she softly called for attention.

"Mama?"

"Baba, Enhle and I are cut from different cloths. We are not the same. If we are to get along, it will just happen organically. In all honesty, I'd like to steer clear of her and I'd love it if she does the same", she confessed on her feelings and he sighed. He took her hand and rubbed it.

"I have a feeling you won't agree to staying at the house?", he felt he had to ask.

"I honestly don't. Chaos makes me anxious. I love peace. If I don't have it I'll never be happy and that will negatively affect our marriage"

"But mina I want you there?"

"It won't work Mbulazi"

"It will. Please trust me?"

She exhaled heavily and shook her head. He gently pulled her by the neck.

"What is the main function of the rib cage my love?"-Manqoba

"I don't know. To protect the heart and other organs?"

"So if the most important rib is not there with me who do you think is going to protect my heart?", he gravely asked and she smiled.

"A good woman protects indlu yakhe at all times. Are you a good woman?"(her house)

She nodded.

"You live in my heart Sphehile. My heart is your house in this case. Ngiyibeka ezandlen zakho lenhliziyo.

Ithathe phela mama?"(I'm placing this heart in your hands. Please take it?). She swallowed but didn't break the stare. His hand was busy caressing her thigh, making her drip in certain places he has now gained control over...

...

Muzi and Andiswa lost track of time that their meal took hours. She couldn't stop laughing at the madness that was spewing out his mouth. He grabbed the serviette and wiped his hands before finishing up his juice.

"I don't remember the last time I had such a good laugh", she stated as she wiped the corner of her eyes with her fingers. He huffed and sat back on his chair with a smile, the almost empty bottle of juice in his hand.

"You're good company. This side of me only comes out when I'm in the presence of good company", he said harmlessly. She flashed a smile then asked to go to the loo. He showed her the door to the toilet in his office and she took the mini toiletry bag out of her handbag so she takes it with.

"Ey women. Entlik ziyaphi iykhwama etoilet?"(What's with the bags in the toilet?), she laughed and hopped over to the lavatory. He stood up from his chair and stretched his arms. He then checked the time on his wrist watch and he realized that most if not all of the office had already went home. He took out his phone from the pocket of his jacket that he'd hung over his chair to attend to his messages. He walked over to the couch to give his tired muscles a change of scenery.

Andiswa came out of the loo with her grey see-through shirt unbuttoned, exposing her black lacy bra. She was smelling fresh of a spritzer.

"Were you bathing in there?", Muzi asked when the fruit scent hit his nostrils but did not raise his face from his phone nor stopped typing. Andiswa laughed as her stilettos hit the floor towards him. She had loosened her neat and black dreadlocks, allowing them to flow and dance ontop of her shoulders. She got to him and settled down on his lap.

"Whoa--", he was about to dispute when his eyes landed on the luscious pears on her chest. His lower lip hung loose. She had touched up her her make-up and was smelling like a delicious snack.

"You're a very beautiful man Yise I don't know if you've ever been told. Everything about you is attractive. The way you talk. The sound of your voice. The way you walk. The power you possess. You're a gentleman too. I want more of the little I've seen so far", she complimented and seduced him with patience as she ran her soft fingers down his cheek and towards his chest, drawing circles. She could see the erection coming to play. He unexpectedly stood up with her but made sure she didn't fall.

"Look Andy, you re... you're a very, very gorgeous woman but...I cannot do this", he tried to confess in a throaty voice but his eyes fell on the curves sitting mischievously on the sides of slender legs. She was what Mandla would describe as 'portable for any position in bed. Lightweight'. His dxck was excited. Way too excited. Andiswa stepped closer and he held her back by the shoulders.

"Those hands belong on my throat", she said in a velvety voice and pasted the scene of him choking her in his head.

"Shxt Andiswa you really need to go now"

Her hand travelled down to his crotch and he shut his eyes, trying hard to focus.

This girl had better to leave before I destroy her lil coochxe. That was his dxck thinking on his behalf. It was twitching and a bit painful from the torture of having to resist her. He took the hand off his bulge and turned her around, directing her towards her bag. She laughed and walked at the same time, with difficulty since she was being slightly pushed and propelled forward.

"Button up", he instructed when she finally had her bag in hand. She shut her lips but smiled beneath them.

"Why?"

"You might bump into someone and they'll draw their own conclusions", he said and he buttoned her up himself. The bxxbs were really a thing of beauty.

"Are you diabetic?", she mocked intentionally and he raised his brow. His member fell at the insult

"Oops. Guessing that's a no"

"And I'm guessing you've never been rejected before"

"Not by perfectly healthy men no", she continued provoking him with a smile. He huffed out a sarcastic laugh and looked to the side briefly before bringing his face back to her. He placed his hands back on her shoulders, pulled her closer and led his lips to hers. She was ready to receive them when he shifted them to her ear and whispered: "Please leave before I fry your vxgina?"

Chapter Forty-Five

"Haluuuu!", Tumi energetically yelled when Betso opened the door. She laughed and they hugged.

"Hey stranger. Haven't seen you in a minute. How was Bali?", she said before they could break the hug. Tumi handed her a gold, sparkly paper bag and shifted her from the door with his hand so he walks in.

"Oh heavenly darling!", he said and she peeped into the bag to see the souvenir.

They walked into the lounge and both got seated while he ranted on and on about the gorgeousness of the men in that island.

"You look good man! Pregnancy was really made for you. Ever considered taking it up as a hobby?", he said and she shot out a laugh.

"You're an idiot"

"Tell me something new", he jabbed back with a smile and crossed his legs in white jeans.

"I see you're having one of those small bumps", he added.

"Thank God!", she exclaimed and they both laughed.

"You should name her Hide and Seek", he teased and she continued laughing.

"Don't say her. I want a boy"

"You already have two of those. Isn't it enough? I need a live make up doll", he said and stood up to go help himself in the kitchen. She followed him.

"Anyway, where's hubby?", Tumi asked as he scanned the fridge with his knees bent.

"He's at work. Fortunately!", she took a seat. He turned over with a suspicious look on his face.

"O-kay?", he questioned.

"Arg long story", she tried to evade the topic. He pulled out a litre of grape juice and closed both doors to the fridge.

"Did they not tell you that I'm on leave? I have all day", he said and grabbed a chair also. She heaved a sigh.

"I don't know. He...", she tried to find the right words.

"He????"

"Being in the same room with him ruins my day. It started off as something small and I thought it will go away but now, I celebrate when he's not here"

"Well, that's the thing with pregnancy. It fxxks with your hormones. Your libido either shoots to the roof or it drops below zero"

"See, it's not just about the sex. He genuinely irritates me. If it wasn't for the kids I would've probably moved out"

Tumi laughed and took a sip straight from the bottle.

"That's also normal in some cases"

"There's more..."-Betso

"Spill", he said and placed his palm under his chin.

"I think I have feelings for somebody else"

Tumi's eyes widened so much they would've popped out if he stretched further.

"You're cheating?!"

"No. I'm just... I think about this person a lot. I've been trying to ignore it thinking I'm just admiring her but--"

"Wait wait wait. Put some brakes on this bus before it spits all of us out. It's a she?!"

He asked and she nodded. He clapped once and laughed.

"Vrou van Samariah. Gie my n bietjie water...", Tumi started singing with an amused smile on his face.

"Wa thoma aker"(You've started), Betso said and laughed.

"N bietjie water om te drink", he continued singing and taking tiny sips of his purple drink.

"Who is this person?", Tumi asked.

"Her name is Bongiwe. She works with him"

"His whole entire colleague?!"

Betso nodded.

"But remember I used to tell you that you're not sooo straight"

"Hayisuka I really don't know what's going on"

"Seriously friend. You love women with beautiful bodies. So much that you'd lose concentration in a conversation just to stare", he said and leaned back on the chair.

"That's not true"

"Remember that nurse you once told me about? Then one who tested you for pregnancy when you were pregnant with the twins? Phela I have a very sharp memory nna. You were so impressed with her body that you had to share with me", Tumi stated. Betso laughed.

"I don't remember any of that"

"Okay. How about Bridgette? I noticed how much you like to stare at--"

"But that doesn't mean--"

"I can bet my annual salary that this one also has a killer body", Tumi waited for an answer with both his brows raised after saying this. Betso grabbed the juice and drank it. Tumi laughed.

"Heeee..", Tumi exclaimed and shook his head.

"I wonder what Muzi will say when he discovers that he's being stinafied by a woman. Let me see her?", he said and extended his hand so she places her phone in it. She went to Bongi's Instagram account and showed her to him.

"No blowjxbbing way!", his hand reflexively wait to his mouth as the other held the phone.

"Bongi Bongi the influencer?!"

Betso bit her lower lip trying to conceal a smile and looked away.

"The drama of this girl. Let me tell you there was a scandal last year or was it the year before last? Arg doesn't matter. She left her girlfriend for a man called Menzi. Huh? Menzi? No Mangi! The lesbian caused havoc on social media and Bongiwe ignored. Months later, Mangi slept with the woman who was supposed to be their surrogate and impregnated her", Tumi spilled all the tea.

"You lie! So she's not straight?"

"I swear. Nope she's not. She once mentioned that she's pansexual. Kganthe where do you live wena Spongebob? Under the sea?"

...

Mthokozisi finished tying up the laces to his sneakers and got up from his bed. His mother knocked once on his door and let herself in.

"I don't remember saying you should come in ma", he calmly said but did not make a single effort to hide the irritation in his voice, then inserted a toothpick on the side of his mouth and left it there as always.

"This is my house I will enter any room I want at any time I want", she stated before sitting on the bed. He unplugged his phone from the charger and said, "Okay sala nendlu yakho ke" (Let me leave you with your house then), he left the room.

"Mtho! Come back here!", she yelled and stood on her feet. He turned back.

"Are you going to tell me why you and dad have separated?"

She exhaled, deeply.

"Sfiso is a criminal"

"He has always been a criminal. You're only seeing it now? Angisona islima ma so please stop treating me like one. I'm man enough to handle the truth. What happened?", he questioned and waited for a reply. She looked away. He scoffed and walked away.

"Mthokozisi!", she yelled. He kept walking till he was out of the house. He made his way to his dad's new place, which wasn't far from his house. When he got there, he found him reversing the Citi golf out the gate. Sfiso stopped the car when he saw him on the rear view mirror. He stepped out to greet the boy. They bumped shoulders and stood against the red vehicle.

"Awukho right. What's wrong?", the man asked.

"What do you mean?", Mtho asked.

"You're quiet"

Mthokozisi huffed out, laughing.

"But I'm always quiet?"

"You're too quiet today"

Mtho exhaled.

"Where are you going?"

Sfiso crossed his legs before he could answer.

"Shooting"

"What? Birds? Photos? People?", Mthokozisi questioned and Sfiso laughed.

"Wanna come with?", he asked and Mthokozisi's eyes lit up.

"Sure", he agreed even though he didn't know where they were headed. Sfiso laughed.

"Yaz wena and dangerous things. Remember you once broke your arm when you were 7? I kept telling you not to get on that staircase but you just wouldn't listen. And when you cut your hand with a knife"

Mthokozisi laughed briefly.

"You should've removed it if you didn't want me on it"

"I wanted you to learn that there's a consequence for every action", Sfiso said before opening the door to the

driver's seat. Lillian passed by and greeted them both, leaving Mtho with a smile. Sfiso marvelled at this sight, one that Mtho was adamant to ignore. He got into the passenger seat and Sfiso got in after him.

"She likes you", Sfiso said before inserting the key back into the ignition.

"How do you know that?"

"I saw how she looks at you. Why ngath uyabhayiza mfana?"

Mtho laughed it off and unlocked his phone.

"Well I don't like her. Not in that way"

"Why not?"

"She's not my type"

"A man knows nothing about types. Ikuku yikuku"(Pxssy is pxssy), Sfiso stated before starting the car.

Mthokozisi laughed.

"I'll just hurt her if I entertain her and I don't want that"

"Nothing wrong with that", Sfiso continued driving with a nonchalant look on his face. Mthokozisi laughed in disbelief.

"What?", Sfiso shrugged.

"There's nothing wrong with playing with people's feelings?"

Sfiso nodded.

"You're still young. You need to explore. Learn things. Ngena ngala. Qed' uphume ngale"

"If they do the same to me? What must happen?"

"Siyatratshwa isfebe"(You beat up the whxre)

Mthokozi continued laughing at Sfiso's warped logic. They got to the open field and found Sfiso's shooting setup still assembled and untouched. A stand made of planks. Sfiso took out a full cooler box from the boot and took out 3 big Heineken bottles and went over to assemble them on the stand. He came back and took out his gun.

"Wanna see magic?", he asked with an enthusiastic smile on his face.

Mtho shrugged nonchalantly. Sfiso aimed at bottle number one, shot at it once and it broke. The liquid contents spilled to the grass and he did the same with the other two. Mtho covered his ears after the first shot. He had a slightly twinkling smile on the corner of his lips, fascinated. Sfiso handed the gun to him and pulled out a black refuse bag from the boot of the car filled with similar but empty bottles. He still needed to drink the booze in the cooler box. He went over to set up another three at the stand and came back to Mtho.

"Shoot", he instructed and Mtho aimed at the bottle in the middle. When he pulled the trigger, it shot him back a bit and he missed. Sfiso laughed.

"Which one is your strong hand?", he asked.

"Left"

"Usebenzisa isandla semfene?"(You use the monkey hand?), he mocked and Mtho laughed lightly.

"Ngiyadlala. If left is your strong hand then that's the hand you need to use on the trigger. The right will help you stabilize the gun in your hand", he said and helped him wrap the fingers properly on the gun.

"Seperate your legs and stabilize your self on the ground. Make sure you're balanced", he instructed and Mtho

did as told. Sfiso wasn't satisfied with his posture. He went over to separate his legs a bit further apart.

"Do you do maths? And I'm not talking about this one of counting onions and what distance I will walk if I take two trips to the same tuckshop twice", he said and Mxo laughed.

"What? Math lit?"

"Whatever you want to call it"

"Respect other people's choices please"

"Suka. Do you know what a right angle is? Make sure that your finger nail is perpendicular to the direction where you want to sent your bullet"

"If it's not?"

"You'll shoot sideways and miss, which is what you did the first time"

Mtho nodded to show comprehension and went back to aiming. Sfiso took out a can from his box and opened it, readying himself to stay there for the whole day till Mtho's shooting skills improved.

...

Muzi took off his cufflinks and folded his shirt when he got to the bar parking lot. Mandla was already waiting for him inside. He folded his sleeves, loosened his tie and made his way inside.

"Ey man", Mandla stood up so they could greet each other and bump shoulders. Today it was just the two of them.

"You look like you had a long day", he said to Muzi and they took their seats across one another. Muzi raised his hand to flag a waiter and never replied. They came to take his order and Mandla asked for a refill.

"Remember the girl I told you I took home the other night?"

"Yeah?", Mandla said while he typed on his phone.

"She grew horns and ate my dxck", he said when he realized Mandla wasn't paying attention.

"That's good", Mandla said and continued typing. Muzi laughed and stopped speaking. Their beer arrived.

"She then spat it out, spiced with some six gun and fed it to me", he went on.

"Spat what out?", he asked when he finally locked the phone and placed it down.

"Nxn", Muzi said and Mandla apologized.

"Ish you know how Bridgette can get. Sixabene in the morning she thinks I'm cheating", he mentioned.

"What made her think so? Wenzeni manje?"

"Nah man I haven't misbehaved in a while and the way she's carrying on with her assumptions and accusations I might just. It's exhausting", he said. "Anyway, you said a girl and taking home?"

"She came to my office today", Muzi informed.

"Okay? And?"

"She didn't come to play. Depends on the CONTEXT of the word play", he said and made his eyes dance so Mandla quickly catches his drift. Mandla laughed when he caught up.

"Uyak'funa ngoku?"(She wants you?)

"Ewe"(Yes), Muzi confirmed.

"Why after ixesha elide kangaka?"(after so long)

"I have no idea. I almost... almost ripped that checkered skirt apart", Muzi confessed. Frustrated.

"Still having issues with mama sekhaya?"

"Ay I'm done trying to make things work mina. I think she's lost interest in our marriage. Nothing I say or do is good enough for her. A man knows when he's no longer wanted or needed around"

"Maybe it's the pregnancy?"

"Nah it's way more than that. I know a hormonal woman when I'm around one. Especially if she's mine"

"Why do I smell divorce vibes?"

Muzi huffed out a laugh and said,"She might not but I still love her. With my whole heart. Unless if I lose interest too, that won't work"

"So what are you gonna do?", Mandla gravely asked and fixed his silver watch over the table.

"I'll wait"

"For?"

"For her to get back to her senses"

"And if she doesn't? Seeing that yall can't break up?"

"I don't know man we'll see"

"The only solution to this is taking another wife"

Muzi laughed.

"I've done that before and I'm not doing it again. Isthembu has its benefits but its exhausting. Sengimdala for that"(I'm too old...)

"You can't live on uphuthu alone. Get an obedient side or else uzawphambana fondin"(You'll go crazy)

Muzi silently took another sip.

"How about this office chick?"

Muzi laughed.

"Would you stop? And besides, if I were to get a side it wouldn't be her"

"Why? Let me guess. She's too fast?"

"Yyup. The way she came onto me? She wouldn't take no for an answer. You know I like my women tough nuts playing hard to get"

"I get you. It's exciting for me too. AND speaking of hard to gets, I bumped into Teboho the other day I forgot to mention"

"Konje who is Teboho?"

"I never thought I'd see the day you forget her. You were always tryna bed her during our final year", Mandla said and they laughed.

"I remember her now! I'm not sure I'd recognize her now though"

"She's still the same. Still focused. Just more sexier and prettier. Umisa i-traffic lamntana"(She's hot)

"What does she do? Where did you see her?"

"The gym. She say she's into investment banking now. Let me see if I can't find her business card", he said as he opened his brown leather wallet.

"Nice", Muzi said when he received the card.

"She's single. If you were wondering", Mandla said and Muzi laughed.

"Why would I? Nxh", they laughed it off and continued unwinding with the aid of their alcoholic beverages.

...

"What took you so long?", Melo asked when Khanyi finally came out of her house. She shoved her wrists under her armpits and sulked as they stood in the dark.

"Baby?", Melo probed.

"What is it that you want from me Melokuhle?"

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know. You're confusing me. When you're with me you're the best boyfriend in the world but the moment you go away you start behaving some tupa way. You haven't replied to my texts in two days", she vented and he exhaled.

"If I knew that today was fight day I wouldn't have come here"

"Why were you not replying to my texts?"

"What's my last seen?"

"You could be chatting to other people while you're offline except for me"

"I wasn't. I'm writing in 2 days so I was studying. I was not on my phone", he said, trying to get her to calm down.

"Do you even love me Melo?"

"Now where is that coming?"

"I don't know! We've been dating for two whole months and yet you've never invited me to your house. You rarely tell me that you love me"

"If I don't then what the fxck am I doing here?!", he shot out and she looked away, tapping her angry foot on the ground.

"Yaz min angaz nifunani ngempela. If I invited you over you were going to complain saying it's too soon and I just want to smash. I didn't invite you over and still, I'm doing it wrong. Ufunani?"(I don't know what you want)

"I want a real relationship. If you're not serious about me there's always someone else who will be", she threatened.

"Cool then", he said and went back to the car.

"And where are you going now?", she asked when she heard the car unlock. He opened the door and stood there.

"See what I'm talking about? You don't know what you want", he hopped in. She rushed over to him and opened the door before he could start the car. He sighed and looked at her.

"Baby askiies please come out", she pleaded. He did as requested and closed the door, standing against it.

"I'm just tired of questioning what you want because your intentions are not clear", she fiddled with her thumbs. He took a moment to stare before pulling her into his arms. He cupped her chin and raised her face so she

looked at him.

"Khanyisile?"

"Baby?"

" Anginayo min i-energy for wonke lombhedo manje ngiyak'cela baby, musa ukungisanganela?"(I don't have the energy for all this nonsense so please stop acting crazy?)

She nodded while sulking, her lower lip protruded. He gently pulled her by the neck and kissed her forehead. He unexpectedly picked her up and backed her against the car. She laughed as her dress hiked up. She felt him kissing on her neck below her chin and immediately felt herself get wet. He balanced her with one arm and allowed the other to find it's way between her legs. He shifted her underwear to the side and inserted his middle finger into her. She moaned as he continued planting warm kisses on her neck. When the finger came out of there, it was dripping wet. He licked it up and placed her down. She smiled shyly and looked away. He kissed her on the lips once more and told her he needed to leave.

"But you just got here?"

"Usasangana na manje?"(You're still crazy?), he kept a straight face and asked.

"Nxn", he shot out from irritation and kissed her again. She just poured her lips and he drew back.

"You don't wanna kiss me?"

He questioned and she just challenged him with a stare.

"Ngiphendule. Awufuni uku ngiqabula na?"(You don't wanna kiss me?), he asked and pulled her by the waist.

"Ngihambe?"(Should I leave?), he whispered seductively. She laughed. He didn't.

"Yeah ngcono uhambe Melokuhle"

"Ngempela?"(Really?)

She continued laughing.

"Hmm??", he asked while leading his lips to hers.

"Ngikukhuza kanye. Qhubeka nalo msangano wakho. Uzokhala kungek'dala"(I'm only gonna warn you once. Continue acting crazy. You'll cry soon), he said with a serious face and she laughed.

Chapter Forty-Six

When he felt the alcohol was on its marks and getting set to his head, Muzi said his goodbyes to Mandla, who also decided it was time to head home. Muzi got to his car and rested his head against the car seat for a moment before driving home, gathering strength. He eventually decided to start the vehicle and direct it to his house.

He exhaled heavy with his jacket in one hand when he opened the door. He found Mxo playing a game on his phone, seated by the kitchen counter.

"Bafana", he greeted.

"Hey dad"

"Where's everyone?"

"Asleep", Mxo replied and tilted his phone to the side, riding the car on his screen. Muzi opened the fridge to grab a bottle of water, then took a few steps before Mxo stood up and stopped him on his tracks.

"Can I talk to you about something?", Mxo requested.

Muzi shut one eye and asked it if it cannot wait.

Mxo laughed because he was expecting that very reaction.

"It really can't. It's very important"

Muzi sighed and they both walked in the direction of the living room. They took a seat and Muzi leaned back on the couch, waiting for his delinquent of a son to start speaking.

"I am not going to beat around the bush. I fxcked up", Mxo confessed. Muzi closed his eyes and pinched his nose bridge.

"I wonder wenzeni manje"(what you've done now), he sat up.

"Ngigqale ngakuphi... okay. I... my girlfriend is pregnant"(Where should I start)

Muzi just pressed his lips and stared without a single blink. Mxo shrugged and stared back. Muzi scoffed and said, "Mbulazi omncan".

Mxo kept his eyes on the carpet.

"Wena no Melokuhle nicabanga ukuthi babies are matching outfits angith?"(You and Melo think...)

"That's not true"

"Are you in a competition of some sort?"

"Dad this wasn't planned I swear"

"Wasn't planned yok'nuka? What? It was a mistake? You were holding your sperm in a glass and it fell ontop of a vxgina?"

Mxo was about to defend himself but decided to shut his mouth instead.

"How old are you konje?"

"16 dad you know this"

A brief laugh of disbelief left Muzi's throat and he fell back on the couch.

"Say something"

"Something efana nani? Congratulations? Help you plan a baby shower?" (Like what?)

"Dad, I really love this girl and I have every intention of doing right by her. But I can't do all of that without your guidance"

"I'd like to believe that you know that no child in this family grows outside the fence"-Muzi.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, you need to find the means to pay all the damages and marry this girl. From your own pocket"

"MARRIAGE?!"

"Yes. Marriage. You also need to find a job. Awunawo ngisho umatric so I don't know ukuthi kuyo sentshewaphi"(You don't even have a matric certificate I don't know where you're going to work)

"Work? Dad?!"

"Yes. And don't even think about quitting school. You're still going to go to school. Nothing is going to change there"

"What time am I going to work then? Where? Are you cutting my allowance?"

"You'll go to work when the school is out. Luckily for you, I'm looking for general workers to manufacture bricks and mix concrete. No. I am not cutting any allowance but four point five won't raise you and your baby"

"You could always increase it", the genius suggested.

"Of course I can sonny", Muzi said with a smile. Mxo felt some relief unfolding in his chest.

"But I will do no such thing. You should've learnt from Melo's mistakes but nooo, you just had to go taste how hot the flame is with your tongue didn't you?!"

"Dad. I've been to that place and I saw how difficult those people work. And it's hot in there! Making bricks is not child's play"

"Correct. But you're no longer a child. You're father to be"

"Yoh mxjsjwjsnsnsbhusm!", Mxo threw himself back on the couch and ran his hands down his face in frustration, mumbling inaudibly

"Is that a lullaby you're practicing for Uyeza?"

"Uyeza?", Mxo asked with an angry frown on his face.

"Mh. Uyeza Usendleleni Khumalo?"

Mxo shook his angry head and looked away. Muzi stood up with his jacket and left him there.

...

The lights were off when he entered his bedroom. He undressed himself and got under the sheets. Their backs were facing one another as they faced opposite directions. He tried to get himself to sleep but ended up kicking the sheets and sitting up. He could hear from how she was breathing and fidgeting that she wasn't asleep. He switched on his side lamp before he could speak.

"I know you're not sleeping. Get up so we can talk?"-Muzi

She sighed and took a moment before getting up as well. He walked to her side of the bed, got there and knelt in front of her in his underwear. He placed his arms on her exposed thighs and she shifted back.

"Do you still want to be in this marriage?", he bluntly asked. She looked away.

"I don't remember the last time I touched you freely. I'm living like a bachelor with a ring on my finger. What the hell is going on? I know this is not just about hormones and shxt?!"

"You will not speak to me like that Muzikayise", she warned. He drew his frowned face back.

"Every man has needs in case you forgot my love. I'm tired of analyzing everything I say before I speak, in fear that you will snap for no reason. I'm busy getting punished for God-knows-what and you're not willing to speak about it. I am not a kid and I did not marry one"

"Why do you feel so entitled to my body? This body is mine. Not ours! I'm pretty sure there's someone who will fulfill those needs because I will not be coerced into having sex when I don't want to!"

Muzi froze for a bit, without his lip hanging.

"I tried so much not to say this but you keep pestering and pestering it's so damn annoying! Your mere touch repulses me what makes you think I'd be able to stand kissing and listening to you hump on top of me?"

He removed his hands entirely from her but never got up.

"So, we've become that typical couple?"

Betso sighed and got up. Muzi blocked her with his arm as he got up.

"We will finish this conversation today. Why didn't you tell me when you felt you were falling out of love with me?"

"I couldn't..."

"Why? What's really going on?"

"I love somebody else dammit!", she snapped. Muzi immediately felt like a madman was playing drums on his temples. She tried to walk away again but he blocked her again.

"Uyangjolela?!"(You're cheating on me?)

"I'm not cheating on you. We're not in a relationship yet but what I feel--"

"YET?! Nali ibhadi lami bo! What the fxck are you trying to say sthandwasami?!"

Betso afforded herself a few breathing exercises. The conversation was getting exhausting for her. His cologne also smelt like a refined version of terrible. She tried walking away once more but he gripped onto her wrist fuming.

"Is he the reason why you've become so disrespectful lately?"

"You're hurting me. Let go of my hand before I scream"

"Even if I wanted to hurt you, no one would hear you"

"Muzi...", she was now prepared to fight if he tried anything funny.

"Let go...", she added.

"What do you think I'm gonna do to you?"

"Nothing because I won't allow you to"

"Allow me to do what? To do what exactly?"

"Your usual tactics of "getting me in line" using rough sex when your fragile ego feels disrespected"

"Let me get this correctly, right now as you're standing there, you think I'd... you think I'd rxpe you?!", the last part of his statement had a breath of disbelief.

"I said you're hurting me!", she shot out. They shared a mutual threatening stare in the slight dark. There was a

full moon outside-- its light eavesdropping in on their conversation through the huge window.

Muzi loosened his grip on her hand and she marched into the bathroom, banging the door behind her. He looked up, trying to fight the burning sensation that was surrounding his eyes. It stung but it had nothing on the flame that was busy engulfing all the hay of hope in his heart. He walked into the closet to put on a set of tracksuits and some sneakers, then walked out.

...

Mthokozisi's phone rang while he was busy watching soccer with Sfiso. His mother was calling. He silenced it and put it away.

"Mm. I don't remember the last time I had such a good meal. Your mother taught you well", Sfiso couldn't stop licking his fingers as he dug into the pap and beef stew. Mthokozisi gave a halfhearted smile and continued watching the television.

"Who was calling?", Sfiso raised the face he had buried into plate to look at Mtho, who wasn't eating much.

"Why?"

"Your mood changed"-Sfiso.

Mthokozi heaved a sigh and placed the plate on the small table in front of him.

"What happened between you no mama?"

Sfiso sent his eyes back into the plate and continued digging his big fingers in it.

"Your mother is a dishonest woman Mtho"

"You're also a criminal. There's no such thing as an honest thief", Mtho said in his mother's defense.

Sfiso placed his plate on the floor and reached for the damp dishcloth on the tiny table. He wiped his hands and drank his water. Mtho still had his elbows over his knees waiting for the man to speak something intelligible.

Sfiso drank all the water in the glass next to his foot and sat back on his chair, placing both his hands on the armrests.

"You're a very quiet yet very smart boy Mthokozisi. Booksmart and streetwise. But why haven't you wondered how your mother can afford all the things she buys for you? Your cellphone? Laptop? Expensive clothes? The pocket money you get?"

"Weren't you the one paying for all these things?"

"I wouldn't waste my money on the kind of things you buy mina. Your mom works as a kitchen girl but affords to get you things even your neighbor doesn't get for his child. That time he's a teacher"

"I genuinely thought you were the one who--"

"Your mother is a prostitute Mthokozi. Ayikho nje indaba yama kitchen work nan nan"

Mxo raised his bro.

"My mom is a lot of things but that"

"The truth will come out twerking one day"

He said and opened a bottle of beer with his teeth as Mthokozisi felt himself drown in puzzle pieces.

...

Muzi had no idea where he was going but he knew he had to get out of that house. Betso's words kept rewinding and replaying themselves in his head without his conscious permission. He called Mandla but his friend wasn't picking up. He was parked outside of the bar he left earlier with no energy of going in to drink by himself. His head took him back to the moment where he took Teboho's business card and placed it in his wallet. He started reminiscing about how he fucked things up with her by not showing up to their date. Which wasn't a date date. It was just her agreeing to see him and listen to what he had to say. She then cut him off for good. He used to enjoy the thrill of chasing the hot nerd around even when she wouldn't give him the time of day. Going to the library specifically for her since that's where she'd spend most of her days as a freshman, bringing her 'love candies' on a daily basis. Muzi was in his exit year at that point. She wanted to hide it but he knew she loved the attention from him. He laughed to himself as he sat in the car and felt the unstable pieces of his heart that he was trying to ignore, cracking even further. He dialled her number and it rang for a while before she could answer.

"Teboho Mmarabe speaking?"

Her sweet voice felt like cold honey in his dry ears.

"Why so formal?", he asked.

"Uhm, who's this?"

"I'm hurt that you don't remember my voice whereas it never changed"

"I'm honestly really busy right now so if you're going to continue playing games I'm gonna cut this call?", she threatened. He bowed his head and laughed to himself silently. Betso's words were still invading his mind.

"You're gonna cut it even if I promise to bring you ama love candy?", he teased and she shot out a laugh at the realization of who she was talking to.

"Oh my God!", she exclaimed.

"Unjani?"(How are you?)

"Ke teng okae?"(I'm okay how are you?), she was still laughing.

"I'm still hurt from the time you erased me from your life like my entire existence was drawn with a pencil", he stated and she laughed.

"That was your own fault", she defended.

"You never gave me a chance to explain what was going on though?"

"Looking at that from an adult point of view, that was unfair of me", she giggled.

"Good. Manje ngicela ithuba lok' chaza ukuthi kwenzeken that day"(I'm asking for a chance to explain what happened that day)

"Che hle bathong ba Jehovah!", she chuckled.

"I'm not joking. I need tell my side of the story. That was an unfair dismissal"

"Bua ke mametse he"(Speak I'm listening)

"Cases like this are usually discussed in person"

She laughed.

"Use u qalile ka maqheka a hao aker Muzikayise?"

"Lutho njani. Angenzi maqheka ngifuna ukuk'chazela nje mina? Where are you right now?"

"I am in no state to be entertaining visitors"

"I hear and understand that very well. I just wanna know where you are"

"Are you even listening to me?"

"Yebo mama. Ukuphi?"(where are you?) he kept a serious tone and she giggled.

"The Grand Vantage"

"The hotel? You stay there?"

"For now yes. I'm still looking for a proper permanent place to stay"

"Alright", he said and cut the call, getting the car on the road.

What does that mean?-- a text from Teboho, who wasn't sure whether to expect him or not.

Thirty eight minutes later, he was there. He called her to ask for a room number and she laughed first before giving it to him. His mind and heart were still persistent on focusing on Betso but he was adamant on shutting both down. She opened up after the second knock and pressed her lips trying to compress a smile.

"You'll never change will you?", she said.

"Hawu. No hello nothing?", he said shortly before hugging her, leaving no space for her to say no. She was in her pyjama shorts and vest with a light gown just hanging over the skimpy items.

"You smell good", she complimented.

"You smell of methylated spirits", he said and she laughed.

"Eish askiies. I just removed my make-up and washed my face but the smell of this micellar water is just weird and too strong"

"I know nothing about women's products but I am 100% sure it is not supposed to smell anything like that", he made fun of her.

"Arg I know man. My sister made it for very oily skin and she wants a product review from me. I don't have a choice", they continued speaking at the door. Her hair was all over the place.

"Tell your sister to switch careers"

Teboho laughed and pointed a warning finger at him.

"I brought you chocolate. I know how much you like sweet things", he said before handing her the gold box he picked up in store at the filling station. His eyes couldn't stop themselves from dropping down to her exposed creamy, thick thighs. Teboho wasn't skinny neither was she that chubby.

"Aw. You're still sweet as ever, like the candies!", she said and they laughed lightly.

"Come in", she offered. He did.

"Would you like anything to drink?", she asked as she already made a trip to the bar fridge.

"Just water thanks", he said and made his way to the couch. He moved the green polar fleece and the mess of documents on it first. And her laptop.

"I'm sorry about that", she said while she walked towards him with two blue bottles of water in her hands, barefoot.

"It's alright", he said and tried to move the open toiletry bag on the couch.

"Wait I'll take that!", she jumped and tried to grab it from him. He was surprised at this reaction. To her own personalized and tailor made badluck, the toiletry bag fell and the all contents spilled to the carpet. She quickly got down to pick up the scattered products and he did the same to help her.

"No it's okay I'll do it!", she continued trying to push him away from her stuff. He saw it. He saw it and she gave a straight and embarrassed smile. He picked up the purple device.

"A vibrator?", he huffed out a laugh.

She bit her upper smiling lip and looked away.

"Is this what you were hiding?", he asked and gently held her soft chin to bring her face back to him. She dropped her eyes. He placed it back in the empty bag and got her to stand up.

"I am an adult. There's no need for you to hide these things from me", he lowly assured.

"I just hate the assumptions that come with 'these things' "

"What assumptions are those?", he had his hands on her upper arms.

"Arg. My sister once said the reason I own one is that I think I'm above men and that I'm lonely", she let out.

"The sister that created a nuclear bomb in liquid micellar form?", he said and she shot out a laugh, then nodded.

"Don't listen to her. She's drunk and intoxicated from all the wrong chemicals she inhales in the lab", he continued. She chuckled.

"But she kinda has a point though"

"She does?", he softly asked. She didn't reply.

"Are you lonely?", he got closer. She smiled and looked away.

"Gosh you're such a fine man", she complimented in whisper.

"Thank you. But you never answered my question my lady?", he brought his forehead to meet with his. She nodded.

"Let me fix that?"

"Are you not married?", she asked due to the ring he purposely never took off.

"I am. Are you not lonely?", he dropped his lips on hers and kissed her delicately till she lost half all her sense. He picked her up and she wrapped her legs around his waist. He then walked over to the bed with his hands gripping on her bxtt. It had been long since a man was that gentle with her. She missed the feeling of being touched, have her body caressed on and parts of her fondled...

He placed her down gently on the bed as they continued kissing while she unzipped his track top, the pace quickening as he undressed her too. She maneuvered her way around their position and did the one thing he had no patience for, came on top. She found herself underneath within seconds. Both breathing like that very moment was the one thing they needed to save their lives. Muzi dropped his head and gave her pleasure-filled stings on the neck while fondling both her bxxbs.

"Are you sure about this?", she questioned while hyperventilating and brushing the back of his head. Muzi wrapped her hair around his hand and tightened the hold at the back of her head, making her look up. He slightly

grabbed her lower lip with his teeth and released it slowly. He then watched her enjoying his hand travelling up her stretched neck as she looked up. He gave her a glimpse of a smile before gently pushing her to the bed. He knelt on the floor and pulled her towards him, widely stretching her legs and exposing her cxxchie. He gave it a soft peck and looked up to see her reaction. She had her eyes shut as her stomach moved up and down in consecutive attempts to keep her alive. Muzi was shortcircuiting her breathing. He separated her pxssy lips with his thumbs before running the tip of his warm tongue up on her tender opening.

"That... feels so good", she moaned as he circled her clit with his wet muscle. He started sucking on it religiously as his index finger slipped patiently into her hot pot.

"Mmm Muzi you're really good at this fuuck", she cried out loud. He took his finger out and placing his hands under her legs. He stuck his tongue in there and lapped up her juices. She got up in disbelief of what the man was capable of and he kept eye contact as her lower lip hung low. She fell back when she felt the electrical ripples causing her goosebumps. He got up and picked up his track pants. He unzipped it and took out a condom from his wallet.

She watched as he rolled it down his shaft, impatient for all of that to stretch and scratch the itch she felt on her walls.

He got on top of the bed and kissed her for a moment. He placed his palms by her sides and secured his balance on the bed. She widened her legs and he directed his member into her hands free. It had been so long that he felt his balls were about to explode. The emotions travelling back and forth between the contact of their eyes was hot and intense. He struggled a bit but he eventually made it in. She shut her eyes as each inch travelled deeper and deeper into her, unrushed.

"Shiiiiit woman...", he groaned as he felt her moist muscles hugging his dxck. She bit her lower lip seductively as Muzi travelled her nakedness in adult ways. Her body felt each slow thrust and stroke but it also felt it needed more.

"Please fxck me ntate Khumalo? Kopa o nkote", she lowly begged. Muzi felt his dxck hardening to extremes at the sound of that and the voice that delivered it.

"Your wish is my command", he assured hoarsely but kept the same pace as he poked her into sensitive spot. He withdrew patiently and watched her lips tremble slowly. He had every intention of catching her off guard and he did exactly that, shoving and thrusting all of his rod into her balls deep and watched her shoot her eyes open with her open mouth. He tried closing it with a simple kiss but she stood with her mouth still agape. He started serving the serious thrusts requested of him.

"Oh my word Muzi...", her vocals were throaty and running low. Her helped himself to her lips as she came and screamed in his mouth. He took one of her legs, crossed it over the other and fucked her in that position.

"Mmm oh shit Yise onketsa eng hle monna ke wena?"(What are you doing to me?), she moaned as she dug nails into the white sheet and pulled it into some visible wrinkles. He looked down and watched as her white cum cream smothered itself around his manhood, providing more heat and lubrication. He came and just stayed in there till he was done spilling. He then pulled out and dropped to the side, trying his best to catch his breath.

Chapter Forty-Seven

REWIND...

Muzi loosened his grip on her hand and she marched into the bathroom, banging the door behind her. He looked up, trying to fight the burning sensation that was surrounding his eyes. It stung but it had nothing on the flame that was busy engulfing all the hay of hope in his heart. He walked into the closet to put on a set of tracksuits and some sneakers, then walked out. His temples were drumming and throbbing painfully as he sped the car out. Lwandile heard him bang the door and felt something in his heart go off. He ran out through his slightly open door and went after him. He shot out the front door and was left with only the furious sound coming from his father's exhaust pipes. Mxolisi came after him-- running as well.

"What's going on?", he questioned the anxious Lwandile, who had his hands on his waist.

"I don't know. I heard him speed out and I just--"

"I heard YOU running out that's why I'm here. What's going on?!"

"I don't know. I think... I think they fought. Mxo this family is falling apart"

Mxo let out a deep breath as they stood outside, the cool air lightly brushing their skin.

"Let's go back inside", he said in an exhausted, hushed tone. Lwandile followed him in and they found Betso drinking milk in the kitchen. She quickly wiped her tears then moment she heard the door open as she sat on the high kitchen chair. Mxo turned back to Lwa to ask him if they should intervene-- silently through confused eyes. Lwandile gave a small nod before closing the door behind him.

"Mom?", Mxo probed.

"Yes baby?", she replied with an obviously fake smile. A smile even the cheapest of misers wouldn't buy from small street. The boys took their seats across her.

"What's going on?", Lwandile questioned. Betso sniffed away the wayward mucus that was prepared to snitch on her--travelling down one of her nostrils.

"With what?"

"We are not playing that game today. What the hell is going on?!", Mxolisi patience was swinging by his last nerve.

"Mxo!", Lwa reprimanded. Mxo kept his eyes on Betso.

"Are you getting a divorce?", Mxo aimed and shot at the elephant in the room. Betso remorselessly pursed her lips.

"Is it true? Are YOU getting a divorce mommy?", Lwandile reinforced Mxolisi's hanging question.

"I... I don't know. This is difficult for me my babies. I don't want one for your sake but... I no longer love your father. Staying one more minute in this marriage will drive me crazy"

Lwandile's speechless jaw dropped to his feet.

"Is that what you told him?", Mxolisi asked with threatening eyes.

Betso nodded. "Koppie I am tired..."

"But how is that possible? I've seen couples before but I have NEVER, I have never seen people that love each

other like the two of you do. Did he do something to you?"

"Why does it have to be his fault?", Mxo turned to Lwa and defended his absent father.

"I know mom wouldn't--"

"And dad would?!"-Mxo

"Please don't fight", Betso begged. They paid no attention to her.

"The problem with you is that you see dad as a God or some superhero. I love him too but I know for a fact that mom loves him more and--"

"WHY DOES IT HAVE TO BE HIS FXCKING FAULT?!"

The bickering was beginning to grate Betso's patience and she lost it.

"I AM IN LOVE WITH SOMEBODY ELSE!", she shot out and instantly regretted it. The twins popped their identical eyes.

"Wait what?", Lwandile wasn't getting it. He definitely thought he heard wrong.

"Still dad's fault?", Mxo raised his brow to Lwa, then sprung down off the chair.

"Kopano...", Betso gingerly called out.

He turned back. His eyes were glassy-- filled with tears. Betso's emotions suddenly felt like this was contagious.

"If there's one fact I know about dad, is that he adores you. He literally worships the ground you walk on. I have been watching how badly you've been treating me these past few months but I thought it's an whatever pregnancy phase. What about your soul tie? Huh? I swear... mark my words. If he seizes and dies from this...", he had his index finger held up and dropped it when he ran out of words. Then left. Betso wiped her tears and the equally emotional Lwandile extended his upper body over the kitchen counter so he holds her hands.

"Tell me the truth. What does this new person have on you? I know you're incapable of loving anybody else apart from dad", he pleaded with her.

"Nothing. You will grow and understand that forever can be a myth sometimes. Love does run out"

"Well excuse me but I am not falling for that"

"Boikanyo...", she said with pained pleading eyes.

"No mom. No!"

...

Muzi's journey with no specific destination continued as he thought hard about who the new guy who was disrespecting his house was. He was about to dial Manqoba for his hacking services when Lwazi called.

"Yes?", Muzi answered with a tower of impatience as he drove with one hand.

"What's up with you?", Lwazi picked it up.

"Ufunani?"(What do you want?)

"Trouble in paradise?"

Muzi sighed and did not respond.

"Okay. Look man I'm kinda stuck. I need a small financial favor. I'll pay you back"

"How much?"

"100K"

"Is your GPS broken?"

"Uhm... no why?"

"I'm just asking seeing that you've lost your way to the bank"

Lwazi laughed. Muzi didn't.

"The bank?"

"You know that place specifically made for withdrawals, loans and shxt?"

"Mciim entlik let me call Mindlos. You need to get laid wena. No man is ever this moody if he's well taken care of under the sheets"

"Anything else? Apart from your failed loan application?"

"Ask me who Mandla and I saw at the gym?"-Lwazi

"Santa Claus?"

"Tsek. Teboho mfana. Yesses she's ten times more the flame she was in varsity bro!", he cheered.

"Mandla did mention"

"You need to see her. Check her Instagram. Her latest post? In some very, very short pyjama shorts. Yoh! I can imagine her moaning in that tone and lovely voice. Gaddam!"

"When will you resign from being a pervert?", Muzi asked and Lwazi laughed. With a boltlike flash, he saw a lady crossing the road and almost ran into her. He swerved off the road and the car rotated speedily as he lost control of it-- listening to it screech. Where did she even come from? He self-questioned and the whole experience took him back to the last time something like this happened. His seizures pressed play and he started convulsing, white foam coming out of his mouth. When the car hit a huge tree truck, the airbag failed to save him. When his head hit the steering wheel and began bleeding, he could feel himself fading from reality.

...

No phone call at 2 am ever bears good news. Betso could hear the phone ringing but her mind thought she was dreaming. When she finally quit her slumber,

"Hello?", she answered, her voice raspy and drunk on sleep.

"Hi. Can I speak to Mrs Khumalo please?"

The tone from the other end of the line wasn't a pleasing one. She sat up.

"This is she?"

"I am sorry. Your husband was involved in a terrible car accident. Can you please make your way to Pholoho private care?"

Something went blank as Mxolisi's tears and words drew themselves on the space with a very dark ink.

"What have I done...?", she lowly asked, directed to herself.

"Ma'am?"

"Yes I'm... I'm on my way"

She quickly got out of bed and threw a gown over her long silk pyjamas. She wore her slippers as she rushed out after grabbing her car keys and phone. She heard instrumental music playing at a low volume in Mxo's room and walked in. The door wasn't closed. Mxo had the back of his head against the headboard as he composed the lyrics to a new song on his phone. He raised his eyes and questioned her silently.

"Koppie...", she had no idea where to start. Not after what he'd said. He kept quiet and waited.

"Your dad is...", she was trying hard to be as quick yet as gentle as possible.

"He's what? A bad husband? You're here to rub salt into the wound?"

"No no. He's... uMbulazi is in hospital"

She couldn't track the exact point where he launched out of bed.

"He's what? Why? What happened?", he rambled in panic and Betso tried to hold his hand so they could go get Lwa. He yanked it off.

"He eh don't touch me. What happened to dad?!", his tone was fast riding on exasperation. Betso quickly rushed to Lwa's room just opposite Mxo's and knocked once before walking in. Lwandile was sleeping-- tummy down and hugging on a pillow. She woke him up and explained to both about what had transpired. They all rushed out and Mxo insisted on being the one to drive.

...

"Elizabeth?! Elizabeth?!", that was Spinach waking Gugu up from the top of the bunk bed.

"Mm-mh!", Gugu refused to wake up. She switched sides and faced the wall when Spinach wasn't giving up, with a pillow over her ears. Spinach jumped down from the bed and sat down on Gugu's part of it-- below hers.

"Ah gorgeous wake up man!", she shook Gugu, who let out a very heavy breath before she sat up.

"Couldn't whatever it is you want to discuss wait until the morning?", she was yawning and irritated.

"No it can't", Spinach was mostly whispering. There were two tractor snores competing for ear attention in their section of the prison.

"What is it?", Gugu sulked, desperately wanting to go back to sleep.

"Tomorrow is the day. Ons vayy mama"(We are leaving)

"What?", Gugu's sleep suddenly divorced her. She had her eyes wide open. Spinach sat even closer to her.

"So, my brother made a deal with one of the warders. She'll keep guard and help us escape"

"I thought your brother was in prison"

"He never stays for long in there. He contacted his people who contacted his people who also contacted their people--"

"Okay okay I get it! Are you serious?"

"Do I look like Mr Bean to you?"

"And you are serious. Okay. How is this supposed to work then?"

"Alright here's the plan. What time do the bins get wheeled out?"

"Half past 4 I think. It's usually around that time"

"Good. Patricia will organize two empty bins for us. We'll get in there and get taken out with the trash. From

there--"

"Me? In those smelly--"

"You don't want to get out of here", Spinach flatly stated and attempted to go back to her section of the bed.

Gugu stopped her in a hush.

"Okay. Okay. I'll do it. From there?"

"We will obviously land at the back of the trash truck. But here's where the problem starts"

Gugu communicated with her eyes that she was eagerly listening.

"You know they check those trucks before they leave at the gate right?"

"I didn't know"

"Now you do. So it means we cannot just get in and just lay there like full chickens roasting in an oven. You will have get inside one of the big black plastic bags and curl into a ball"

"What? I won't be able to breathe!"

"You'll have to punch holes in it don't be stupid man"

"Plus the smell? Yoh", Gugu grimaced in worry and disgust. Spinach shrugged.

"Either that, or you will have dig into the other trash bags in the truck and stay under them. It's only an option if you have a death wish. I would but I know your coconut self with weak azz lungs won't survive"

Gugu scratched her hair thoughtfully.

"After months and months of hopeless planning and dreaming, we're finally doing this?", she asked Spinach in disbelief. Spinach gave her rare genuine smile.

"Ons vavy bhebhi", she assured and confirmed.

...

TWO WEEKS LATER.

The entire family came to relieve their trauma. Evelyn couldn't stop crying in all the 13 days she spent there. Muzi has been comatose for each and every one of them. Even Thando had flown into SA for her brother. Evelyn insisted Ava wasn't supposed to be told yet, in fear that she would relapse. She believed her son was going to be okay eventually yet she was the one who cried the most. Her runner up was her daughter.

The lot sat in Betso's house, watching their breakfast sitting on its plates. Betso's phone rang and she asked to be excused. She removed the white napkin from her thighs, placed it on the table and left the house. Manqoba watched her walk out suspiciously.

"Morning", she answered. Bongiwe called frequently to check up on her since the boss's accident.

"Hey how are you?"

"Hanging in there. How are you?"

"Forget me. How is he today? I went to the hospital yesterday in the morning and they said he's not allowed visitors"

Betso was speaking as she walked around the pool.

"Yeah he's not. We're just hoping for the best at this point"

"He's still unresponsive?"

"Yes"

"I'm really sorry Bee. But Muzi is a fighter man. He's a strong man I know he will make it out of this alive-- back to making everyone laugh again. Don' be sad"

Betso sighed.

"I'm sad because this is all my fault"

"Your fault?"

"Ours", Betso confessed. The conversation was getting weird for her. Her pool of right words had evaporated and dried out.

"I don't understand?", Bongiwe said and just when Betso was about to speak, she met Mxo's eyes at a distance by the big shade tree in the yard. He looked like he had a while standing there. He shook his head and pulled his large hoodie over it, then walked away.

"I'm sorry I have to go. Kopano?!", she called out as she followed him. He went back inside the house and she stopped yelling. Otherwise everybody was going to question the rotten vibes between them. He ran into Thando by the stairs and she stopped him.

"Slow down what's going on?"

"Not now aunty"

"A whole you doesn't have time for me? The you that wakes up for my video calls and actually answers them even suffering from a hangover?", she tried to make him smile. He huffed out a single breath of a laugh, pulled her hand and kissed the back of it.

"I'm serious. I am not in the mood"

"Yaz the way you're such a gentle sweetheart you remind me so much of him", she remarked. The weak smile on his face grew a bit wider.

"Anyway, where's Lwa?", she asked and he frowned, recalling that the last moment he saw him was the previous night.

"I... don't know", he said slurredly. He took out his phone to try him but it went straight to voicemail. Their relationship with school has been on and off since the accident.

"Where's Melo?"-Mxo

"Melo is with the rest of the family. I was there just now", Thando informed. Mxo's confused frown shrunk even further.

...

Lwa had been waiting for an opportunity to sneak into the Intensive Care Unit. When the corridor finally cleared a bit and only left with people who seemed they wouldn't care even if he walked in backflips, he snuck in. He slowly approached the bed as the machines kept beeping-- trying to keep his father alive. He had an oxygen

mask strapped around his head. He also had a bandage around the top of it. Lwandile allowed his tears to drop and tried nothing to conceal or stop them. He stood over Muzi and gently held his hand.

"Dad...", he called out lowly, even with zero hope for a reply. He pulled the chair next to the bed and sat on the edge. After an infinite moment of watching Muzi breathe through machines...

"The experience of almost losing you taught me how to pray. I don't want to lose you. I know you're a traditional man and all, but I have been praying dad. I have been praying. I have been fasting. I have been worshipping and praising him every day and night, begging! Dad, today, at this moment, I declare and decree that you will wake up. It is done. From my faithful mouth to God's graceful ears", his eyeballs were now soaking in tears. His lips trembling. He held tightly onto the bed rail and tried to compose himself with his eyes shut. He raised his face up to the heavens and swallowed.

"Loving and loyal, never unkind.

Majestic and royal.

You are the everlasting...

Loving and loyal.

Never unkind.

Majestic and royal.

You are the everlasting God.

You are you are...

Authority (you are, you are)

Supremacy (you are, you are)

Majesty (you are, you are)

Royalty (you are, you are)"

He began singing HLE's 'You are' calmly.

"You are, you are

You're the Victory at war

You are, you are

You are Title to win

You are, you are

You're the way through the sea"

He heard the sound of the door handle clicking as somebody let it go. He turned back and saw the doctor standing by the door, with tears settling on her lower lids, holding onto the stethoscope with both hands.

"I'm sorry. I just... I felt that. I'm actually feeling the presence of God right now and it's giving goosebumps", she wiped the emotions in the form of liquid then walked in.

"You're not supposed to be in here", she said in a calm tone. She was still wiping the tears.

"I know", Lwa sobbed.

"But according to your faith and mine, it is done", the Christian in her reinforced the prayer. Lwa smiled through

the tears.

"You have to go now before you get me fired", she smiled back.

"Before I do, can I ask you a question?"-Lwa

"Let's talk outside", she led him out.

When she closed the door, she stood and waited for him to speak.

"The injuries on his head. I've heard stories"

"Stories like?"

"Completely forgetting one's existence?"

The doctor slipped her hands into the pockets of her scrubs.

"Head injuries are very complicated because the brain itself is a complex organ. You can never predict how it will react to different kind of blows. However, I've said this to your grandmother as well. Your father had alcohol in his system and he had a seizure during the accident. There's a lot of factors that might contribute to how his memory works if he wakes up, including these two and stress. We will have to wait for him to do that before we can make any diagnosis regarding that. However it's not all cases of head injuries that result in memory loss don't let hearsay scare you"

"I'm trying not to"

"Look, for interest's sake, let me just give you a brief overview with regard to amnesia. There's many types but there are three top ones. Number one, anterograde amnesia. With this one, the patient remembers everything but cannot form new memories. They always forget things that happened after the accident, completely and always without miss. Two, retrograde amnesia. Here you lose previously made memories. The last one which is the least horrible, transient global amnesia. Here the patient forgets the incidences that occurred a few hours before the attack. It occurs in cases of seizures, strokes and the likes", Lwa was lost in his own thoughts as she explained.

"Kiddo?", she called out from a place of a concerned parent.

"Hm?!", he snapped out of it.

She squeezed his shoulder.

"Go and get some sleep. I can see that you haven't been getting any. You are quarter to collapsing. Please go home"

Chapter Forty-Eight

Lwandile ordered a taxi and went back home. He got there and found the help they usually call in sometimes washing the dishes from breakfast.

"Sis' Noma. Unjani?" (How are you?), he greeted as he walked in. She smiled and took off her wet yellow gloves.

"Ngiyaphila unjan? Sit and let me get your breakfast", she pulled out the chair for him and fetched his plate from the microwave. He sat, although very languidly. She placed the plate in front of him and uncovered it. Evelyn appeared.

"Lwalwa. Where have you been? We tried calling you and your phone was off?", she took quick steps to go sit next to him. Noma excused the two.

Lwandile picked up the toast and took a small bite, then dropped it back on the innocent plate.

"Lwandile ngikhuluma nawe bandla" (I am talking to you?)

"I went to the hospital", he informed.

"Oh? But they said they will call if there is any improvement my boy. Sleeping on those benches will make you sick. You need proper sleep"

Lwandile didn't want to argue. He instead nodded and asked to be excused. After he left, Bongiwe knocked on the front door after she spoke to Thando through the intercom. She greeted Evelyn and Evelyn greeted back with a smile. She had a bouquet of flowers in hand.

"My name is Bongiwe ma. I'm a colleague to Mr Khumalo. Can I please see his wife?", she politely requested.

"Melo!", she yelled for somebody who could go get her.

"Oh he's also here?", Bongiwe's face brightened up. Evelyn pulled a surprised face.

"And how do you know him?"

"Oh I'm one of his mother's bestfriends. I'm actually his godmother", she explained and the confusion still stuck on Evelyn's face.

"I thought his godmother was Thulisile?"

"Thuli died ma. It's been a while now"

"Haa when?!"

There was no way Bongiwe could miss the shock in her voice.

"I think Melo was 3 if not four"

"And the weird thing about this is that I'm starting to realize how much you actually look alike!" -Evelyn

Bongiwe placed her bag and flowers on the kitchen counter, then sat with a smile.

"Yes she was sister"

Melokuhle appeared, walking and typing.

"Gogo?", he answered to her call. Evelyn was still shocked. When Melo raised his face, he was met by Bongiwe's face.

"Ma!", he exulted before giving her a hug.

"And here comes the prodigal son", she laughed as she extended her hands towards him.

"Haa I'm not--"

"How many times have I been begging you to come visit kodwa dololo"-Bongiwe

"I was really gonna come after my final exams. I swear", he laughed shyly.

"You said the same thing last year. And the year before that"

"But ma I've also been telling you how much I don't like this place and I remember you at some point promising to come visit me instead", he defended. She laughed and hit him on the arm playfully.

"Mciim go and call u mamncan wakho for me"

He agreed and swiftly went up.

He passed by Lwandile's room, who was singing along to Bucy Radebe's 'Warrior's medley' on YouTube. Melo wanted to stop and ask if he was okay but he decided not to disturb him. He went to knock on Betso's door and she opened for him.

"Mam Bongiwe is here to see you", he notified. Betso popped her eyes.

"What? But I haven't bathed yet"

Melokuhle laughed.

"You look and smell fine ma. Besides, it's just her"

"Okay go tell her I'll be there in a minute"

The teenage messenger agreed to the back and forth. Betso quickly freshened up and got out of her ugly dress. She threw her wig over her cornrows and combed it. She kept looking in the mirror to see if the dress she decided on was fine. She then made her way to the kitchen and greeted Bongiwe.

"Hey how are you?"-Bongiwe

Betso shrugged and she got up to hug her. She handed the flowers and Betso grew a persistent smile on her face.

"He's in my prayers", Bongiwe assured. Betso nodded as she sniffed on the huge bouquet of white lilies.

"But what did you mean when you said it's our--"

"Let's go talk outside", Betso quickly pulled her by hand and they exited the house.

...

The majority of the learners in math class kept dozing off. The teacher kept talking but noticed that only a small number of them were actually paying attention. She dropped the hand with the chalk in it and banged the desk closest to her very loudly with the wooden side of a duster. This abruptly pulled most out of their slumber and they sat up.

"What is going on? Is my lesson that boring for you?", she questioned, annoyed. A sharp laughter left Zanele's throat.

"Did I say anything funny?", Mrs Zulu questioned with the straightest of all faces.

"No ma'am it's just--", she couldn't put the unruly laughter on a leash.

"Ntuli, please leave my class. You can excuse us for the rest of this week"

Zanele immediately composed her self.

"I am sorry ma'am it won't happen again"

"It's either you tell us all the joke or you leave this class and forget about it for a while"

"Ma'am I honestly wasn't laughing at you. I am laughing because Ndalo is pregnant and she's the reason why everyone is sleeping", she spilled the beans and the whole class rumbled in disbelief, staring right ahead at Ndalo who was sitting at the front. Ndalo was on the brink of crying. She just needed to blink once for the first drops of tears to tumble over and string the others down her cheeks with them.

"Okay okay!!! Settle down!", Mrs Zulu shouted as she looked over to Ndalo with pity in her eyes. She couldn't believe it just as the other learners equally couldn't.

"Ntuli. Make your way to the principal's office now. I will meet you there"

"But ma'am--"

"ZANELE!", Mrs Zulu snapped.

Zanele sulked on her way out. The siren went off for lunch and the teacher asked to speak to Ndalo amongst the noise and gossip in the class. Ndalo followed her to the staff room and she asked the HOD if she could use his office for privacy. He agreed and Mrs Zulu gently pulled the emotional Ndalo in, then closed the door. She took the leather chair and Ndalo sat across her. Mrs Zulu sighed before she could speak.

"What happened? I had so much faith in you Ndalo", she said in a clear cut disappointed tone. Ndalo wiped her tears and sobbed. She had no answer. Mrs Zulu took the roll of toilet paper on the desk so she could tear some off for her. She handed her a few connected plies and Ndalo wiped her wet cheeks.

"Okay. No use crying over spilt milk. Just promise me one thing?", Mrs Zulu softly requested. Ndalo raised her reddened eyes.

"Promise me that your performance will not drop. You have more reason to continue doing well now. You need to pass so you can go to matric, get there and slay it as well. Pregnancy or not, I can still see you as the very first actuary that will come out of this school. Clear?"

Ndalo giggled.

"The second ma'am. Ndumiso took that position 4 years ago"

"The very first female actuary I meant to say"

Ndalo smiled and nodded.

"Keep your head held high and stop crying. You made a mistake. Granted. But now you need to work on how you will move on from that without it hanging over your head for the rest of your life. Alright baby?", Mrs Zulu said and squeezed her hand. Ndalo nodded.

"I am waiting for a delivery for new study guides. Come collect yours when school is out"

"I don't have the R250 ma'am"

"Ndalo I said come and collect your study guide when the bell rings. You will be able to use it for your finals and even in matric as well"

The warmth this teacher was projecting melted Ndalo's heart. She was the one person she wouldn't dare disappoint the most in that school. She got up with a smile as Mrs Zulu remained seated.

"Ndalo?"

"Ma'am?"

"Tuck in your shirt properly and brush your hair up", she commanded and Ndalo did as told.

"Now, head held?"

"HIGH", Ndalo said enthusiastically and the teacher nodded approvingly. She then left. She went back to class to go eat the lunchbox her grandmother always prepares for her-- toasted sandwiches with diluted mango juice concentrate. The few eyes that were in there wandered around as their matching mouths quickly kept quiet.

They were obviously gossiping about her. Ndalo ignored them and took out the plastic with her lunch. She checked her phone and Mxolisi still hadn't replied to her text that she sent early in the morning. Grace, one of the people she closely associated with got up from the back to go talk to her.

"Ndarlz"

She probed.

"Here to verify your gossip?"

"Hawu Ndalo. I am your friend I'd never-"

Ndalo scoffed.

"Friend? It didn't look like it when I walked in here"

Zanele came back with the deadliest of stares.

"I have been suspended for a week because of you!", she shot out furiously.

"Because of me? Zee you broke the anti bullying rule that vice always emphasizes almost everyday"

"You're really on a mission to make an enemy out of me neh? Bring it on Ndalo yezwa? BRING IT THE FXCK ON!"

"There's something wrong with you", Ndalo said and threw her eyes back on her purple lunchbox while shaking her head.

"Don't you dare call me crazy Ndalo don't you dare!!", Zee was already strangling Ndalo with all her might by the time she finished this sentence. Ndalo was gagging and running out of breath. Grace pulled her back yelling for her to stop. The other girls at the back came to assist. The noise attracted a bunch of other spectator learners. When they finally managed to pull Zanele from Ndalo, her neck was already red and bruised from Zanele's long nails.

"Mxolisi is mine! You were supposed to be a one night stand and I won't allow you to trap him with a baby!"

The rumbles began again, discussing and trying to decipher the Mxolisi issue. There was really nothing to decipher since Zanele made sure everyone knew she was his girlfriend. If weird noises were nectar, then principal was a bee. Everybody scattered when they saw her approach. Even in her most happiest moments, she still had a resting bxtch face. Her muscles just won't relax, the same way her hot temper won't budge.

"Not you again!", she shot out to Zanele as Ndalo rubbed her painful neck.

...

Lwandile never ceased praying that day. He moved from one minute to the next either worshipping on his feet or conversing with God on his knees. There was something motivating him to keep praying tirelessly. Little did

he know that the more he prayed, the more his father's finger kept twitching on his hospital bed. The more he kept praying, was the more Muzi slowly slipped out of his coma. Lwandile did not know that but he continued praying. Something was fuelling the fire in him. Something was communicating with him spiritually. The goosebumps that the doctor was talking about, he felt them-- the chills that let him know that he was no longer alone in that room. He continued praying for his father and whatever had gotten into his mother to let her go. That was his daily prayer. The intense his prayer got, the worse Betso's brain became at putting together a sensible sentence to Bongiwe at that very moment.

Betso and Bongiwe stood outside while everyone was inside the house. Some had left to attend to their own things. Bongiwe stood in anticipation for Betso's explanation. Betso placed her fingers on her temples when she felt a cluster headache covering her cranium.

"Are you okay?", Bongiwe asked.

"I'm fine. What I wanted to say was, the accident..."

"Yes?"

"Before it happened I ish", she placed her fingers back on her head. The headache was getting worse.

"You don't look fine", Bongiwe said in concern.

"I am honestly-- ahh!!!", a sharp stabbing pain bolted down her spine and she felt herself instantly get wet.

"Bee?!", Bongiwe was a second away from panicking. Betso crumbled down to her knees as she cried. The pain was too much to handle. She felt it when she was giving birth to the twins but this was nothing like it. This was a premium subscription kind of pain. Top tier. She felt like her vertebral column was cracking into two. That her spinal cord was a second away from snapping and breaking.

"Somebody help!!!", Bongiwe screamed as she held onto Betso's hand. She didn't know what help she needed most between being saved from Betso who was crushing all the bones in her hand and actually getting her assistance. Melo and Thando launched out of the house. Evelyn shortly followed. Lwandile was still neck deep in prayer. So much that his senses were blocked from perceiving all the commotion that was going on outside.

Chapter Forty-Nine

After they established that Betso was actually giving birth, everyone went into a frenzy trying to find the nearest car keys. Mxolisi and Manqoba were not around. They both left separately and never said goodbye to anybody. Betso was now seated bxtt flat on the pavement with her one arm on her burning waist and the other balancing her on palm flat on the ground. She was hyperventilating so much one would swear she was trying to dilute the pain with all the extra oxygen she was taking in. Thando came back running barefoot with the keys in her hand. "Found them! Found them!", she yelled frenetically and Bongiwe helped Betso up, along with Melo. They all just assumed that Lwandile left with Mxo since there was no sign of either. Lwandile was still praying while Mxo drowned his sorrows at his friend's house.

"Mm-mh! Mm-mh! I cannot do this!", Betso screamed as they tried to get her to walk. She stopped and stood with her legs spread apart.

"Just a few more steps ma we're almost there", Melo encouraged and Betso shook her head vigorously. The tears fell sideways and Melo quickly took the keys from Thando. Betso needed to take approximately eight steps but she wasn't budging. Melo brought the car closer--close enough for her to take a single step in. They managed to get her in the back seat with her legs tented up, resting her head on Thando's thighs. Evelyn occupied the passenger seat and Melo drove off. Bongiwe stood with her hands on her waist as the car disappeared, still trying to wrap her head around what just happened. She had never seen anybody go into labour, at least not live.

...

"Booze won't solve your problems Mxo...", Kabelo said before trying to take the bottle from him. Mxo shifted it away from his hand.

"Ey I never said it would. It's either you let me be or I'll simply go chill with Jay. You're not a VIP in this friendship thing", he stated with zero regret and took another sip. Kabelo sighed and gave up. He sat on the couch next to him and gave him one joystick. Mxo gently pushed it back to him and sat back on the couch.

"C'mon let's play. Maybe it'll improve your mood"

Mxo exhaled before standing up and grabbing his phone from the table.

"Coming here was actually a bad idea. Laitaka, I'll see you", he held out his fist so they bump. Kabelo pulled him by the wrist so he sits back down. Mxo was prepared to leave.

"Sit down Mxo"

He did as told.

"I'm bout to sound like a soft bxtch but--"

Mxo laughed before Kabelo could finish his sentence.

"BUT, I hate seeing you like this. You're always the happy and goofy one around. Even Jay can attest to this.

The one who's making us laugh even when we don't want to. But right now you look a hot mess. You're all over the place. Man I know, I know how much you love your dad bro everybody who knows you knows this fact"

Mxo huffed out a laugh trying to fight the urge to cry. He noticed the pity in KB's eyes.

"Nah fxck you I'm not gonna cry", he said and immediately laughed. Kabelo followed.

"He's gonna be fine"-Kabelo. Mxo nodded.

"Even if he doesn't--", he tried to add.

"Aiy yabo' manje..."(You see now...)

Mxo never allowed him the currency to afford finishing that sentence. He quickly got up and pulled his pants.

"No listen...", Kabelo tried reasoning with him. Mxolisi's phone rang and he immediately took it when he saw his grandmother's name flash on the screen.

"Gogo?"

"Mxolisi. Please come to the hospital"

The tone in her voice had his heart racing a sonic marathon.

"Please don't tell me--, is dad okay?"

"It's your mother"

"WHAT?!"

"Just come"

Mxolisi cut the call and ran out the house.

"Mxo!", Kabelo yelled after him. Mxo never looked back.

...

Bongiwe got to her place and threw her heels off, after grabbing a bottle of white wine. She dropped her weight on the couch and unbuttoned her shirt. She took a few consecutive gulps without rest before throwing her head back. Behind her shut eyes, she was rewatching the happenings of that day from the archives of her mind. As much as Betso was in excruciating pain, there was something beautiful about that moment for her. Actually being able to bring life, to life. She thought of the day she froze her own eggs and her train of thought was cut into two by the abrupt knock on her door. She was too exhausted for visitors but that did not sound like a knock that one would just wish away. It was too persistent. She accumulated the strength to get up and went to attend to the door. Gugu threw her whole body in and closed the door. Bongiwe was obviously startled by this.

"Mabuyi?!", she shot out with her hand on her chest. Gugu was still trying to catch her breath.

"Were you running? Who is chasing you?!"

"Water...", she managed to speak, roughly. Bongiwe's jammed brain led her into just handing her the bottle of wine she was holding. Mabuyi took it and downed it.

"Whoa slow down!"

Mabuyi took a very brief break from her drinking.

"See, this is why you're my friend", she appreciated the wine and went back to drinking. Bongiwe just stared in disbelief. When the bottle was done, Gugu deflated her cheeks and asked if she could sit. Bongiwe led her to the couch.

"Did you escape from prison?"

Gugu agreed.

"So the cops are after you?"

"Not quite"

"What?"

"Can I please take a bath first?"

"No Buyi you can have your bath after you've given me a sound explanation. What the hell is going?"

Mabuyi brushed her thighs before she gave in.

"I was supposed to be out of that place a long time ago. The people who are probably looking for me now, are Muzi's people. The ones who were paid to make sure I stayed in there"

"Err... speaking of Muzi. There's something I need to tell you"

Gugu pinched her brows and listened attentively.

"He... Muzi is in a coma. He was involved in a car accident".

Gugu froze.

...

When the bell rang, Ndalo packed her books carefully into her large pink backpack and made her way to the staff room. She found Mrs Zulu's desk empty and asked the other two teachers where she might have went. They informed courteously that she went to the printing room and that she should be back soon. She walked in as Ndalo was about to leave as she was feeling pressed. She wiggled her legs around and Mrs Zulu laughed.

"You can use that loo", she offered and Ndalo laughed as she put her bag down. She peed a lot ever since she fell pregnant and the pee had no patience for the company of her bladder. When she came back, Mrs Zulu tore the plastic holding together the stack of guides with a pen and handed her the first one.

"Thank you so much!", Ndalo exulted as she received it. Mrs Zulu smiled.

"Don't you dare tell anybody that you got this for free", she whispered. Ndalo laughed. She ran her thumb and index finger pinched together over her pursed lips, imitated a lock and threw the imaginary key away. They both laughed and said to see each other the next day. Ndalo walked out and ran to the car that's always waiting for her every 'after school'. She threw herself in, closed the door and took out her phone.

"Hi Vovo", she greeted the driver enthusiastically without raising her face. The driver never greeted back. He quickly put on child lock and only then did Ndalo realise that it wasn't "Vovo" in the passenger seat.

"Sthe!", she shot out in panic. She tried fighting the door while screaming for help but he was too fast for anybody to see enough. However, Grace's smile quickly disappeared when she realized Ndalo hitting against the car window. She hit her boyfriend on the arm to let him know that something was wrong.

"Zanele tells me you're pregnant?", he eventually spoke. Smoke coming out of his ears and nostrils. He was furious.

"Where are you taking me?!", Ndalo cried out loud. Sthe held on tightly to the steering wheel with his foot diligently on the accelerator.

"Sthe!"

...

Mxolisi launched himself into the hospital and almost passed reception. He slid to a stop and ran back to the desk. He made all the necessary enquiries and was immediately assisted. He shot into lift like a bullet and fought with the button, disappointed in modern day invention. According to him at that moment, hospital lifts should have the option to teleport. He ran out looking for his family and saw them on his left. Melo stood up to meet him. Thando remained seated, deep seated in worry.

"What's going on?!", he asked breathlessly.

"Ma is giving birth. But there are complications"

"What complications?"

"Apparently her blood pressure is too high", Thando sadly jumped in.

Mxo rested his arms over his head.

"This family needs serious cleansing", Melo remarked as he slowly sat back down.

"And grandma? Where is she?"

"Upstairs. Dad's apparently out of the coma but he hasn't opened his eyes yet. I was there just now"

Mxo almost ran in the direction of the lift but brought himself back. He was indecisive. The final decision he came to was that if his dad was out of the coma then he relatively needed less attention.

"You can go see him. They're still busy with your mom anyway", Thando stated. The lift opened for Lwandile, Manqoba and another patient wheeling out a drip. The doctor passed by speedily and Thando stood up to stop him.

"Doc, any news?"

They all surrounded him. He sighed.

"Her blood is too high. I'm suspecting superimposed preeclampsia but she's in too much pain to speak and confirm this"

"We were not your classmates in med school", Manqoba stated in a tone laced with irritation.

"I think she developed hypertension during the pregnancy. This could pose a lot of risks during birth", he explained further.

"Nah she has never had any health problems. Not that I know of", Mxo put a big red wrong mark on his suspicions.

"Same. I would've known", Lwa reaffirmed.

"Well, her BP is hitting the roof"

"You said something about a risk?", Melo asked.

"With such a condition, a lot could go wrong. Her vital organs... her liver, brain, kidneys and the likes could get seriously damaged. Breathing problems and infections could be posed to the baby. Severe abruption of the placenta could cause heavy bleeding, which could be fatal for both the mother and the child. Her heart could also fail. I am just letting you know so you're aware of what we're up against"

The doctor then left after that disheartening explanation.

Chapter Fifty

"Here", Thando said to the boys as the three of them sat on the same metallic bench. Melo and Lwa took the brown coffee cups and said their low thanks. Mxo remained with his eyes facing the wall in front him, his hands in his pockets. Melo nudged him on the elbow and he immediately said, "Huh?!". He was there but simultaneously lost in a place far, far away. He took the cup as well and they all sat in silence. Thando went to sit on the bench opposite theirs. Mxo took one sip and spat it back into the cup almost a millisecond later.

"Shxt tastes like boiled mud water"

"You shouldn't have spat in in. You should've given it to me", Thando said with irritation.

"Trust me, it doesn't even taste healthy. I'm saving your life here", he flatly replied before he could place his head back on the rest and cover his face with his bucket hat. As pained as they all felt, Thando and Melo wanted to laugh.

"What are you thinking about?", Thando directed this to Lwa. He sighed and shook his head, granting her zero response. Thando took a glimpse of the time and her smart watch reported it to be 21h32. She sighed and finished up her coffee. She immediately stopped drinking when she felt the sweetness that was concentrated at the bottom, by virtue of the sugar she forgot to stir.

They all stood up when they saw the doctor approach in his navy scrubs. He had his surgical mask below his mouth. He was taking quick steps and finally arrived.

"The good or the bad first?"

"How is my mother?", Mxolisi was the first to ask. The question came out at the same time with Lwa's "Bad news first" and Melo's "The good please".

"Okay. Allow me to congratulate you on another addition to your family"

They were all not sure whether to celebrate or not. What was in the box written Bad News?

"She didn't make it did she?", Thando asked on the brink of breaking apart. Mxolisi sunk back on the bench and squeezed his head in between his upper arms, squashing the hat on the top of his head.

"She is not dead", he informed, trying to compile a statement that would be gentle yet still make sense. Mxo quickly raised his head with a frown pasted on its front. A frown laced with relief.

"She is not dead but she's not conscious either. The surgery went very well, better than we expected actually. Her blood pressure gradually dropped to normal. After blood tests, we will surely know what might be wrong with her"

"Might and sure don't belong together in that sentence", Melo took out his frustrations on him. The doctor sighed and briefly looked away with pressed lips.

"What are her chances?", Thando questioned.

"I will be able to make a proper diagnosis after the tests. Please excuse me". With that, he left. Thando ran after him.

"Wait!", she said as her shoes abused the hospital floor.

"Can we see her?"

"Unfortunately, not yet. I want her to get enough rest and allow her body the time to recover from the surgical trauma"

"Can we at least see the baby then?", Lwandile yelled from a short distance. The doctor considered it.

"Sure. Follow me", he instructed before turning and going in the opposite direction. Thando went to quickly grab her bag and they followed the doctor. She was calling Evelyn on the way.

When they got to the room with new babies, he pointed to her tiny self through the large window and told them to walk in one after the other to avoid a crowd.

"Who goes in first?", he asked.

"I am the aunty. You all will follow after me", she said gave none of them a chance to disagree. The doctor smiled and opened the door for her after telling her not to take too long. She sanitized her hands at the door and walked on carefully as if her footsteps would interrupt the new minions. They all watched from outside as they felt their hearts melting the ice that's been building anxiety walls around them.

"She's so small", Melo remarked with a smile, whispering. They continued watching Thando giving delicate kisses on the cheeks of the tiny person. The doctor opened the door.

"Please refrain from kissing her. Babies are overly sensitive. The germs you're able to live with everyday could be detrimental to her", he reprimanded softly. Thando quickly nodded. She placed her back on the yellow blanket and smiled down at her.

Mxo handed his hat to Lwa and went in after Thando.

"Why do you look so nervous? You're not going to an interview", Thando teased and they all laughed, including the doctor.

"Eish...", Mxo exclaimed before walking in. He got there and immediately marvelled at his very first little sister.

"Waze wamncan nawe mancan"(You're so small, little one) She had her pink eyelids closed and her lips pursed peacefully. A flake of dry skin was peeling off of her little lips. He then picked her up delicately. It immediately put a stamp on the fact that he will be holding the product of his own seed in the same manner a few months down the line.

"I've just met you but I already know that I'd die for you. How can you be so little and be able to steal such a big yet crappy heart?", he whispered. Her lips twitched and he perceived that as a smile. The one on his face grew to touch his ears.

"Pretty little thief", he said and there was a knock on the window to indicate that his time was up. He indicated with his head that he will be out soon. He placed the princess down and took a picture.

Lwa went in after Mxo. He immediately picked her up and laughed lightly.

"You must be tired of all the ups and downs we're making you do in your sleep. Sampona wena. Sampona nunus", he gently tapped her nose-- his mother's nose". He silently watched her serene face as he slowly rocked her in his hands.

"I can't wait to take you for ice cream..."

It was at that moment that he realized that she was no different to Pick'n'Pay branded products-- that she was a no-name.

"You know, mom and dad are both going to wake up and we will know what to call you. For now, I'll just call you Jellytot. My yellow Jellytot". His time elapsed and he made space for Melokuhle.

Melo walked over to the bed as he rubbed the sanitizer onto his hands. He rubbed it all the way to his elbows for good measure. He didn't want to take any risks.

"Hey there...", he whispered as he took her in his arms.

"Bheka umuhle kanjan kodwa awunayo i-timing shem. Dad would've wanted to be there when you were born. I know that for a fact"(You're so pretty but you have no timing), he said to her and sighed, before taking a careful look at her.

"I saw the woman next door is also pregnant and ugly. I heard that when a woman is ugly during pregnancy, then it means she's carrying a boy. Nono wami I dare him to even greet you yezwa? I'll put his already useles a** in a toaster"

...

"Mm! Mm! Mm!", Ndalo was trying to get Sthe to untie her so she would get out of that RDP house and go home. He had put tape on her mouth to avoid risking her screaming. She was lying on her side on the smelly brown duvet and soiled pillowcase reeking of saliva. He was busy pacing the room, drinking water. It was becoming clearer that he made a stupid decision by abducting her. He was too much of a coward for the consequences with the law. Ndalo kept making those sounds under the tape. He found this irritating and smashed the glass of water on the hard cement and smashed it into a bloody handful of pieces. Ndalo's eyes were swollen from all the crying.

"Ndalo THULA! THULA! THULA DAMMIT! I am trying to think!"

She was pressed. She felt a lot of pain around her bladder area. Sthembiso continued pacing up and down with his palm against his forehead and one hand on his waist. He then took an abrupt move and went to make her sit up. Both her feet and hands were tied. She shut her eyes and the tears rolled down.

"Stop crying. You're the one who betrayed me"

She frowned and continued mumbling. He stared at her for a moment, contemplating whether to let her talk or not.

"Okay. I will remove the tape. Kodwa ulinge nje uthi uya memeza... uzom'khombha unyoko"(Don't you dare scream)

Ndalo quickly gave multiple nods. The smell of weed that was surrounding his entire presence in the afternoon had subsided. He pulled the tape off as he sat in a squat in front of her and she almost screamed at the pain.

"I wanna go pee", she informed. She couldn't hold it in anymore. The pee was burning her insides and she was

also afraid of an infection. Her mom always preached about how a woman should not hold in pee in any case. Sthe shook his head and told her that he can't afford having people see her.

"I'm gonna pee on this bed", she cried.

"Don't you dare. Jazzi would kill me"

"You brought me to your brother's house? Where is he?"

"KwaZembhe. He left me in charge of the car and the house"

"But Sthe, it's only a matter of time before Jazzi becomes a suspect and the police come here. He is the only one with the same car as Vovo's around here"

Sthe stood up. She had a point. But he also knew she wasn't going to let this slide. She was going to go to the cops because she's every teacher's pet. Teachers' pets tell on everything and everybody. You step on their toes by mistake and your name is already in her ears of the educator. He was thinking, hard.

"Can I please pee?", she continued begging. He shook his head and said, "Mm-mh man!". She was interrupting his thought process.

"You know what? Let me just take the car away"

The pseudo-genius in him had a lightbulb moment. Ndalo didn't say anything. If the cops suspected Jazzi, they would want to find him, at his place, not his car. Everybody knows where Jazzi lives. The smart and panicked fool placed the tape back on Ndalo's mouth and dashed out.

Ndalo looked around to see what could be of use to her. She couldn't hold in the pee anymore. One fart and she would be taps open. She saw the plastic tub at a corner that Jazzi probably uses to take a bath. She stood up and took kangaroo jumps to it. When she got to it, she saw grey and probably decomposing bath water. She grimaced in disgust but still went down and tried to sit on it. She thought it was better to wet her panties than the bed. She would go sit on the blanket folded towards the end of the bed with damp underwear under her pleated and checkered skirt. She couldn't risk making Sthe more mad than he already was. She managed to pee and got up. She then realized that the edge of her skirt touched the dirty water. The tiny drops continued falling to the floor. She shook it off and took the same kangaroo steps that brought her to the corner, back to the bed. She then sat, looking around. She missed Mxo. Badly. She was listening to her stomach grumbling in hunger. The question he always, always asks kept sounding in her head.

"Sthandwa sami udlile na?"(My love have you eaten?)

...

Everyone was now in Muzi's room, waiting for the doctor. The boys were standing. Manqoba gave his chair to Thando. Muzi's one hand was in Evelyn's hand, the other in Thando's. Muzi was awake.

"How are you feeling?", Thando asked. He just smiled slightly he laid there.

"Nangibuka kanje kant kuse zoo lana yini?"(Why are you all watching me like this? Am I an animal in a zoo?), that was the very first thing he said, though weakly. They all laughed.

"Welcome back pops", Melo said cheerfully. They all agreed not to stress him. The doctor walked in.

"Oh hello", he greeted his recovering patient. Muzi just stared.

"How are we doing?", the doctor asked and Muzi never replied. He continued staring with a straight face. The doctor exchanged looks with the family, worried.

"Mr Khumalo, I am Dr Mpfariseni. I am here to help you recover fully so you can have your life back okay?", he slowly explained as if speaking to a handicapped retard. Muzi kept his silence and his straight face.

"Okay. How many fingers am I holding up?", the doctor asked as he stuck seven fingers in the air.

"Twenty thirty forty and three", Muzi answered. They all leaned in with worried faces.

"Do you know who I am?", Evelyn quickly asked with a hand on her chest.

"Lomama othengisa amagwinya? I'd never forget you", Muzi replied and Mxo looked up.

"He's just joking. Right dad?", Melo said, trying to mask away how worried he was.

"Joke?", Muzi asked and looked at them, one after the other.

"Everybody please relax. Mr Khumalo, please look at me...", the doctor pleaded. He took out his torch and inspected his eyes. He switched it off and placed it back into his top pocket.

"Can you tell me what your name is?" -Dr Mpfariseni

"Yes"

"Yes you can tell me?"

"Yes"

"Please tell me"

"Scooter's pizza", Muzi replied. Mxo and Melo simultaneously said "Yoh...", hanging the hands at the top of their heads. Muzi couldn't keep serious anymore. He started laughing. They were not sure if he was laughing because he was psychotic or because he was pranking them.

"Loosen up. My name is Muzikayise PK Khumalo. You were holding up seven fingers", he said as he continued laughing. Evelyn hit him on his chest and sharply said "Udlala kabi!"(You have bad jokes).

Chapter Fifty-One

Every heart in that hospital room bounced near and off the coals when Muzi assured that he was fine. Everyone was laughing, except Evelyn. Muzi has always been her baby boy, no matter how many times he mentioned how much of a grown man he was. Imagining him in a state that was anything but himself paralyzed her peace.

"I'm seeing all of you here but ukuphi umfazi wami?"(Where is my wife?), he asked and the smile on his face gradually evaporated when he realized that theirs were changing.

"Ma?", he questioned further. He bent his neck to ask Manqoba, who was standing next to his pillow.

"Eish... bafo...", no other words were willing to come out. Muzi tried to sit. Evelyn and the doctor pushed him back to the bed by his shoulders.

"She gave birth!", it quickly slipped out from her.

"What?", his muscles loosened and he laid back willingly. "How long have I been out? Where is she? Where's my baby girl?"

"The baby is fine and healthy. But mom is unconscious", Lwandile let out. Muzi immediately removed the sheet and tried again to stand.

"Mr Khumalo. I will advise you not to do that. Your wife is under very good care and she's receiving the best medical assistance we can offer. You're not ready to be exhausting your self like this", the doctor tried restraining and reasoning with him. Muzi wouldn't have it.

"You will not be allowed to see her anyway dad. Neither of us have", Melo jumped in. Muzi did not have enough strength to keep fighting. He exhaled while sitting up, still hooked to the machines by cords and wires.

"What happened?"

"In simple terms, her body is misbehaving but I have sent her blood to the lab. The results should be back by one".

Muzi faced up and shut his eyes.

"Doctor?"-Muzi

"Yes?"

"I want to see my wife"

"You can't"

Muzi deflated his chest and sat thoughtfully.

"Can I see my daughter?", it came out more of an instruction than a request. The doctor nodded.

"If you promise to sit still, I will bring her to you"

"McStuffin, I said bring my damn daughter!"

"Calm down", Thando pleaded.

"Nxn!", he shot out when the doctor finally walked out.

A nurse walked in wheeling the Jellytot in and everybody's eyes immediately got fixed on her through the glass protecting her. Muzi's fury immediately died down. The nurse pushed the small bed with a smile.

"Say hello family", she said in a babying tone. She was sucking on her fingers in her sleep. Muzi carefully sat up and waited for the nurse to hand him the baby. When she did, everyone leaned in to watch her. She was small but her presence made a difference. It was felt. It mattered.

Muzi's eyes were fixated on her as she continued to sleep in his arms.

"Umfaz wam gave birth to herself here", he hushly remarked. He was gently rubbing her tender cheeks. She eventually opened her big eyes. Instead of crying, she stared back.

"Mom's womb is a photocopy machine", Mxo said and the room filled with light, loving laughter. Jellytot had a round head full of black hair.

"She doesn't have a name", Melo reminded.

"She does", Muzi huskily replied but never moved his eyes from her.

"She does?", Lwandile and Mxolisi asked at the same time.

"Yes. Odaliwe Khumalo", he informed.

"I love it. MaMbulazi", Thando immediately agreed.

"Mind me asking why?", the nurse curiously asked. Muzi took a moment before he could reply.

"I fetched it", he responded. Evelyn and Thando immediately understood. The kids knew nothing about the happenings of his last accident.

"Fetched it?", the nurse was confused.

"It's complicated", Thando said with a smile and punctuated with a laugh.

"She only has one name?", Mxo was baffled. Nobody has a single name in that family.

"No. Her mom will name her when she wakes up", he said with certainty.

...

After struggling to get Muzi to let the baby go rest, he began insisting on seeing his wife. The doctor had no choice but to put him to sleep. He was also a patient who needed to rest. The family left him and Manqoba pulled Mxolisi to the side.

"Wena sphongo senja. Did I not specifically tell you to use condoms?!", he shot out. Mxo gave a regretful straight smile.

"Urhh a lot of things happened that night MQ"

"Well, you have damages to pay now. Does your father know about this? And please, there will be no abortion here or anything snaxx", he asked as he held on tightly to Mxo's upper arm, holding him closely so the rest don't hear their conversation.

"Yeah he knows. I don't want her ukuthi askhiphe MQ. I want us to keep it", he explained with sincerity.

"Hee. You sound ready"

Mxo swallowed.

"I'm not. But I don't have a choice. I will be when the baby gets here. In fact I need to call her she must be fuming right now"

"I hope this is the first and the last baby for the next 9 years"

A laugh escaped Mxo's throat. His phone rang when he was about to reply. He questioned himself why Sbusiso would call him at that time of the night. They were kinda friends yes but not close enough that he would call him around midnight.

"Sbuda?", he took the call and Manqoba just stood there, waiting for him to get done so he could continue frying him. He took out his phone to check on his wives.

"Mxo. Mfethu. Ndalo is missing", Sbu informed and Mxo immediately shrunk his face.

"What do you mean she's missing?"

Manqoba stopped typing but never moved his fingers from the screen. He raised his brow and Mxo kept rigid eye contact while listening to Sbu.

"Grace apparently saw her screaming in a car that looks like the one that always take her home this afternoon"

Mxo felt a few springs unhook from his sanity.

"How sure is she that it wasn't the same car?"

"She says Vovo's car has three Apple stickers at the back. That one doesn't"

"Did she at least take the number plate?"

"I don't think so. Let me send you a screenshots of her post"

Mxo dropped the hand with the phone in it.

"Who's missing?"

"Ndalo. Apparently she was kidnapped"

Mxo was trying hard to think of a possible suspect.

"Stay here", Manqoba stated without a grain of doubt in his voice. The rest of the family had went to go get some food. They all last nibbled on breakfast in the morning. Mxo followed him.

"I'm not staying anywhere. I am coming with you"

"Mxolisi. I'm not gonna repeat myself"

"Mbulazi. With all due respect, this is the mother of my child we're talking about. The love of my life. You stay then!", he shot out.

"It is equally my grandchild that's in danger. I will find her. I promise". Mxo disregarded everything he just said and grabbed the keys from MQ's hand. Manqoba just knew that he wasn't going to win this one.

"Okay. Asambe ke"(Let's go then). They then left without any goodbye or explanation, the same way they both did back at the house.

...

"Do you have this Grace's number?", Manqoba asked a frustrated Mxo who felt like his uncle wasn't driving fast enough.

Mxo sent Sbu a text asking for the number and called a second later when he felt he was taking too long. He wasn't going to reply judging from how sleepy he sounded when he answered the call.

At this point, they were a kilometer away from reaching their destination. Mxo called all ten of the acquired numbers to Manqoba who dialled as he drove. He placed the phone on his ear and drove with a single hand.

"Hello?", she was wide awake and her voice was proof of this.

"Baby girl. This is Mxolisi's uncle neh. We are looking for Ndalo and we hear that you have information. I would like to speak to you in person but I'll need permission from your parents first. Can you give them the phone?", he softly explained and she understood.

"Okay. Give me a second", her saddened voice. A minute later, a more mature and grown male voice came onto the phone.

"Hi. I realize and I'm well aware of how much of an inconvenience this will be but I really need to speak to your daughter. I heard she has information about uNdalo?"

"Who are you?"

"Chief Khumalo. Can we have directions to your house please?"

"Oh Mbulazi? No of course. Of course. Uyasazi istolo sakwa Mbhejana?(Do you know the Mbhejana tuckshop), the man asked.

"Erhh, which one is that?"

"The one next to the abandoned computer academy"-the man

"Lesi esi red seLucky star"(The red one?)

"Yes that one"

"Yeah yeah ngiyasazi"(I know it)

"Count five houses from the store, take the first street that you will see on your left then keep driving until you see a house with a truck on your right. That's my house", he directed. Manqoba thanked him and cut the call. Mxo wasn't looking good, at all. He kept changing sitting positions and breathing rates. Ndalo's phone was ringing without any answer. It was in her pocket. She had tried to take it out but failed in the afternoon. She wasn't even sure that anybody was calling since she did not put in on vibration. But now she was sitting in the dark. She could see through the material of the skirt that it had lit up. She jumped around as she sat, hoping it falls out. It wasn't. Instead, the pocket was just jumping around unwilling to let go of the phone. She tried shifting her hands towards it. Even the tips of her fingers would do the trick but Sthe had tied her like he was tying up a bundle of forest wood. She promised herself to stop crying but the tears invited themselves again when she began feeling helpless. Mxo kept calling.

She took a deep breath in. And out.

"Ndalo, you're a smart girl. You can do this come on", her voice was breaking as she tried to encourage herself. The pee was back and it made nothing better. She could think better without it. She then exhaled. If her shoulder was to break, then so be it. She gritted her teeth and extended her tied hands all the way till they reached her pocket. It hurt. Badly considering that she had been tied the whole afternoon. She always wondered what chickens felt like after they'd been exchanged for R60 and taken home. She wondered if they weren't hurting when she clutched on to their white wings as she walked. One day, she clutched too hard and the chicken was bleeding around the area where the wings joined the rest of the body. Today, she felt like karma had sent her a special letter.

She soldiered on though. Until the phone was out. To her ugly badluck, it fell to the floor. As distraught as she felt, she went down with it. Her heart was bouncing when she saw that it was Mxo who was calling relentlessly. She fell intentionally on her knees and it hurt, she then laid on her stomach after processing the pain. The phone stopped ringing when she was about to try and answer using her chin. Her heart cracked. She was exhausted. "Come on Mxo please call", she begged to the phone. Sthe could've walk in any moment from then. Where did he even disappear to? Did he chicken out and leave her there to die? The questions bounced around in her head. A minute passed and she was giving up. He probably thinks she's mad at him and or that she's asleep. She continued thinking to herself. The phone lit up again and the enthusiasm to answer filled her eyes. She quickly slid her chin across the screen but it didn't work. She tried again and Mxo immediately started talking. She put him on speaker. He was standing outside Grace's house while Manqoba spoke to her and her elders.

"Baby?! Where are you?! Oh my God Ndalo are you okay? Baby?!", he rambled.

"Mm! Mm mm mm!!!!", she mumbled from behind the tape. Mxo immediately knew that she was silenced. He watches way too many movies to not know this. Never did he dream of experiencing fiction in real life.

"Dammit!", he shot out and kicked the rock in front of him, next to the tap.

"Mm! Mm!!", she continued mumbling. The light on the screen went off and she remained in the dark

"Okay. Okay. Relax okay baby? I'm here in KZN alright? I'm gonna try my level best to find you", he made a promise he himself wasn't sure how he planned to keep but, he knew he was never going to rest till he found her.

"Try your best to keep alive okay? Ngiyak'cela", he was getting emotional. Ndalo heard the door creak and she quickly pushed the phone under the bed, scraping some skin off her chin. Mxo never cut the call.

"Baby?"

Sthe walked in. He reeked of weed again, all the way from the door. His was in completely high spirit, with a kota in his hand. Mxo kept quiet to gauge what was really going on. Listening to a male voice was like a hammer decorated with pins against his ear drum.

"Oh you fell? Askies baby wami", he placed the food on the floor since there was no where else to place it. He tried getting her up and heard sirens approaching. He slapped Ndalo at the back of her head and froze.

"What was that for?!", Ndalo asked sharply after her forehead collided with the cold floor. He stood up, stepped on the kota and ran out, leaving the door open. Ndalo laid on the ground and watched her squashed food on the floor. She didn't even have enough water in her body to salivate. She just laid there, hungry, parched and dehydrated- waiting to be rescued. The siren was getting closer and closer. One moment it felt very near and the next, it started disappearing. A lone tear travelled across her nose bridge and into her other eye when she realized that they were actually not coming for her. Mxo was still on the line, listening to her sob. He was still quiet. He wasn't sure if she was alone yet. Feeling that helpless drove him insane. Manqoba came out with Grace and her father in the house.

"Do you know where she is?", Mxo asked Grace desperately.

"No but if it was who I think I saw in that car, I know someone who can help us"

"Okay let's go", Mxo rushed to the car.

"Shouldn't she go add to her statement at the police station first?", her father asked.

"There's no time for that"-Manqoba

"We shouldn't take the law in our own hands", her father was trying to convince the two.

"If she dies, is the law going to resurrect her?!", Mxo shot out, feeling the tank that held his patience running on zero.

Chapter Fifty-Two

"Did you try calling her?", Manqoba asked Mxolisi when he felt the girl and her father were suddenly having doubts. Mxo raised his screen to show him that the call was ongoing.

"Where are the kidnappers?"-Manqoba

"I am not sure what's going on but some guy walked in and went out. She's been crying ever since"

"Thank you for your cooperation. I'll call if I need anything else. Asambe", Manqoba gave no opportunity for the two to reply. They were already opening car doors and leaving.

"Give me your phone", Manqoba instructed as he drove. He immediately cut the call and went to Chrome.

"What are you doing?", Mxolisi asked. Manqoba was trying to focus on the road and track Ndalo at the same time. Evelyn had been calling interchangeably with Thando. Both getting ignored. Manqoba threw his phone to Mxo and told him to type them a simple message to alert them that they were safe and fine.

They got to the royal house and parked outside. The guards at the gate could recognize the car but were surprised why they weren't coming out. Manqoba just hooted once at them and they raised their hands with smiles to greet him back.

"Hawu. This place is not that far mus", he stated. Mxo raised his ears.

"And I think I know this address"

"You do?", Mxo asked suspiciously.

"Yeah. We used to use it as a pick up point for--", he almost blurted out his underhand dealings to the 16 year old.

"So you know who took her? What are we waiting for?"

Manqoba was puzzled. What would Jazzie be wanting from Ndalo? He knew Jazzie and he was anything but a pedophile. In fact, all the little girls around his area looked up to him as a big brother and a protector. Manqoba handed Mxo his phone and started the car.

When they got there, Mxo got off before the car came to a complete halt.

"Ndalo!!", he was running and yelling at the same time.

"Wait what if these people are armed?!", Manqoba tried to stop him. He quickly grabbed his gun from the glove box and left the car door open, running after the frantic Mxo.

Mxolisi barged into the house and yelled her name once more. There was no reply. He searched the first room and it was full of nothing but pungent-smelling bags of cement. He entered the second one and immediately saw her, laying on the floor on her tummy, still tied up.

"No no no Ndalo?!", he rushed to her and crashed on his knees. He tapped her cheek a few times and she opened her sleepy eyes. Her eyes gleamed up at the sight of him.

Manqoba walked in and just stood at the door, confused. When Mxo realized that Ndalo was just asleep and not dead, he sighed heavily from relief as he bowed his head, palms flat on the ground. After a very brief moment of

collecting himself, he untied her feet first and then her hands. She quickly wrapped them around his neck and fell apart even further. Mxo shut his eyes and brushed her back.

"Askiies. I'm so sorry baby"

"I'll go check if these worms are still around", Manqoba said and left. He knew there was nobody there, judging from how the doors were open when they arrived. He just wanted to give them space.

Ndalo was sobbing painfully that she even developed hiccups. Mxo's tears welled up and settled on his lower lids. He pushed her back and held her by the shoulders.

"Who did this? Did they hurt you?"

Ndalo couldn't speak. He wiped her tears with his thumbs.

"Khuluma nami. Did they touch you baby?"

She shook her head. He just stared at her, clutching onto his lower lip with his teeth. He pulled her back into his arms trying to comfort her. It was the only thing that made sense.

When she showed signs of finally calming down, he kissed her on forehead and said, "Let's go home". He helped her up and they started walking. She was limping.

"Why are you limping Ndalo?", he sharply questioned. He was already thinking of the worst.

"My bladder. I have a lot of pee and I don't feel too good", she informed.

"Who took you?", he could see himself strangling the faceless mongrel till they went in the opposite direction with the rain.

"Sthe", Ndalo reported as they stood by the door.

"Who the fxck is that?"

"Please let it go", she remembered how he almost killed him the last time.

"I am not going to ask you again"

She swallowed.

"Remember the last time we were at that house?"

He knew exactly which house she was referring to and everything came back and fitted into the empty spaces of the puzzle, completing it.

"Lenja ibingibiza ngoDanone?" (That dog who was referring to me as Danone?)

Ndalo nodded.

"He!", he began laughing. It wasn't a laughter that came from the same place he gets the rest from when he is with his friends or his brothers. It was coming from the same vault he stored the images of the likes of oMzwanele in. He took off his hat and squashed it. His laughter was intensifying.

"Please don't do anything that will land in your jail", she pleaded. Mxo gradually stopped laughing. He pulled the black hat down on her head and held her hand. He then walked out with her, jaws tightened.

...

"You all need to go home, take baths and long naps. I will stay here", Evelyn said to the kids. She had her hands under the fleece she had wrapped around her waist as she sat on the hospital benches.

"If anything gogo you should be the one to leave", Melo argued.

Tumi and Violet both launched themselves into the hospital, leaving the two flappy doors behind them swinging to and fro till they lost momentum and closed themselves. They were both running out of breath. It was a cold early morning and Tumi was in the tightest of brown shorts and an oversized basic, yellow t-shirt. Transparent water boots at his feet. One could swear he was wearing the tee only. The royal blue hair on his head did absolutely nothing to help the disaster that was his outfit.

They greeted everyone and everyone greeted back, except Melo. He was still scanning him, trying to make sense of his attire.

"What happened?", Violet asked Evelyn. Eve sighed before she began explaining everything. Tumi squeezed himself between Thando and her mother, dropping his designer handbag on Thando's thighs. Thando just smiled in defeat and looked away. Tumi had his back against her, staring intently into Evelyn's eyes-- ears wide open. That family spent more time in hospitals than in parks and cinemas.

Violet was ready to turn the entire hospital upside down and inside out just to find the doctor. A nurse walked past and she instantly became an obstacle in her journey. She blocked her and asked where doctor Mpfarisomething was.

"I really don't ma", the nurse answered.

"What exactly do you know?"

The nurse just saw that it was one of those cases that usually end with her catching some hands.

"Let me go look for him"

"Can you see that you can be useful if you just put your mind to it?", the motivational speaker in Violet asked sarcastically. The nurse just nodded innocently. She was in the last hour of her shift. She wasn't about to run into trouble with frustrated family members.

Dr Mpfariseni arrived and greeted the new ones. Violet shot up from the bench when she saw a white coat decorated with a stethoscope on the neck approach.

"Are you Dr Mfambhureni?", she asked anxiously. A light laugh escaped his throat and he nodded. He was too tired to argue. There was no point.

"Can I please see my daughter? Boikokobetso Motlhabane"

"KHU-ma-lo", Evelyn emphasized. Violet turned back to look at her with scornfully.

"Does it matter?"

Thando stood up and left. She knew they were about to be at their Tom-and-Jerry-diaries again.

"Of course it does. There's Khumalo on her forms, no Motlhabane"

"Well I can bet with your accent that there's only one Boikokobetso in this hospital", Violet fired. Melokuhle wondered how people can be so old and yet behave like his exes do. He could never understand their relationship. It doesn't take much to move them from besties to foes. He found his airpods in his back pocket

and raised the volume of his music to max. Evelyn clucked and looked away.

"Dr, my name is Violet Motlhabane-Moko. The patient's BIOLOGICAL mother. You know, the one that she loves and trusts more?", she stated to the doctor but was actually intending on throwing the whole tree at Evelyn instead of just the shade. The doctor just nodded, trying too hard not to laugh at how serious she was.

"Double-barrel? No wonder...", Evelyn jabbed back, insinuating that she wanted Betso to take her bull habits of not wanting to let go of her maiden name. Tumi was totally enjoying this live tea.

"Ke no wonder ya eng wena? Ke no wonder ya eng? You can take your yebo-baba tendencies to the grave and even make sure that it's included in your obituary I won't give a toss but asseblief, bly baie ver van my kind af hoor jy?" (Play very far from my daughter do you hear me?), Violet rambled and threw the matter on an escalator. Evelyn shot up from the bench and threw the fleece where she was seated. Melo stopped typing and raised his eyes at Tumi, surprised by his disregard for the opportunity that was just unintentionally handed to him. He wanted him to take the blanket and cover up. He put Bryson Tiller's 'Blame' on pause. If this artist had a number one fan somewhere in the world, Melo would come before it hierarchally. He related to him on so many levels, including how detached he sounded to be in relationships, when it needs be. A detached yet hard lover. According to Melo, Bryson was an oxymoron--just like he felt himself becoming after Busi's death.

"Aren't you feeling cold?", he finally asked when he was done staring, baffled. Tumi noticed how Melo's eyes were moving from the blanket to him, suggesting that he should take it.

"Oh no darling. Nobody is gonna see these thighs if I cover them up. I'd rather die with my fashion sense than live with none. What if there's a runway in heaven?", he said and rubbed his upper arms with his exposed legs crossed. Melo kept his brow in the air for a second before shaking his head and going back to apologizing to Londiwe for getting tagged in an Instagram story by Khanyi. She wasn't having it.

...

Mxo took Ndalo to the loo outside and waited on her as she urinated, with his one foot up the small stoep and his one hand on the metallic door.

"Don't move", Ndalo firmly stated that he shouldn't go out of sight.

"I won't", he assured. He just stood there as she did her business.

"We need to go to the hospital to make sure that the baby is okay", he notified and she never replied. She got dressed and left the shirt untucked. She stopped when they had just stepped into the back of the car and said, "My phone!", finally remembering that her grandmother must be worried sick about her.

"Where is it?", Mxo asked, ready to fetch it. Manqoba was standing outside speaking to Sihle on the phone.

"Under the bed", she directed. Mxo stepped out and took quick steps back into the house. He stopped when he heard a person making sounds as if struggling to complete a Herculean task. He took a peep and noticed Sthe struggling to get in through the window. He reeked of weed again. The window wasn't even that high for him to struggle like that. Mxo had so many questions that his anger had no time nor patience for. Sthe left the key on the outside of the door the last time he ran off. Mxo took it out and walked in. He was willing to beat the strange mannerisms out of Sthe. Sthe fell in when he saw him, startled. Mxo was already done locking the door by the

time he wanted to make his exit through the same window. Mxo ran to him and pulled him back by his feet. Sthe's chin hit the windowpane. Mxo sent a few kicks to his ribs before getting on top of him to beat the crap out of him.

"Mxo mfethu wenzan?!"(What are you doing it?)

"What does it look like? I'm massaging your a**!", Mxo hissed through gritted teeth. The talking never stood in the way of the beating.

"You can beat me up but Ndalo loves me. She said it herself", his emotional self stood by his warped perceptions even through the pain. This aggravated Mxolisi even further.

"Keep Ndalo's name out of your filthy mouth!"

At this point, Sthe's mouth was full of blood. He had lost several teeth. In theory, Mxo's knuckles were burning in pain but he felt none of it. His brain wasn't receiving it.

"Why did you come back? I'm wasting my time with you because you're stupid but I want to make sure that the next time you hear her name, you run!"

Sthe began laughing.

"Why did I come back? I fxck her everyday in my sleep. I came back to make sure it wasn't a dream anymore", he hissed and spat the blood in Mxo's face. Mxo immediately grabbed his short dreads and smashed his head a couple of times on the ground. Sthe was losing consciousness.

Manqoba thought he was hallucinating the screams as he spoke on the phone. His brain started calculating on his behalf. Where was the noise coming from? How long has Mxo been gone? The questions circled his brain at vortex speed. He stopped talking when two and two gave him a perfect four. He dropped the phone and ran into the house. He found the door locked.

"Dammit Mxolisi open this door!"

Mxo wasn't hearing him. He pulled the half-dead Sthembiso towards the old fashioned bed and positioned him. He pulled the bed up so the one metallic leg was up and over Sthe's genitals. He stamped on them as he screamed, imagining Sthe forcing himself on her. Sthe felt each and every impact. He just had no strength to fight, shift or run. Manqoba stepped away from the door and broke it open, shoulder first. He fell into the room and went completely agape. Mxo was still shredding Sthe's genitals. He wasn't hearing nor seeing Manqoba as he yelled for him to stop. He pulled him away and the bed fell and squashed onto Sthe's privates for the last time. Mxo was hyperventilating.

"Ntwana? Hayi man. WHAT THE FXCK HAVE YOU DONE?!"

Chapter Fifty-Three

Mxolisi began calming down as he came back to his senses. Manqoba wasn't happy with him. He was trying to gauge Sthe's pulse from behind his ear and his neck as Mxolisi stood there, still trying to comprehend what the hell just happened. Ndalo was still in the car talking to her grandma.

"Is he dead?", Mxo asked cautiously.

"You had better pray to oMbulazi that he's not!", Manqoba shot out. Mxo bit his lower lip in frustration and immediately tasted the blood Sthe spat in his face. He quickly wiped his lips and spat the saliva in his mouth out the window. Only then, did he feel that his whole face was covered in splashes of blood.

"He's still breathing. Go wash your face at the tap outside and get me my phone if someone hasn't picked it up yet", Manqoba commanded. Mxo was reluctant, confused. He loathed Sthe and he did want him dead, just not by him. He didn't want his blood on his hands.

"Mxolisi!", Manqoba yelled for him to be snappy as he squatted next to Sthembiso. He was bleeding from his mouth and the front of his pants. Mxolisi left. Manqoba pulled the duvet off the bed and applied pressure to Sthe's genitals so he didn't bleed out.

Mxo came back with a clean face and handed MQ the phone. He took it and handed him the car keys.

"Take Ndalo home. I'll take care of everything"

Mxo left. When it came to MK and MQ, he knew that his back was safe. No matter how badly he may fck up, they were always be there to catch him, right before punishing him for being an idiot. When he came out of the house, he saw Ndalo approaching him.

"What took you so long?", she asked as she kept walking towards him. Mxo turned her back to the direction of the car. The darkness of dawn was making way for the sun to come out.

"Are you gonna answer me?"

"Did you call your grandmother?", he completely evaded her curiosity as he opened the passenger door for her. She got in. Mxo went round the car and got settled in his seat. Ndalo was waiting for an answer. She could see that he wasn't quite himself. After a big sigh, he started the car

"Where's uncle Manqoba? Are we leaving him behind?"

Mxo stopped the car and fell back on the seat. Ndalo was still waiting for an answer. He pushed the inside of his chin with his tongue before he began talking.

"He's inside..."

"Inside?"

"Yes. Inside. Sthe too", he confessed. He had to say something about what just happened for him to also understand it too.

"Oh my... is he beating him up?"

"No. He's trying to get him help"

"I don't understand baby"

Mxo kept quiet. He opened the car windows so his brain could get some fresh air.

"Mxolisi?"

"I almost killed him. I didn't mean to. I just wanted to teach him a lesson and the next thing..."

Ndalo did not know what to be scared of more. The fact that Mxo almost murdered someone or the calm in the slow voice that delivered the story. Silence...

"I had to make sure that he never touched you again. That's what I wanted to do. I didn't--"

"It's okay...", Ndalo said and grabbed his hand. Mxo raised his eyes.

"What?"

"It is okay", she repeated. He couldn't understand the emotion that he saw in her eyes. Fear mixed with assurance. She wasn't mad. The Ndalo he knows would definitely overreact. She wasn't. Instead, she kept saying that it was okay. What was? An ambulance sounded from afar and that was enough to alert Mxo that he took longer than instructed to leave. He then started the car and got it in motion. Nobody was talking.

...

"Where are my things?", Muzi asked the nurse as she removed the sphygmomanometer off his arm and wrote down his blood pressure.

"What things?"

"My wedding ring, watch, my phone?"

"They're with your sister. Ask her about them"

Speak of the devil and she shall appear. Thando was walking in at that moment.

"Wenzen usister ka Puckermoney?" (What has Puckermoney's sister done?), she questioned as she closed the door.

"You have my stuff. Bring them". He was in a foul mood. The nurse left. Thando took her seat next to him and placed her bag on the bed.

"Are you going to tell me what you saw that other side?", she asked and pulled the heavy chair forward, screeching it against the floor. Muzi huffed out a laugh.

"What do you want to know?"

"Everything. Did you see dad?", she questioned with intense curiosity.

"No. He's not the one who called me"

She playfully sulked.

"Why do they never call me?", Thando asked. Muzi laughed.

"I am sitting on a hospital bed in case you thought this was a hotel, straight from ICU"

She laughed too.

"Do your brother a little favor"

She rolled her eyes.

"I am actually telling you as your elder. I'm not asking"

Thando laughed.

"What is it?"

"Go to the house and get me fresh clothes"

"What do you need clothes for?"

"I am discharging myself"

"You can't do that"

Muzi lifted his threatening brow.

"Mom is gonna kill me don't make me do this"

"I'll get somebody else to do it then give me my phone?"

He raised his hand and straightened the palm. She heaved a sigh.

"Fine. I'll go get them"

He immediately smiled.

"I'll buy you a swiss roll"

A sharp laughter escaped her lips.

"I don't eat that anymore. I'm a grown a** woman now. Engaged to be married even", she blurted out. That single sentence was enough to completely erase the smile that was pasted on Muzi's face.

"Oops. That came out prematurely", she wished she could take it back.

"I hope you didn't allow that fool Xolani to marry you because I will rearrange his face again?"

He warned and she laughed.

"Nope. I'm done with black boys", she said as she reached for the handle.

"Wait. Wait. Wait a f*cking minute. You're getting married to a white boy?!", he was now sitting up.

"He's Italian", she informed with her back on Muzi.

There was silence.

"Money?", she lovingly called out, still keeping her eyes away. She wasn't prepared to face his expression. He fell back on his pillow and placed his arm behind his head.

"Hamba"(Go)

She turned in his direction

"But bhut--"

"Ngithe hamba Thandoww. Mathanda amaitallian"(Lover of Itallians)

She just stared, sulking. She's not supposed to be begging because she is grown however, her brother's approval means a lot to her. He is married himself. He has f*cked over five fingers but cringes at the thought of her having sex.

"Pucker--"

"Uyazibona ukuthi awuthumeki?"(You're not doing as I instructed you to do"

She still had a sulking face. He heaved a sigh.

"Okay. Okay. But I want to meet this fool before the lobola negotiations", he commanded.

"Uhm... there won't be any... nego-tiations", she hid her face with her palm. Muzi shrunk his whole face.

"You think you were born in a tuckshop ne Milisuthando?"

"I honestly don't want amalobola mina bhuti. I am not a commodity to be sold"

"I am not doing this with you. Landa impahla zami before ungifulathelisa ngedlozi"(Fetch my clothes before you turn my ancestors against me)

...

Ndalo's grandma told her that she was at her mother's house and she should go there. Mxolisi drove straight there and both the mother and the gran came out of the house. Ndalo got out of the car and ran into her grandmother's hands. Nomcebo was also extending hers but Ndalo never acknowledged that. She just wanted her grandmother to hold her.

"Oh my baby nkosiyam...", grandma's dropped her walking stick and brushed her emotional back. Nomcebo had no choice but to drop her hands. She had a look of sincerity on her face. She took slow walks to Mxolisi, who wasn't sure whether he should step out of the car or not. She's carrying his baby yes but surely there were still boundaries not be crossed since they were not yet married. Nomcebo indicated with her hand that he should come out of the double cab. He did. Slowly. With uncertainty. She was already standing against the car when he went round it. He got there and stood besides her. If he still had his hat on he would've taken it off but it was on Ndalo's head. Nomcebo sighed before she could speak.

"Thank you. For finding her. She told us what happened over the phone. Please thank your uncle for me" She was speaking with humility. Mxolisi wasn't expecting this at all. He was in fact expecting her to accuse him of running off with her daughter. He went speechless and saw it befitting to nod. There was silence.

"Mxolisi?"

His relaxed eyes widened at the seriousness in her tone.

"There is no easier way to say this but I am going to tell you because compared to Ndalo, you're the one who can put a stop to this nonsense. I have seen the love she has for you in her eyes and I just know she will not agree"

"What nonsense ma", he was befuddled.

"You are not supposed to be dating Ndalo and I wish I could've prevented this sooner before a baby got involved. I need you to keep what I am about to tell you a secret while you keep away from her"

"What is it ma?", he was getting annoyed by her beating about the bush.

"Ndalo is your sister Mxolisi", she confessed in a hush. He gave a sharp frown.

"Yes. We will keep the baby, however, I will make sure that she is moved away to go live with her father's family"

Uyangihlanyela lomama yaz. Mxolisi thought to himself as disrespect came flying in through the window.

"What father, ma? How is she even my sister?"

Nomcebo swallowed, then sighed.

"I am just going to be blunt about this. I cheated on her father with your uncle, Mbuso"

A whole Christian woman? Mxo's alter ego said to him in shock.

"I don't expect you to understand. You are still a kid. I just need you to be a caring brother and stay away from my daughter. And please, she must never find out about this. I almost lost her today. I cannot lose her again"

She pleaded and Mxolisi scoffed in disbelief. His brain was digesting a lot. From his dad's coma, his mother losing consciousness after giving birth to a person he now felt responsible for, his baby's mother getting kidnapped by a schizophrenic idiot right to being told that he's siblings with the only girl who has managed to steal his entire heart and all it's blood vessels. He walked away. Ndalo and his grandmother could see that something went wrong in that conversation. Mxolisi got into the car. Ndalo ran towards it.

"I'll call you", he let Ndalo know, faking a smile. He had to dig up the strength to allow his lips to stretch. He then drove off.

...

After getting Sthembiso through the backdoors of a trusted hospital, Manqoba made his way to Phosingwenya to go see Sihle. His phone rang before he could make his way out of the car. Muzi was calling.

"Mfa' ka baba", he answered as he reclined his seat in exhaustion.

"Nikuphi?"(Where have the two of you went?), Muzi questioned. Manqoba heaved a sighed.

"KwaZulu Natal", he informed. Shoulders were tight and aching.

"Doing what there?"

"Ndalo was kidnapped"

"UNdalo usho igirlfriend ka Mxo? Who took her?"(You mean Mxo's girlfriend?)

"Some stupid psycho. Yintanga yakhe uMxo. And guess what sonny almost did?"

There was brief silence.

"No...?"

"Yes. Lentwana has your hot temper and once he reaches that level ney'ndlebe zibuye zivaleke"(...he loses all sense)

Muzi let a very heavy breath out. He grabbed his lower lip in between his teeth before he could ask if the boy Mxo victimized was alright.

"He's breathing yena but his doctor mentioned something to do with penile amputation"

"What exactly did Mxolisi do to this boy?!"

"He. You don't want to know"-Manqoba

"So the boy is going to live without a dxck?"

"Apparently yes", Manqoba agreed. "We need to have more sit downs with these boys", he added. Muzi was quiet.

"Bafo?", Manqoba called for attention. Silence. "Kayise?"

"Hm?!", he snapped out of it.

"You alright?"

"Yeah I'm good. We'll talk", he falsely assured then cut the call.

Manqoba checked his watch and it reported the time to be half seven in the morning. A car parked behind him before he could step out of the his. It was one of the ladies he'd met the first time he visited that place, getting dropped off. Her hair was a mess. The zip of her skirt was in front when it was evidently supposed to be at the

back. Whoever was in the driver's seat of that car surely did her good. She greeted Manqoba with a wide smile and he greeted back. The guy stepped out and never said anything. He was giving a warning to MQ. Manqoba laughed and asked Thushey to open the gate for him. She did and he walked in, leaving the car parked outside. He could hear her asking her boyfriend what the whole attitude was about. He kept walking.

He expected to find Sihle still asleep but the door was slightly open. The burglar proof was locked. He could see shadows of movement inside. He gently pushed the door and knocked.

"Nqo nqo", he said before his eyes widening. Sphe was on her yoga mat with her legs spread widely, widely apart. She was so deep in the zone that she didn't hear his voice. She stretched her arms above her head, with her back on the mat.

"Baby?!", he called out. She shot her eyes open in panic, then relaxed when she realized that it was just him. She laughed at the look on his face. She tried to get up so she could open up for him but he refused.

"Stop right there and throw me the keys. What if one of these bachelors you live with passes by here? Haibo", he went on his possessive rant. She was in a black camisole with matching black boy shorts that sat above her brownskinned curves. She laughed and grabbed the keys from the bed. Instead of throwing them, she pushed them on the floor towards him and he picked them up. He then let himself in and closed the door.

"Habe! Nahlala ne milenze e divorcile kwenze njani?"(Why were your legs so widely separated)

She was trying to grab a gown but he also refused that idea. She no longer knew what he wanted so she laughed. He looked like a dog looking at a fresh bone.

She walked towards the bucket of water to quench her thirst and he sat on the bed. She noticed he was still staring. She bent over to get a cupful of water and twerked while she did her got her water. She laughed when she looked back at him. The hunger in his eyes.

"Yabo' ley'nto uzenzayo? I will not be responsible for the things I will do to you um' engakwata lo. Uzodliwa mama. Kodwa qhubeka anginamona"(See the things you're doing? ... if this one gets angry. You're gonna fxcked but continue I'm not jealous), he threatened and pointed to his member, who was already up. She shot out a sharp laughter into her blue jug and continued drinking her water.

"In fact woza la"(come here), he instructed and stood up. She continued laughing and shook her head. She tried to run but he grabbed her quickly and wrapped his arms around her waist from behind. He began kissing on her neck as she laughed.

"Manje tshela mina. Uyibizan lento kade uyiyenza la phansi?"(Tell me. What do you call what you've been doing on the floor?)

"It's called yoga baby"

"Iyoga neh?", he repeated her words hoarsely as his lips explored her exposed back.

"But baba--"

He stopped and turned her around.

"What is it?", his hands were on her bxtt.

"I last saw you after ilobolo and you never really communicated the reason why you've been distant"

He sighed and kissed her forehead

"A lot has been happening at the royal house. Nkinga after inkinga. Plus other stuff. I'm sorry. Did you manage to find a wedding planner?"

The "other stuff" he was talking about included the therapy sessions with Enhle.

"Not yet. I think I'll do it myself"

"Won't it be a lot of work?"

"If we were also having a white wedding then it would've been"

"You seriously don't want one? But women love that shxt?"

She puckered her lips and shook her head.

"I am a Zulu black woman. Until I'm made to understand why I should have a west-based wedding I will not be having one", she stated with her hands on the side of his waist.

"Alright. As long as it's not about you sparing my wallet then whatever makes you happy"

She laughed softly. He watched how her eyes glittered as her lips formed a smile. He smiled at this view and cupped her chin, bringing her face closer for a kiss. His lips softly landed on hers like a butterfly and he stopped for a moment before helping himself to her parted ones. His hands were slowly travelling up her camisole to her bxxbs. He picked her up and walked with her towards the bed. He gently placed her down and took off his top. He went back to the blushing and waiting lady for a continuation of that arousing kiss. He placed his palms on both sides of her head and watched her. Her skin was evenly brown, taut and flawless.

"What?", she asked lovingly with a slight smile when she noticed he was taking his time.

"Ubuhle bakho abulinganiswa na lutho. You're genuinely the final draft of perfection"(Your beauty is incomparable...), he complemented and she looked away, failing to control the blushes that were gracing her face as her legs wrapped around his waist. He dropped his lips to her neck and planted a trail of warm kisses. She felt her underwear slowly get wet. Her hands were lightly placed on his shoulders. She sat up from the bed and undid his belt while they continued kissing on one another with loving smiles in between. She could feel the heat of his body transferring to her hands as she ran them on his stomach. She pulled the pants down and managed to get up from the bed. He tried to protest but she pushed him to the bed, then got on her knees. She pulled his briefs down and his hard and veiny manhood sprung out. She took a single crawl to get closer and massaged it. His eyes were on her the whole time, lustfully.

She massaged his dxck two times before slowly taking the head into her mouth. He shut his eyes and she smiled at this sight as she tasted the precum. She swirled her tongue around the glans while massaging his bxlls and he hissed. She licked his shaft from the bottom up, with a sassy smile occupying her face. Her hands went to her back and she kept them there, sucking on the dxck hands-free. She took all of it in as she shook her hand to pave the way for it on through her throat. She placed her hands on his thighs for balance as she worked him without an inch of mercy. She made gagging sounds before pulling off his shaft. Her saliva mixed with his liquid dripping off her chin. This served as lubrication and the sight of this hidden freak in a respectful, village wife turned him on.

"Woman!", he shot out with his head thrown back. She grabbed the bottom of the shaft and continued sucking on the dxck.

He couldn't take it anymore. He felt himself about to come and pulled her up. His imagination took him to places where he couldn't wait to go. He threw her on the bed and she laughed. He speedily undressed her as she laid on her back. He got ontop of her and sucked on her lips breathlessly, while grabbing and caressing both her bxxbs. He left a trail of wet kisses on almost each part of her lower body. He got off the bed and pulled her by the legs, spreading her legs widely before diving into her cxxchie.

"Oohh", a moan left her lips as she bit on the lower one. He sucked on the clxt and slowly released it from the grip of his lips. He placed two fingers on it and watched as her lubricous and transparent juices gelled down slowly from her canal. He lapped them all up before sticking his tongue in there. She wasn't ready for his tongue game. Four minutes in and she was shaking like she was possessed by an vengeful demon. He stabilized her legs above his shoulders by holding tightly onto her thighs.

"Mm Zikode!", the moans kept travelling up and out her throat without her permission. Her palm found itself at the back of his bald head and her fingers grabbed onto his scalp. The crown of a real and experienced pxssy eater.

"Baby?", he answered. His name was called and he answered. She did not speak. She kept moaning. He continued sucking and slurping on the cookie till she was no longer hearing the things that were coming out of her own mouth.

He got up and let himself in between her thighs. He lifted one leg as he kissed on her neck patiently.

"Do you have condoms?", she asked and attempted to sit up.

"For ini manje baby? You wanted a rapid HIV test and we did that. ICondom eyani manje sthandwasami", there was no missing the impatience in his voice. The stalling was making his erection feel painful and his muscles overstretched.

"I don't wanna risk falling pregnant. Not before the wedding"

He dropped his head and heaved a sigh.

"Mkami, nom' ungamitha we're getting married next month. You won't be showing then. And nakhona ungu mfazi wami. Uma ngifuna ukuk'mithisa ngizovele ngilibusheke lonke ngidedele isdoda sami kuvele kugcwal' isbeletho. Am I loud enough?"(Even if you get pregnant... And also, if I want to make you pregnant I'll just shove all of it in, release my soldiers into you and just fill up this womb), he said this with his eyes staring intensely fixed into hers, so much that she felt the look burning the surface of her pupils.

"But baby..."

"Ha ah", he refused to listen and continued kissing on her neck. The command in his voice turned her on regardless of not wanting to risk a pregnancy. The doctors told her nothing was wrong with her so she thought that maybe the problem was with her ex. This thought was at the front of her head. She was panting at these neck kisses as he rubbed the head of his dxck on her clxt.

"Baba..."

He didn't answer. He held his shaft and applied pressure on her pulsating and burning clitoris with his dick. He then gave the bean multiple slaps with it.

"Mmm!", that was soft moan leaving her lips. She just resorted to relying on the morning after pill.

"Hm?", he finally heeded to the call. Her eyes were closed as her hands found home on his hard chest. She was overpowered. He slid his rock hard rod back and forth in between her folds before sliding in.

"Mbulazi...", she was feeling every inch as he slid in till he was fully in, balls deep. He then stopped to watch her crumble below him. He started thrusting. Very, very slowly. Patiently. Lovingly. Her lips were slightly parted such that he could see half of her upper teeth.

He kept that tortoise pace as he tried to establish her pleasure spot. He angled his body to the left and stirred her up. She was slowly losing it. She sunk her fingers into his back as she ran out of breath. He changed positions after she came and laid on his back. He got her to sit on the dick. Her jaw slowly dropped as she felt the realness of his girth expanding her walls. He allowed her to digest the feeling and she started moving. She put her flexible waist to good use. She was working him as he sides swayed ontop of him. He groaned as she did as she pleased on top of him, with her palms on his chest. He unexpectedly held her still when the feeling was beginning too much. He held her still and locked her on top of him, then started drilling into her like a sewing machine. He was consistently tapping on her g-spot.

"Ahhh Mashobane baba yes just right there! Right there baby right there!!"

He quickly turned her back to their original position when he felt he was about to come. He attacked her with a kiss and deepened it with each thrust, with each stroke.

"Ahhh fuckkkk!!!", he groaned into her mouth as he ejaculated deep inside of her. Every. Last. Drop.

He got off as they both panted trying to catch their breaths.

"Huuu!! That was so fucking intense damn you...", he said as a satisfied smile grew on his face. He held her blushing cheek and kissed her some more. She pulled the light throw over their lower bodies and they laid in that position as she drew inconsistent shapes on his exposed chest.

"Asiphinde futhi?"(Let's go for another round), he said naughtily and she laughed.

"I need to go grocery shopping baby. What are you gonna eat?"

"Ngiyak'cela? Just one?", he begged as he gently brushed her butt.

"Baby man", she was laughing.

He laughed lightly too and deflated his cheeks thoughtfully.

"Eish. I'm not staying my love. I need to pass by home to see umnakwenu first before going back to Joburg. I'll drop you off at the shops and somebody will come fetch you. Is that okay?"

"Oh. How is your brother?"

"Uyalulama. Uzobaright yena I'm more worried about his wife"

"I'll keep her in my prayers", she stated and he gave a quick smile before kissing her forehead. He got up from the bed and sat on the edge, grabbing his phone from the pocket of his trouser.

"Awungiboleke i-account number yakho kancani sthandwasami"(Can I have your account number?)

...

After Muzi got done with his shower and dressed in comfortable clothes, he went back inside the hospital room and found the doctor there.

"What are you doing?", he asked.

Muzi placed the empty sportsbag on the bed and wore his watch.

"What does it look like? I am discharging myself", he stated without stutter as he clipped on the silver watch.

"You cannot do that"

"Wanna know the number of times I've heard those words ever since I was born?", he asked and took out his wedding band from the transparent zipper plastic it was stored in and wore it.

"No I don't but I am sure you're about to tell me", he said cheekily.

"A million times. Now, wanna know how many times I actually listened? Zero", he said and displayed a naught by joining the ends of his thumb and index finger, the zipped up the bag.

"Mr Khunalo, please stop gambling with your life? We still need to monitor you", the doctor pleaded and jumped in front of him to stop him from walking out.

"If you don't move out of my way, you will see that between the two of us, I am not the one who's gambling with their life", he threatened and kept a stare. The doctor sighed and shifted to the side.

"Thank you. You're such an amazing doctor", he said with a clown smile and left. The doctor shook his head and sat on the bed, trying not to laugh. He was annoyed, very annoyed. But he still had an urge to laugh. Thando had told Muzi where he would find them after he was done so he walked straight there. He found her by herself and another stranger on the other bench.

"Where's everyone?"

"I forced mom to go home and sleep. Melo said something about seeing sis'Bongiwe before he leaves. He wanted to stay but ma forced him to go pack", she explained.

"He wasn't supposed to be here in the first place. He has trial exams coming up"

"You know your son. He wasn't going to agree to be left behind"

"You should also go home and sleep. I'll keep an eye on Liwe"

"I managed to get some sleep right on this bench. I'll leave after a few hours"

Muzi nodded and placed the sportsbag on the bench. He was in no mood to argue. He also wasn't about to be dictated to by a doctor about when and when not to see his wife. He walked towards the ward and he immediately saw Skhumbuzo coming out of it and walking in the different direction. He stood and called him to stop. He then rushed to him. Thando stood up, surprised. When did he walk in there and how come did she not see him enter in there? She walked towards them as they spoke.

"What are you doing here?"

"Your wife is going to be fine", he notified simply and attempted to leave.

"Wait. What-- How did you get here? How did you know--", Thando went on with the stupid questions.

"I hiked a few cars. Muzikayise, ndoda, let go of your heavy heart. Your wife is going to be fine", he reiterated and left. He was barefoot with ancestral beads crossed over his upper body. Thando's eyes couldn't help but

focus on the red and white material covering his lower body. Isn't there supposed to be a ceremony of some sort before he actually starts practicing? She questioned but never voiced it out. Muzi was baffled. He looked to her for answers and she shrugged with a distorted upper lip.

...

A lot of things ran through Mxo's mind as he took a shower at home. He ended up just standing against the cold tile and allowing the water to freely hit him in the face. He questioned a lot of things. A whole lot of things. He even forgot about how he dug up Sthe's grave and almost pushed him in. It wasn't completely off his mind but the problems he had managed to take up enough space to push it to the back. He got out of there and went to get dressed. He hadn't slept in a while but he felt he needed a walk, not sleep. He knew he was just going to toss and turn on the bed so he found the few clothes he always leaves there in the wardrobe and got dressed. A simple black vest, denim shorts and slides.

He was hoping to meet Manqoba somewhere in the house so they could discuss what happened and what time they're going back but he was no where to be found. When Mxo first walked in, his aunt notified that she was going to see her therapist. She wasn't keeping it a secret that she's seeing one. He walked out and greeted the guards. They greeted back and conversed a little. He wasn't in the mood but he didn't want to be rude. He knows how much they love speaking to him about international soccer and other simple stuff and he loved it too. It just wasn't the right day for it. When he finally managed to get away, he went on his WhatsApp and aimlessly scrolled through the statuses. There were many of them since he hadn't been giving his phone much attention for a minute now.

He came across a video of Zee strangling Ndalo in classroom. He looked closer to see if his eyes were indeed feeding him the correct information. Sphiwe had captioned it: "I don't care if I get arrested for this but this bxtch Zee knows where Buhle is. BET!".

He replied and asked, "When was this?"

He noticed a single grey tick taking way to long to become a double. He clicked on the chat and realized that Sphiwe was last seen online the previous day at 19h44. He clucked and began running to Zanele's house. He remembered that her dad was a take-no-shxt and stopped when he saw his Hilux parked outside. He started thinking. Should he call and trick her to come out? Zanele is a bad bxtch of a skrr skrr so she posted a lot. He went on her Insta stories to get maybe a clue of her whereabouts. It was just a boomerang of a cup of coffee in a restaurant which was posted 23 minutes ago. No location or any clue of where the place might be. He had established one thing: she wasn't home.

He went to sit under the huge tree four houses away from hers. He was willing to wait, even if it took the whole day. He felt Ndalo was too innocent to fight her own battles and he wasn't about to leave her there with crazy people who did not know their place. The first hour passed and he was still waiting. The second followed. The

forth. Fifth. He was about to give up when she saw her getting off a taxi at the main road, holding a shopping bag from H&M. She had earphones on, busy typing on her phone. Mxo ran after her and she popped her eyes when she saw him charging in her direction. She dropped all the items in her hands on the dusty ground, including the funny pack that she was for an odd reason holding in her hands instead of strapping on her waist. She started running while screaming. Mxo had no intention of stopping till he caught her. A neighbour came out of her house to see what was going on and saw that it was Zee. This wasn't happening for the first time. Her getting chased and beaten by a boyfriend. The last time they tried shoving themselves in her business, she told them that they're too old and should mind their business because she wasn't there when they lived their lives. She also told them that she loves him and that she knew what she was doing. The neighbour remembered those words, put her hands inside the pockets of her gown and went back inside the house.

"Mama!!!", she was still running and screaming three minutes later. You cannot outrun a soccer player if you barely exercise yourself. The running and chasing led her far from her house towards the field Melo practices at. There was a steep hill towards the field and she ran down it. Mxo was closely behind. He caught her by the arm and she started apologizing in tongues.

"Shut up! Number one, I am going to beat your a** for making me run this hard and sweat because I wasn't planning on another shower. Two, ngizok'shayela ukungijwayela kabi Zanele. Azange ngikutshela ukuthi kuphelile phakathi kwami nawe? Azange ngikutshela? Why are you harassing my girlfriend jo?!" (I'm going to beat you for overdosing on your familiarity with me. Did I not tell you that it's over between us? Did I not tell you this?)

She began crying before she even got a shadow of a slap.

"Ukhalelani?" (Why are you crying?)

She sobbed harder. His father's words rang in his head.

"Whatever you get up to, never find your hand on a woman. I don't have abusers in my bxl's", Muzi had said this to all three of them--him and his brothers. He bit his upper lip in frustration. His hand was still tightly holding on to her wrist. He was sweating and breathing heavily from all the running in the sun. His eyes fell on her hair. He knew how much Zee cherished her big afro. It was the main reason she had such a huge following on social media. Everyone complimented her on it. It looked like those ones you install, not naturally grown because it is rare for an afro to reach that length. Possible, but rare. He took out his phone and called Sbu. Sbu was a part time barber as his hustle.

"M X O, what's the latest on uNdalo mfethu? Is she okay?", he answered and began talking like he was the one who called.

"Are you home?"-Mxolisi.

"Yeah why?"

"Do you have a queue?"

"Nnope. There's nobody here. My last customer just left"

"Okay. I'll be there in five", he informed and cut the call.

"Siyaphi?"(Where are we going?), Zanele asked with a voice draped in fear.

"Ask no questions, hear no lies", he was dragging her to Sbu's place, which wasn't far from their geographical position. He got there and found Sbu playing deep house and whistling as he brushed his machine in his mini salon just next to the gate.

"M X O the CJB"(the player), he greeted and Mxo laughed.

"Sho", he greeted back.

"Niqhamukaphi nijuluka kanje?"(Where are you coming from sweating so badly?)

Mxo sat Zee on the black chair.

"You brought me here so you can cut my hair? Uyanya Mxolisi!", she tried to sit up and he pushed her back down by her shoulders and kept his hands there. They were both looking into the square mirror in front of them.

"I can do worse than this Zee. Don't test me", he threatened as he looked at her through the mirror. Sbu didn't like Zee, at all. He just stood there whistling and sorting out his stuff like nothing was happening. She wiped her tears as her chest moved up and down in anger. She has always been afraid of Mxolisi, even as her boyfriend. He has never beaten up but according to her, he had this aura about him that suggested that if he slapped her once she wouldn't be able to get up from the ground. All this from how he would stop to look at her whenever she pulled her rubbishy stunts.

"Sbusiso..."

"Mjita"

"Gunda lomuntu Caterpillar"(Shave this person)

Zanele cried even harder. She tried to run but Mxo quickly closed the rusted door. She sunk back on her chair.

"Bald, mohawk, chico or????"

"Susa konke mfethu. Susa konke neshiya"(Remove everything. Remove everything including her eyebrows)

Chapter Fifty-Four

After Mxo was done Boko Haraming Zanele's hair, he took his way back home and got an energy drink at some tuckshop he came across. He called Ndalo along the way. Her voice immediately reported that she was sleeping.

"Baby?", she answered.

"Sthandwa sami. I'm sorry for waking you up. Are you okay?"-Mxo. She sighed.

"I'll live. I'm just tired. I just got back from the hospital"

"I was actually calling about that. What did the doctor say?"

"She took my blood for testing but so far, she hasn't said anything scary"

"I'm glad to hear that. Usudlile?"(Have you eaten?)

"Yeah I have. Wena?"

He didn't catch this question because his mind was already wandering in the complex forest that Nomcebo threw him in.

"Mxo?"

"Hm? I'm still here baby"

"Are you okay?"

"Ngiright", he lied. "Listen I'll call you back. I need to go now but I'll come see you before I leave.

Ngiyak'thanda Ndalo yezwa baby?"(I love you Ndalo do you hear me?)

He could sense the smile that was chaperoning her voice.

"Ngiyak'thanda nami babakhe"

His lips immediately stretched into a smile.

"You should call me that from now on"

She laughed.

"Okay babakhe"

"Sharp ke ungiqedeli ibattery and uyazi ukuthi ubuhle bakho bucauser i load shedding"(You're finishing my battery and you know that you're beauty causes load shedding)

He teased and and she shot out a sharp laugh.

"Mciim yabheda yaz wen"(You're crazy)

He got home and saw Manqoba's car parked outside. He started planning how he was going to initiate the conversation in his head. They had a lot to talk about but one thing about him, he was a lot of things but a coward wasn't one of them. He walked into the house and didn't see him anywhere. He went straight to his study and found the door open. Manqoba was sleeping over his hands on his desk. He felt the matter couldn't wait so he knocked. It took two knocks to wake him and he raised his head. He squinted his eyes before telling him to come in. Mxo approached the chair across him and Manqoba sat back against his chair with a stoic face. He said nothing.

"I'm sorry", Mxo let out.

"You could've killed him Mxo. He could still die?", Manqoba said hoarsely. His voice wasn't yet prepared to

speak. It thought he was still asleep till he forced it to verbalize those words.

"I know. Again, I'm sorry. There's nothing else I can say to correct this. It won't happen again"

"Damn straight it won't. The next time you find yourself faced with a fight you will walk away. Do you hear me?"

Mxo mumbled under his breath.

"Do you hear me Mbulazi?", Manqoba insisted.

"Loud and clear", he had no choice but to agree.

"Good"

Mxo exhaled before he could grab the other bull by the horns.

"MQ?"

"Ntwana?"

"There's something I need to tell you", he gravely informed. Manqoba squeezed his head in between his arm in frustration.

"Weeeee. Wenzen manje?"(What have you done this time?)

"No it's the same crime but with heavier consequences"

"I'm not following?"

"Today, this morning when you told me to take Ndalo home, I got there and had a talk with her mother"

"You have no business having "talks" with the girlfriend's mother Mxo we taught you better than that"

"She's the one who called me", he quickly emancipated himself from the crime.

"If there's anything she needs to discuss she needs to come to me", Manqoba wasn't understanding this issue at all. "What did she want?", he added. Mxo looked up and fell back on the chair.

"Are you gonna talk or continue wasting my time?"

"Apparently, I impregnated my sister", he informed and Manqoba stared for a brief moment before he could laugh.

"I am serious", Mxo put a halt to MQ turning his life into a circus. He stopped laughing.

"What?"

"Yes"

"There's no such", Manqoba argued.

"Well, she claims that Ndalo is uncle Mbuso's child".

He'd never met him but he respected him as his uncle. He only ever saw him from pictures. Manqoba wheeled his chair out of the desk and stood up. He was thinking-- hard. He went over to sit on the corner of the desk and hung his one leg over it. Mxo was still seated on the chair.

"What does this mean? Am I gonna be forced to break up with her? Cause I won't"

An unintentional smile grew on MQ's face. He just knew at that moment that he'll one day be sent to discuss lobola on Mxo's behalf.

"Bafana bheka, niyakhula and there's a lot that you still need to learn, and know".

Mxo nodded curiously.

"I can see that uyay'thanda lengan and i serious lento yenu as young as you are. Hell there's even a baby

involved now"(... you love this girl and what you have is actually serious)

Mxo huffed a laugh.

"See, Mbuso is not really your uncle ngegazi"(by blood) Manqoba revealed. Mxo frowned.

"But y'all said..."

"I know what we said and it will remain like that. Nobody knows where he is right now and we can't just let something like this be known to the community or anybody else apart from this family", he calmly explained.

"What does this mean because umaka Ndalo akakwazi loko? She thinks I am fxcking my sister and is even threatening to take her away"(Nomcebo doesn't know that)

"Udakiwe uNomcebo she will do no such thing. I will handle her don't worry"(She's drunk)

"Handle her?"

"Mxolisi. Usifakile amanyaleni siyavuma. Manje phuma ey'ndabeni zabantu abadala"(You've made a mess of things for us to fix and we acknowledge that. Now keep yourself out of the business of adults)

Mxo couldn't help but wonder how Manqoba was going to "handle" this matter as he said. He also realized that his last statement was final so he decided not to argue.

...

Melokuhle wasn't sure if he remembered Bongiwe's address correctly. However, nothing much had changed in that neighborhood since the last time he was there. He got there and spoke to the security guard outside of the decent and fancy apartments. The guard called Bongiwe to notify her that Melo was there to see her.

"She says she's not home but she has put me on hold", he reported back as he blocked the speaker.

"O-kay?", Melo was puzzled. If she wasn't home but on her way there that's exactly what she should've said.

"Oh okay. I'll tell him ma'am. Bye bye", the guard cut the call and placed the phone down.

"She says you should go ahead and knock"

"I thought there was nobody home...?"

The guard raised his hands to indicate that he knows nothing. Mxo locked his phone and placed it in the pocket of his sweater. The weather was still gloomy and uninviting. When he finally reached her door, it opened as he was raising his knuckles to knock. His jaw hung loose. She was standing there with an unfathomable expression on her face. Regret with stripes of anxiety. Excitement she wasn't sure how to show in polka dots. He wanted to speak. She did too. No words were coming out from both parties.

"No.", he said in a definite voice before shaking his head turning away to leave. Gugu's tears were quick.

"Baby please don't go!", she begged after she stepped outside to stand in the middle of the corridor. Melo stopped walking but never turned back in her direction.

"Come inside so we can talk"

Only then did he turn.

"If I hadn't come here who would you be inviting in for a talk? Mom, exactly how long have you been here?"

"Not that long I promise"

"You could call me in jail just cause you wanted me to speak to dad on your behalf but now that you're out you

no longer need me right?"

Emotions were high.

"Please come inside", she begged and rubbed her upper arms. She was a quarter away from shivering in her black vest and navy sweatpants. He exhaled through his nose and looked away for a brief second. He then walked in.

"Would you like some coffee?", she politely offered and he warned her with a side eye. The look in the damn child made her feel exactly the same way her husband would make her feel whenever she would set a foot wrong in his presence.

"Okay...", she timidly said before leading him to the couch. He got there and sat, elbows against his knees. She sat next to him.

"Melokuhle, I gave birth to you. I love you. Nobody on this planet could love you better than I do. There is no way in hell that I'd use you and toss you aside"

"Did you arrive today?", Melo interrogated

"No but--"

"When the guard put me on hold, u aunty bekafounela wena right?"(Bongiwe was calling you right?), he questioned and she nodded, not understanding where it was coming from.

"You know my numbers off by heart. You have a phone available to you but you never even thought of calling me to let me know that you're out?"

"Nana I wanted to do things right. I wanted to speak to your father first before I could--"

"My father was not the one you were busy calling while you were in jail! How come is he the first one in line when you come out? I last saw you when I was twelve! TWELVE!, he vented furiously.

Gugu shut her eyes with her lips puckered as the words pierced her heart.

"Did you think about me when you pulled that trigger? That you could get locked up and leave me behind? Or worse, die? What if ma was also armed? You did not. Just as you didn't right now!"

He was now on his feet. She stood up with him.

"Please give me a chance to speak and explain myself. Give me a chance to tell you the truth"

Melo slightly angled his head in confusion.

"The truth?"

She gently pulled him by the wrist so they sit back down. She let out a heavy hot breath and brushed her thighs thrice before speaking. She does that when she's frustrated.

"Well?"- an impatient Melo probed into the truth he was promised.

"I...", she placed her hands on her temples, looking down at the carpet. She wasn't sure about what she was about to do. If Melo was to find out from somebody else, it could mean the end of their relationship. She appreciated the fact that Muzi and Betso lied to him to protect her but her opening this can could also be detrimental to their relationship--Muzi and his son. Melo was staring in silence.

"Years ago, long before you were born, I... something happened between me and your uncle, Bheki. The first time it happened, your father was away. He told me that he was going on a business trip but I found out that he

was with his mistress somewhere in Mpumalanga, from the mistress herself. I... this is not an excuse I know but I was mad that he was cheating on me again when he promised me that he wouldn't...", Melo was now listening with attention.

"Bheki was there. I told him about it and he comforted me. One thing led to another and... we couldn't stop", she explained and made sure to keep her eyes away from his, riveted to the floor. He was still silent like he wasn't there, unintentionally holding his breath.

"One day, Muzi caught us and I had to think fast. I turned it into something it wasn't and he got all the blame" When she got to this part, she realized that maybe coming out with the truth was a bad idea. Melokuhle had no idea that his father has blood on his hands. His voice was still absent in that conversation, that monologue, the confession.

"I claimed he was... assaulting me. Sexually. Mbulazi beat him up", she finally raised her face to gauge his reaction and how he was processing everything.

"To death...", she went deep into the greasy details and he widened his eyes.

"There was a case but the docket disappeared. The officer who had it, would time and again blackmail the family to keep Muzi out of jail. But the problem is, he was unreliable and he had insurance. If something was to happen to him, somebody else we did not know would leak the information"

Melo fell back on the couch and locked his eyes with the roof, blinking at intervals.

"When your father's wife came into our lives, I accepted her. It wasn't easy in the beginning but I accepted her. I don't know how she got a hold of this information but she made a call to that very officer who sold it to her ex, digging. See, Themba is, or was a greedy man. I don't know if he's still alive. When Betso's ex looked into Muzi's past, he offered him money for that information. He reported back to me after that incident, obviously wanting more money and offering to help me do damage control"

She swallowed and brushed her hair back, twice.

"We then lured her to this abandoned factory. We had told her to come drop off a bag of cash there so we could eliminate her and stop her from digging some more. Little did we know that, Muzi was in the car with her"

"There was a confrontation and I felt like he was choosing her over me. After all those years, of hurting me with different women, he was still choosing another over me. See, Mbulazi never admitted to his cheating ways and he never brought proof home but I always, always found out somehow. And it hurt. But I stayed. That moment there, drove me insane. He made me so mad I wanted to end him. I forgot about the woman on his side and I just-- I wanted him to feel something. Pain. I--"

"Wait...", Melo finally spoke. "So it was dad you were actually trying to kill?"

She just stared, speechless. She still wasn't sure if confessing was a good idea. But the truth was going to come out as some point and she wanted a clean slate. She didn't want to make some progress with him only for it to creep up on her like a thief in the night to destroy everything. She eventually nodded. He scoffed. His hands landed on his knees and stayed there as he froze.

"Melokuhle I am sorry for all the lies and--"

"I have to go", he shot up from the couch when he finally defrosted and never looked back.

...

When Enhle was done with her therapist, she was doubtful as both her hands held on to the steering wheel. She contemplated. She felt strongly about it. She had to do it. She owed it to him. It was the least she could do. She crossed fingers that she would find him on call. She took an off-ramp and directed her vehicle to transport her to the hospital. She got to the parking and exhaled. Where was she going to start? She stepped out of the car and took the brave step towards the entrance. She suddenly began wishing that she doesn't find him there. Her palms were sweating as she clutched onto her handbag. Her badluck placed Muhluri right next to the reception desk. He was conversing with a male nurse about something evidently serious. He kept nodding and she couldn't help notice his strong and perfectly outlined jawline. Muhluri is a beautiful man. A metrosexual with beautiful skin that is always well taken care of. You could never catch him with a bad haircut. Enhle kept walking towards them. She couldn't help but let her memory take her back to the time where she was screaming his name as he rearranged her guts, while she held on to those strong, dark and muscular arms. He looked hella sexy in those scrubs.

"Hi", she greeted them and Muhluri turned back to see her. The male nurse greeted her with a wide smile. She was used to it. That kind of overdosed smile? She was used to it. Men bow at her mere scent. She's a beautiful woman who male strangers always feel responsible to ensure she is comfortable. Muhluri did not want to be unprofessional.

"Hello", he greeted back, with his normal face.

"Brian, Enhle. Enhle, Brian", he introduced them and told Brian that Enhle used to work there two years before Brian arrived.

"Nice to meet you. Let me go check on Sarah at the dispenser I heard she was looking for me"

Brian left. He could feel the suppressed tension between the two.

"What can I do for you Mrs K?", he asked and continued scribbling down on the file that was ontop of the reception desk that was left unmanned.

"Can we talk?"

"But we are?", he never raised his face. She looked around and saw all the patients seated in a queue on her left. She was still clutching onto her handbag.

"In private. Please?", she pleaded. He stopped writing and exhaled from irritation. Nonetheless, he gestured with his hand and said, "After you". She led the way and they got to the office. He went to sit on his chair and she sat across him. The door was closed.

"Again, what can I do for you?"

"Hluri I came to say apologize. I haven't been able to stop thinking about you since that eventful night. I'm really sorry for involving you in my mess. And I am not leaving this office until you forgive me"

Muhluri scoffed and held the edge of the desk, wheeling himself in and closer.

"You know what your problem is?", he questioned. She shrugged.

"The entitlement that comes with pretty privilege. Your apology is a command in itself. You think men owe you

everything based on how you look", he expressed but in a very calm manner. One of the qualities she found similar between him and her husband.

"I don't care about appearances mina Xiluva. I don't. I care about what's in here", he bumped his fist on his chest three times, indicating the heart. She dropped her eyes.

"Ndzik' nyike mbilu ya meh hikuva niku rhandza. I endla yih weh? U teka u tsemetela just because you can"(I gave you my heart because I loved you. What did you do? Took and cut it into pieces..."

She wasn't good in Tsonga but she could piece together the crux of his statement.

"That's not true I--"

"Just stop Enhle. I admit. I was the fool. I wasn't supposed to fall that deeply for somebody else's wife.

Especially that soon", he said this as he stood up. He went over to her and made her stand with her shoulders.

He then gently pulled her by the back of her head and kissed her forehead. She shut her eyes as he kept his lips there. He went to open the door so she could leave.

"Muhluri..."

"I honestly hope you accumulate enough courage to leave that hooligan one day. Not for me. But your self. I hope you love yourself enough to leave the table when love is no longer being served. That you take a solocation to somewhere far in the world where you will cry your heart out and leave the heartbreak and the love you have for him in a foreign country, then come back. Not for me Xiluva. For yourself..."

A lone tear travelled down her cheek as she bent her lips out of shape, trying hard not to cry. She nodded and left the office at tortoise speed.

...

Melokuhle never said goodbye to anybody. He took the next available flight out of Johannesburg and went back home. He was angry but did not know where to channel and direct that anger to. When he arrived at the royal house, he went straight to bed. Mam' Nokwanda tried offering him food but he turned her down politely, faking a smile. She knows him. She raised him. She knew he wasn't fine but at the same time, she knew that he wasn't going to speak. So she let him be. He hadn't been sleeping the past few days and he was exhausted. Sleep was the only thing that made sense at that point. He took off his sweater and the t-shirt underneath, then slept in just his jeans and socks.

When he finally woke up hours later, he felt like he got run over by a concrete house on wheels. He sat on the bed, yawning countless times and rubbing his heavy, burning eyes. He shook his head to reset his blurry and unimpressive vision to default settings but it wasn't working. He opted for a shower instead. His mother's voice and everything she said was haunting him. He got out of there and dried himself. After he got dressed in a long sleeved t-shirt, jeans and sneakers, he spritzed on his cologne because Khanyi mentioned countless times how much she loved it. He pulled the sleeves to his elbows and grabbed his watch, dashing out. He didn't want to be alone. He was tired of overthinking. His phone had countless messages and missed calls. He returned none.

He almost ran into Enhle on the corridor. She was having a cup of coffee in her winter night gown. The weather had absolutely no reason to be that bad but it was.

"Whoa slow down young man. Where are you going?"

"Hi aunty. Can I use your car?"

"If you promise to return your father's calls. He is worried sick about you. I had to come and check if you were indeed here and I found you asleep. Why did you not say goodbye?", she interrogated as she sipped on her hot beverage.

"It's a long story. The car?"

"The keys are somewhere in my handbag on the couch. AND drive safely", she said with a smile and he smiled back.

"You're the best"

With that, he left.

He arrived at Khanyi's a couple minutes after midnight. He took out his phone and called to tell her that he was outside.

"But baby it's late. Why didn't you tell that you're coming?", she said.

"Angidingi timetable ukuthi ngize ngzobona intomb'yami mina. Phuma tuu"(I don't need a time table to tell me when and when not to come see my girlfriend. Will you come out already?)

"Melo ubaba ukhona namhlanje ngeke ngikwazi"(My dad is around today I won't be able to)

"Nge styla lesi uthi angijike?"(In other words, you're saying I must turn back?)

She kept quiet. She really wanted to see him but was afraid of her strict giant of a father.

"No"

"Uthini ke?"(Then what are you saying?)

"I'll make a plan. Give me a few minutes"

"If you get here after ten minutes you will find me gone", he threatened and she sighed on the phone.

She managed to escape through the window and come to him. He was seated in the backseat of the car waiting for her as he played Tone Stith's 'Something'(Drake cover). He got out of the car to hug her when she got to him. She hugged him back but the hug lasted longer than she expected. She tightened it. His lips were tightly pressed against her neck. His hands travelled down to her bxtt. He squeezed over the short silky material as her matching gown hung loosely and untied. He pulled his head back to kiss her. She reciprocated. He broke the kiss and looked her in the eye.

"Sawubona", he finally greeted. She laughed. After all that and he's only greeting now.

"Hi", she greeted back. "Have you been drinking?", she added.

He shook his head slowly and asked why.

"Your eyes"

"I'm just tired. You would've smelt it in my breath. Unless if you've been drinking too", he said and she laughed.

"You never know"

"You'd tell me where you adopt those bad habits"-Melo

"Bad habits? But YOU drink"

"I am not God's right hand man mina. Just because I do it don't make it less bad", he stated and yawned. She laughed.

"So you're the only one allowed to be bad?"

"Yeah. Your job is to make sure I don't overdo it. Keep me in check", he rubbed his nose against her cold one. She just laughed and sucked her teeth.

"Let's get in the car. You must be feeling cold", he suggested, already opening the door for her. She did as told. He went in after her.

"Wozo hlala la"(Come sit here)

He was referring to his lap. He wanted her to sit astride atop him. She did that. His hands rested on her curves as he laid his head against the seat.

"Qabula isoka lakho phela baby"(Kiss your boyfriend)

She blushed before leaning in. She was not used to initiating things. The kiss got off the ground with passion and she felt that something was definitely fighting to be let free underneath her. He found her behaviour peculiar sometimes. She was the one insisting on visiting him but she acted inexperienced at times. He positioned her on the seat such that she was underneath when he felt she was wasting time. He pulled the pyjama pants down while sucking on her lip. He expected to find underwear but there was none. He smiled in between the kiss and rubbed the top of her privates.

"Can I come in?", he asked while staring into her eyes, forehead against hers. She swallowed her lips shyly before noodling. He took out a condom from his pocket before undoing his zipper. He had no time for foreplay. He established that she was wet using his finger. His aunt was going to kill him for her leather seats if he didn't wash it after this.

After putting it on, he tried to find a comfortable position to enter her. It was a bit uncomfortable back there. He kissed her again before lifting her leg and tried to go in. She flinched. He tried but there was an obstacle. He frowned.

"Baby?", he probed.

"Hm?"

"What's going on?"

"What do you mean?"

"I thought you said you're not a vxrgin?", he questioned.

"I'm not"

He pulled out and took the condom off. He grabbed the tissue roll that was seated at the far back and wrapped it. He got dressed and asked her to the same. After they were done, he pulled her so she sits on top of him again. She rested her head on his shoulder.

"Khanyi?"

"Kuhle?"

"What the fxck is going?"

"Ushuk'thin kant?"(What do you mean?)

"I've always had doubts that you might be one but I brushed it off because you told me otherwise because there is absolutely no reason for you to lie. So why are you lying?"

"I told you nje that I once did it no Bongani"

"Kay'ngakhi?"(How many times?)

"Once"

"And? What happened?"

"You want details?"

"If you don't mind?"

"Uhm... the short version of it is, I felt him pushing into me and then he started humping then after about a minute wachama"(He came)

Melo laughed.

"Hayi uhlekani?"(Why are you laughing?)

"Unangakhi lo Bongani?"(How old is he?)

"Ulingana nami"(Same age as me)

"Also in grade 10?"

She nodded.

"Wena sthandwasami you're still very much a vxrgin ngikutshela. Ibidlalela phez'kwe nkomo yakho lebhari"(He was just playing ontop of your *****)

"Ngempela?"

He nodded once.

"Why were you insisting that we do it though?", he asked. She didn't answer. He was curious.

"Khanyisile?"

She shrugged. He gently pushed her off his shoulder so she looks him in the eye.

"Khuluma"(Speak)

"It's just..."

"Juuuust...?"

"When I told my friends that uyangishela and when we started dating, all they kept saying was that every girl wants you and that if I don't sleep with you fast enough then somebody else will"

He sighed.

"Baby, lento engizokutshela yona ngizoy khuluma kanye and ngeke ngisay phinda. If a guy wants to leave you, no amount of s-x is going to keep him. I could sleep with you and still cheat on you angik'fihleli. One thing I don't want is having you over ngiloku ngifenda and enjoying myself while you feel bad inside"

"With him that's exactly how I felt but apart from abangani bam I really want to do it with you"

"My dxck and I are not going anywhere. I gave my brother bad advice and now he's in a sticky situation. I've learnt from that. The day you feel ready, you'll tell me then mina...", he said as he approached her lips with a

naughty smile. He pecked it once.

"Ngizok'landa ngiyok'bonisa ukuthi lidliwa kanjani itshitshi. Hayi lombhedo kade nuwenza no Bongani"(I'll show how vxrginity is broken. Not the crap Bongani has done)

Chapter Fifty-Five

Muzi had went out to get himself a cup of coffee when Betso woke up. She squinted her eyes and looked around, trying to familiarize herself again with consciousness. Evelyn and the others had went home to sleep, along with Lwandile who almost collapsed from fatigue. Muzi insisted on staying with his wife. The doctor had no choice but to agree. The condition was that he was supposed to be the only one and not have a crowd suffocating his patient.

He walked back in mindlessly as he took a sip on the hot beverage. He almost burnt his tongue when he realized that she was awake. He quickened his steps to her confused self and placed the coffee on top of the bedside drawers.

"Hey mommy...", he softly greeted as he brushed her forehead. She smiled innocently.

"He... hey daddy", her voice was raspy and coarse. He poured her a glass of water and helped her drink. She tried sitting up but immediately stopped when she felt the stinging pain around her abdomen. The stitches from the C-section were responsible for this. She was still a bit doped up from the meds, but she remembered her child.

"Where's my baby?", panic caught her off guard.

"Relax. She's okay and healthy", Muzi said before he could place the straw in a glass next to her mouth. She drank up till she indicated with her hand that it was enough. He sat down on the chair and took her hand, rubbing it on the inside with his thumb. That moment felt like *deja vu*. Except it was really happening for the second time. Back to the time where she gave birth to the twins.

"Can I see her?"

"You will. How are you feeling?", he asked.

"My whole body is in pain", she reported.

"I'm sorry. You had me worried sick"

"There was a man in here", she reported.

"A man?"

"Yeah. A man. He kept chanting and sprinkling me with stuff. Right now I don't know if I was dreaming it all but it felt so real"

"That's because it was. Skhumbuzo was here"

"The sangoma?"

Muzi nodded.

"Our marriage was under attack baby but hopefully everything is fine now"

"What do you mean?"

"It's a long story. I'm just glad that you're well and awake"

"You can't drop such a bomb and tell me that it's a long story"

He sighed.

"You know Bongiwe right?"

"Yes?", a frown was shrinking her face.

"Well, okhokho bangibonise yonk'into that happened from the time I forgot my handkerchief in her office. All this is actually my fault"(My forefathers showed everything...)

"She was bewitching you?"

"Not her. She took it and placed it in her bag. Her aunt took it to a sangoma and that's where our marital problems began"

"I don't think I understand. The aim was to break us up?"

"The aim, was to get me to fall in love with her and ultimately marry her. However, you were the one who did, who fell in love with her"

Betso still had that confused look on her face. All the memories came flooding back, including the one where she told him that she finds him repulsive. She didn't know how to feel about the whole situation.

"Do you remember what happened the night before your accident?", she asked remorsefully.

"It's in the past now", he kissed the back of her hand.

"I said some horrible things to you"

"Yeah it stung but I'd be stupid if I held you accountable for all that. You weren't yourself. Let's forget about it", he kissed the back of her hand again. She heaved a sigh. She couldn't help but feel guilty. He pressed the button to call a nurse and they sat in silence while they waited. He could see she wasn't fine.

"Hey, stop beating yourself up about this. None of it was your fault. The person responsible for all this mess will definitely pay for it"

She raised her eyes to look at him.

"I don't like the sound of that"

"I just need her to explain what she was thinking. I am certain that we have never met. I want to understand why she'd do something like this"

"What if this Bongiwe asked her to help her out"

"She doesn't know shxt"

The nurse walked in and immediately jammed when she saw Muzi sitting there.

"Hi. Can you please bring my baby?", Betso requested. The nurse's mind was still on flight mode. Muzi turned to see properly.

"Nurse?", he probed.

"Huh? I'm sorry what?"

"The baby?", they both said, at the same time.

"Sure. Sure", she couldn't wait to get out of there. She came back with a fed and sleeping Odaliwe and made up some excuse about an emergency in another ward, then left. They paid no mind to her. Muzi got up so she could place Liwe in Betso's hands. She couldn't wait.

"Aww. Look at you...", she babied and cuddled her. Muzi was just standing there with his hands in the pockets of his track pants, smiling at this sight. Betso totally forgot about his presence in the room. He didn't mind. After minutes of admiring the fruit of her womb, she raised her head and was met with his consistent smile. She smiled back.

"I know you've already named her", she said with her index finger wrapped in Liwe's tiny little hand. He laughed.

"I didn't. But her name is Odaliwe. Her ancestors want her to be called that. It's the name they decided and agreed upon way before even placing her in your womb", he explained. Betso was fascinated by this.

"Did you hear that baby? Mm? Bare ke wena Odaliwe. Odaliweliwe yena. Hampona dzodzo, hampona", she continued babying her.

"You can still name her if you like", Muzi said coolly.

"Naledi. She's bright like a star. Something in this room lit up when she arrived"

"It's crazy how I felt the exact same way the first time I saw her. I just couldn't find the right words for it", he said, and they locked eyes. They both didn't know when exactly she was conceived but one thing they were sure about is that she was conceived with love. That was definite.

...

Bongiwe pushed the huge double door which required one to have had their breakfast before starting their nonsense with it. The door to the fertility clinic was heavy and she had forgotten this annoying fact. She walked in and made her way to reception.

"Hi. My name is Bongwiwe and I have a scheduled appointment for eleven o'clock?". The receptionist met her with a smile and told her to wait as he checks on his computer. He did exactly that and confirmed the appointment.

"You indeed have an appointment but Dr Benjie is still with another client, but they should be wrapping up soon", he said and Bongwiwe sighed. She hated having being made to wait, especially on accounts when she had an appointment because then, what would be the point?"

Obakeng, the receptionist sensed the change in her mood and raised his finger to indicate that she should give him a minute as he called the office. He called the owner slash doctor to let her know about Bongwiwe's arrival. It took only 30 seconds.

"She will be done just now", he said with a smile and she smiled back. Arg she couldn't punish the poor guy for no reason. The gold lift made a loud 'ting' sound before pulling open. The doctor walked out of the lift with the client and they shook hands before she left.

"Oh hi. I am terribly sorry about that. This way please", she said Bongwiwe. Bongwiwe followed her into the lift.

"How are you?", the Indian doctor asked.

"I am well thanks how are you?"

"Good good. Haven't seen you in a minute. Finally ready to be a mother huh?"

Bongwiwe gave a light laugh.

"Yup. Hopefully all goes well", she remarked before they stepped out of the lift and went in the direction of the doctor's office. Both women walked in heels like they were born with a pair on their feet. The office was at the last floor of the building and it was huge, and elegant.

"You may take a seat", the doctor said before taking off her white coat and placing it on the four-hook hanger.

She went to take a seat across Bongiwe and pulled her macbook open.

"I could hear how eager you sounded over the phone. I was starting to think you were never coming back", she joked. Bongiwe laughed.

"I'm just kidding. We've had women who froze their eggs for quite a damn while before they could come back"

Bongiwe nodded. She had a part of her that didn't want to admit that she was nervous. The doctor noticed this.

"Are you one hundred percent sure about this?", she asked before returning her eyes to her screen.

"Yeah. I'm just... a lot of things are going through my mind right now"

A lady walked in with a tray that had two cups with their saucers and a pot of tea on it. She placed it down and they thanked her before she left.

"What if I make a bad mother?"

Doctor Benjie huffed a laugh.

"Trust me. It is veery common to feel that way. However, we do offer counseling for such cases? Cases where you feel unsure?"

"I am sure. It's just the nerves"

"Alright. Let me take you through what's going to happen and what you should expect", the doctor said before handing her a blue pamphlet with pink diagrams and writings.

"Before we get into that, do we need to find a surrogate for you or are you prepared to carry the baby yourself?"

We work closely with the Help-a-mom agenc--"

"I will be carrying the baby myself"

"Alright then. Do you have a partner? We have a sperm bank within this very clinic if you don't have one. We pride ourselves with--"

"I don't. I don't have a partner", Bongiwe sadly informed.

"That is not a problem at all. We have a couple of profiles you can choose from. Plenty actually!", the doctor said with a smile. "After this, I will schedule another appointment for you so we can get you started on the hormone treatment"

"Hormone treatment?", Bongiwe enquired. She'd read a little about this from the net but she wanted to understand it a bit further, from the mouth of a reliable horse.

"Yes. See, unlike somebody who fell pregnant organically, your body still needs to be prepared for this. By hormones I am referring to estrogen and progesterone. This combo maximizes chances of pregnancy and it has been proven to prevent a miscarriage, of course to a certain degree"

"When you say... they increase the chances of pregnancy...?"

"Let me put it this way: Unlike men, women are born with a particular number of eggs that declines as they grow and go on their menses. You do know that when you menstruate you shed an egg correct? Well men produce sperm every single day. I have explained to you that when you freeze the eggs, you are delaying their degeneration, not actually stopping it. It's the same as when you put food in the fridge. It won't stay preserved forever. After the in vitro fertilization where we will be fusing your eggs with sperm from the donor of your choice, the embryos will be placed directly in your uterus. IF they implant themselves there then you will fall pregnant. If they don't, you will obviously need another IVF trial"

She explained and Bongiwe sighed heavily. Dr Benjie laughed lightly.

"I know. It's a lot to take in. Please take this leaflet home, read it and don't hesitate to call me if there is anything you find confusing. Anything at all"

Bongiwe stood up and took the pamphlet. They shook hands and she left.

...

Evelyn tied her robe and went down to grab a cup of coffee. Everyone in the house was asleep. Their bodies were all tired from all the sleep they had not been getting. She yawned and stretched as she walked. She got there and turned the kettle on. She had to remember first where Betso kept her cups. Her mind was half asleep as she mindlessly listened to the kettle boiling. She pulled the top open and found them. After taking one cup into her hand, she felt like somebody was standing behind her. She turned and immediately gasped at the sight of him, dropping the cup to the floor. It smashed into several pieces as she stood agape. It can't be. She definitely needed more sleep.

"Sawubona nkosikazi"(Hello wife), he greeted. He had his hands in the pockets of his grey pants-- the signature. She couldn't reply. She took reverse steps till she was backed against the oven embedded in the cupboard set. She wished and yearned to see his face again ever since they buried him. She longed for just one moment with him, one last moment. Now that he was here, she didn't know how to feel.

"Don't be scared. It's just me"

She held on tightly to the edge of the stove, so much that she felt pain emerging from the middle of her palm.

"I'm not here to stay. I'm just here to tell you to fetch our child from the wilderness. We are not going to do it for you. You will do it yourself since you're the one who placed him there. We are all tired of the secrecy, the killings, the blood and the conniving. We are reconstructing and fixing this chieftaincy. Odaliwe is here now and she is going to cleanse this family of all the badluck that you all have invited into it. You will not know any peace until you do exactly as I say. None of you will", he calmly informed before turning his back to leave. He placed the hat he had in his hand over his white hair when he got to the door. Evelyn's nerves were still wrecked. She was a trembling mess. Violet came down yawning and asked what they're having for breakfast. Eve's eyes were still fixed on the door that was left open. Violet stood upright and glared at her.

"Are you alright?", she asked from a place of concern. Evelyn didn't respond. Violet's eyes fell on the shattered white cup in front of Evelyn.

"What happened? You look like you've just seen a ghost?"

Evelyn's lower lip was trembling. Her hands were also shaking. Violet's worry gained weight. She ran to the door to see who was outside but she saw no one. She came back into the house and quickly swept the broken pieces and threw them into the bin. She made Evelyn clasp her hands together and brought her face in her direction.

"Look at me. Hey, hey look at me", she was giving her an emotional resuscitation.

Evelyn slowly nodded with widened eyes.

"Breathe in, and slowly ouuut let's go. We are breathing innnn...", she dragged it. Evelyn complied.

"That's it. And ouuuut. There we go"

Evelyn was no longer holding her breath. Her breathing rate was now normal and fine. Violet pulled out the bar stool and allowed her to sit there. She placed her palm against the kettle and felt that the water was hot. She took out another cup and poured handful of sugar in it. The water followed and she stirred. Evelyn's eyes were once again fixed to the door. Violet placed the cup in front of her when all the sugar had dissolved. Evelyn tried protesting but Violet wouldn't have it.

"He eh enwa before you collapse. Ketla goreng nna?"(What will I do if you faint?)

...

Melo thought about missing school when his alarm went off but eventually kicked the blankets off of him. He couldn't afford to slack any further. He did all he needed to do to prepare for school, even though he took his time. He woke up earlier than usual. Normally, he wouldn't wake up at the sound of the 04h45 alarm. When he was busy knotting up his tie, his phone rang. It was his father. He looked at the screen and let out a very heavy breath. He couldn't ignore him forever.

"Dad", he answered.

"When last did you cry?", Muzi asked in a threatening tone.

"I'm sorry. I've been sleeping the whole time", he lied. He wasn't sure if he wanted to tackle this issue. He wasn't sure who he was supposed to direct his anger and confusion at.

"I know I said you need to go focus on school but the least you could've done is say goodbye?"

"I know. I'm just-- I'm stressed about a lot of thing. Mostly school"

"I know matric can be strenuous but stressing about it only makes it worse. Keep a level head. Prepare well enough and get the required hours of sleep to consolidate all the information you would've studied about the previous night. Don't strain yourself because you'll blank out during an exam. Work hard yes but don't strain yourself alright champ?"

A slight smile invited itself on Melo's face.

"I hear you dad"

"I know this has been a very tough year for you, but you need to fight Makhosonke. I didn't raise a quitter in you. Whatever you need, I am here for you. All you need to do is ask"

Melo sighed. He was tired. After a morning shower, he was still tired.

"I hear you dad. I need to go now. Kiss Liwe for me"

"Alright. Don't get into any trouble"

He laughed lightly and promised not to. He woke up early, but he was now running late.

After he was done, he grabbed his blazer and backpack then left the room. He greeted mam'Nokwanda and dashed out.

"Haibo! You can't go to school on an empty stomach buya!", she stopped him at the door.

"But I'm late nje I'll eat when I come back", he was arguing but he knew it was an everyday battle he never even once triumphed in it.

"Eat breakfast at lunchtime? I am not the one who said you must work extra shifts in lalaland", she gestured with her finger that he should come back and he sighed. She placed the oatmeal in a bowl in front of him and he took rushed quick spoonfuls in, careful not to dirty his shirt. She just smiled and watched. He knew he had to finish that bowl.

"Done!", he said when he roughly cleaned it out. If he were to scrape it of the remnants carefully, they'd make two more spoonfuls. She didn't fight him. She handed him a banana and a bottle of water. He placed both in his bag and said goodbye to her.

He got to school and there was an assembly that day. They normally don't host it unless if there is an important announcement to make. The school believes that as different kids come from different religious backgrounds, a typical Christian assembly would be exclusive and unfair to those that hold other spiritual beliefs. He got there and stood behind another boy. The principal was in front, already giving a speech.

"On the school website, we have updated and uploaded a set of past question papers that will be at your disposal. Grade 12s, this school is known and famous for its hundred percent pass rate. It has always been that for the past nine years. Do not disappoint. The school library is also there for you to use. From the 15th of this month, it will be open 24hours a days, including the whole of block C if you feel you need a quiet space to study. It is soon to be exam season so wifi will be restricted", he mentioned and the assembly roared in complaints.

"You will only be able to across YouTube, the school app and Google for research. This is for your own good. If you use your data for senseless things at a time where you're supposed to be studying, that will be on you. You're the one who is going to drop the pass rate of this school and ultimately get kicked out because we don't take repeaters at this institution"

Melo noticed Nomzamo looking at him and she looked away when their eyes met. Zamo was his female competitor in class, even though she dressed like a boy or wore haircuts like one. They suited her well, but her friends always teased her saying she must one day consider being a full-blown woman. She and Melo never liked one another, ever since they met. Their rivalry started then. He thinks she exaggerates her intelligence and she thinks he's a spoilt royal brat that gets away with a lot. Each time Melo raises his hand to answer a question she'd raise hers even higher. When he raised his hand to ask one, she'd answer it like it was stupid question, even if her answer was wrong or far-fetched. She mostly got higher marks than him in Biology, Business studies and English. He beat her at isiZulu, Maths and Physical Sciences. However, their marks always run 2/3 steps behind one another. She's been thriving lately since Melokuhle was slacking.

"That's it for today. If you have any enquiries, your teachers are there to help you. You may disperse to your respective classes", the principal instructed and they indeed scattered to their different classes.

"Where were you?", she asked when she caught up with him. She startled Melo that he almost ran into the janitor who was putting up the large school flag along with the South African one. He apologized and the man assured it was okay.

"Why did you sneak up on me like that?!"

"Sneak up on you? You have issues"

"I am not in the mood Zamo what do you want?"

"I asked you a question. Where were you? We wrote a preparatory test"

"Dilan told me. I made arrangements to write it in the afternoon but thank you, my self-appointed personal assistant", he said and continued walking beside her. She clucked and looked away.

"You know, this is no time for you to be going through adolescent stages. Uzofaila"

Melo laughed.

"You'd love that wouldn't you?"

"No I won't!", she shot out defensively and he stopped walking with a smirk on his face.

"Is that a care I see sparkling in your tennis eyes?"

She thinned her eyes and pinched her brows.

"You're annoying, big head"

He laughed.

"I am surely dying today. You? Care about me? Whatever I used in my bathwater vandag needs to become a habit", they arrived at their class. She said, "Wait here" and marched to her bag. Every other learner was either busy talking to another filling them in on yesterday's tea, busy filing or studying amongst the noise. She got to her large backpack and rummaged through it as if searching for something important. Her bag was huge because she was the type to bring all textbooks to school. She turned towards him, shrugged and pushed her glasses back with her index finger. She shrugged as if she did not find what they'd agreed upon. He frowned.

"What were you looking for?"

"The fxck you claimed I give. It's not in here. Means I don't have it", she said with an attitude before pulling the bag and placing it on the carrier underneath the desk and carrying on with her business. His face dropped and he laughed to himself.

"Crazy bxtch", he said before moving to his own territory.

Chapter Fifty-Six

"Bathong Lehumo, what is it?", Mashoto asked as she stirred the gravy in a pan. Lehumo couldn't stop pacing and roaming about in the room in her cotton pyjamas, popping her knuckles. They lived as roommates in the nurse quarters.

"I did something really stupid", she fessed up. Mashoto closed the pan with patience and said:"Okay...?", leading the way to the couch. Humo followed her there. She dumped herself on the old couch and rubbed her hands in frustration.

"Aowa mosadi bolela tlabe ka fisha dipoto kua"(Speak before the food gets burnt)

Humo sighed before turning in her direction.

"Promise you won't tell?"

"I promise. What's going on waka?"

Humo swallowed before she could speak.

"So, remember when we were in varsity and I told you about this other half-sister of mine?"

"You mean the one you were religiously stalking?"

"I wasn't stalking her!", Humo defended. Mash dropped her eyes in ridicule.

"I just enjoyed watching her pictures on social media that's all. Anyway, that's not the issue here"

"You still stalk her but anyway continue..."

Humo clucked and looked away.

"It is the truth and you know it. Tell me what's going on?"

She sighed heavily once more.

"Her husband was involved in a car accident and went into a coma"

"He was admitted at our hospital?", Mashoto asked while scratching her itchy faux locs. Humo nodded.

"Okay. And?"

"He... I don't know what was going on with him but he used to sustain an erection and ejaculate minutes later, especially very late at night", she divulged.

"Wait. He was in a coma and he would do all that?"

Humo nodded in agreement. Mash was confused.

"Okay. And?"

"He's a handsome man Mash. He's rich. He's built. He's... Lord!"

"Don't tell me that you had se--", Mash was about to fire flaming coals over her head.

"I couldn't risk that"

"So where exactly is this going?", Mash dug into the matter. "Wait! Don't tell me you're speaking about Mr Khumalo?"

Humo threw her head in between her thighs and placed her hands over it.

"Humo!"

"I did something and I'm hoping he doesn't remember being touched inappropriately because if he does and Mr Bokete investigates into the matter I will definitely get fired"

"Just tell me what you did and stop beating about the bush"

"I took his semen", she gave a regretful straight smile.

"Why? What for?"

"I gave it to Kedibone to keep it safe for me"

Mash drew her face back and shrunk it in bafflement, till the equation hit her and it made sense.

"Doesn't Kedibone work at Marilyn and Stokes? The fertility clinic?"

"She does"

"Humo. What is in that busy head of yours?"

"Look I am not going to use the semen anymore. This whole situation led to me finding out that I'm barren I never even... I'm worried about my job. That's the only thing that's stressing me out right now"

"What were you even planning to do?"

"He didn't look like somebody who was going to make it out of that coma so I wanted to get pregnant by him before he died"

"By him? Humo this is your sister's husband are you sick in the head?!"

"I wasn't thinking straight! All I saw was me and my child living comfortably because I know Betso. She wouldn't have turned his child away even if I told her he cheated on her with me. It would've been very easy for me because she doesn't remember me. She last saw me when we were kids and we never even had a single conversation"

"You really are sick..." Mashoto had her hand over her mouth.

...

Nomcebo blew her curtain to the side to see who was parking at her gate. Ndalo was at school and her grandmother went back to her house. Manqoba stepped out and he was by himself. She wondered why. The late chief Khumalo always had a mini entourage escorting him. He watched him fix his cufflinks as he walked in.

"Knock knock", he went as he stood in front of the open door. She appeared.

"Mbulazi", she humbly greeted.

"May I come in?", he asked politely and she nodded, wondering what it was he wanted. Could Mxolisi have told him about what she specifically mentioned to be a secret? He walked in and she offered him a seat by the table in the living room. He pulled out a chair and settled there.

"Can I get you anything?"

He just raised his brow and stared. She then realized that she asked a stupid question. He doesn't eat anywhere and everywhere apart from his house. Everybody knows that. She cleared her throat and also took a seat. He lifted his leg off his other knee before he could start speaking. The more she watched him sitting there was the more she reminisced about the stolen times between her and Mbuso. His body structure and the bottom half of his face, starting from the nose down. The resemblance was there. Even how good he smelt. Mbuso always, always smelt good. There was never a miss.

"Are you listening to me?", he asked and she popped her eyes.

"Hm?!"

He sighed.

"I'm sorry. I just have a lot on my mind", she said and ironed the table cloth with both her hands.

"We all do. Mxolisi told me what you mentioned to him"

She puckered her speechless lips.

"I hear you want to take uNdalo away?", he questioned with a very subtle yet threatening look on his face.

"It is the best thing to do. For everyone"

"Ndalo is our future bride. Mxolisi loves and is willing to do right by her. I am not trying to dictate to you how you should do things in your house but I hope I will only have to say this once, Ndalo is not going anywhere"

She wore a look of confusion on her face.

"She can never know who her real father is. If she continues this nonsense she's doing with her brother it'll only spell a catastrophe!"

"Ndalo did nothing wrong. You are the one who created this mess. Now it is coming back to bite you", he said and stood up.

"But--"

"But nothing. The only time I'm going to come back here is on her wedding day. Don't make me come back prematurely. It will not end well"

"Mbulazi. How do you expect these two to--"

"Leave everything in my capable hands. Okay?", he calmly said and looked in her eyes, searching for understanding. She was frustrated. Her in-laws can never find out about this.

She eventually nodded for the hell of it. He said his goodbyes and left.

...

He arrived home and went straight to his study.

"Baby?!", he yelled for Enhle a couple of times with no reply before walking in. He opened the door to his office, loosened his tie and folded the sleeves of his shirt as he walked in. The secrets were busy piling up over his head and shoulders. He poured himself a drink before taking out his phone to check on his younger brother.

"Mfa' ka baba"(My dad's son), he greeted when Muzi answered the phone.

"Bafo. Zthin?"(What's up?), Muzi greeted back.

"Eish...", he exhaled dramatically from exhaustion.

"Siyak'shisa isthembu?"(Is polygamy already weighing down on you?), Muzi laughed. Manqoba laughed too.

"If you had a cat I'd gladly say msun'wayo leyo kati ney'ngan zayo zonke"

Muzi exploded in laughter.

"Yabheda. You good though?"

"Arg man. It's life this thing. It has to be done at some point or another"

"That's a no. Kushaphi?"(What's wrong?)

"We have a lot to talk about and not over the phone", he mentioned and took a sip.

"That don't sound too good"

"It's not. Ukuphi uMxolisi?"

"He's at school. Mekabuya la ngimfake espanini"(I'm taking to work when he comes back here)

"Ispani san manje?"

"At the site. He's gonna be mixing concrete and making face bricks there"

Manqoba laughed.

"He's never gonna survive that"

"He decided to be a man so I'm toughening him up"

"You just want to waste material wena. Nothing good is gonna come out of that", Manqoba was still laughing.

"He's only gonna do it for a month. Ngifuna ukumvuthisa lekhanda leli eliqinile"(I wanna teach him a lesson)

"But in a way, it's a good thing. It'll teach him some sense of responsibility. I was also thinking of making them build i-boys' room ngoDecember. They're all grown now"

"You're actually onto something. They'll also stop giving their grandmother grief"

Manqoba laughed lightly.

"Yeah it was hard enough with us. No need for her to go through it all over again"

They both laughed.

"Sometimes I just sit and think to myself how we shouldn't even blame these boys. They clearly got it from somewhere"

"It was never gonna miss. But we also shouldn't let them do as they please", he said and took another sip. He heard the door opening and he turned with his lip pressed against the whiskey glass. Muzi was busy talking from the other end of the line and Manqoba's ears were suddenly blocked. Enhle walked in quickly and closed the door. She was barefoot and completely naked under her nude, silky gown, with only her black and lacy thong on. She giggled as she posed against the door like a teenager. The look on his face? His jaw was dropping and his eyes were full of lust. She just stood there admiring his fresh cut. How clean he always looks is always a turn on for her.

"MQ?! Usakhona?"(Are you still there?), Muzi asked.

Manqoba cleared his throat.

"Look bafo I'll call you back. Something important just came up", he said and cut the call. She giggled as she felt "important". He placed the glass and phone down. Enhle was still standing there, smiling. It became contagious. One started growing on his face as well.

"Hi", he said.

"Hello", she said back. They never broke the eye contact. He was walking towards her. Her skin was tingling at the mere thought of his touch.

"Unjan?", he lowly asked.

"Ngiyaphila Zikode. Unjan wena baba?"(I'm okay. How are you?), she replied and gasped a little. He was close. Too close. His eyes were still locked in hers, till they travelled down. He took a single step back and placed his hands in his pockets, scanning her from top, to toe. Her one leg was bent and standing on its ends.

"Mm!", he exclaimed before grabbing onto his lower lip and releasing it moistly and slowly. She giggled and

looked down. She was loving this reaction.

"Take that off. I wanna see you", he instructed. He meant the robe. She shortly let it slide down from her shoulders and down her glowy, freshly moisturized skin, with ease and seductive patience. It eventually hit the floor. The slight horny smile was still twitching from the corner of his lips.

"Turn around", he commanded and she did as told. He approached and pushed her towards the door. She felt the coldness of it on her stomach. His one was still in his pocket and the other was travelling down her arm. It wasn't a full-on touch. He was tracing it over her body hairs. She had lifted both of her arms up against the door. His finger travelled down her side and just when she thought he was heading for the bxtt, the hand went straight to the door handle and she heard the sound of it turning and locking. He still wasn't touching her. Their bodies were tight against one another but he wasn't touching. She wanted him to touch her. He knew she wanted him to. Her body language gave it all away.

"You're one fine mommy. Whose wife are you?", he hoarsely whispered from behind her ear. One hand still on the handle and the other still in the pocket.

"Yours", she voicelessly answered with her eyes shut as she felt his expensive alcoholic breath sending goosebumps over her skin.

"Uban loyo? Angimazi uYours mina"(Who is that? I don't know who Yours is), he still wasn't touching her.

"Ngisho uMbulazi. UZikode. Mkhathswa. Ndabezitha", a little timid voice in her head kept screaming: "Please touch me". He went quite.

"Stand still", he said before squatting down behind her. He gently pulled the underwear down. She turned and dropped her eyes to look at him.

"You dont listen huh, wifey?"

She quickly brought her face back and laughed.

"I'm sorry..."

The lacy material dropped down to her feet and he instructed that she steps out of it. She did exactly that. He picked it up and smelt it. He closed his eyes as he took all her natural scent in. She smelt good. Feminine. Clean.

"Shxt...", he mumbled to himself before placing it in his pocket. He separated her legs and went underneath. She closed her eyes when she felt his warm breath approaching from below...

...

Melo had been studying for the prelims without fail. One would assume that he was trying his best to avoid thinking about his family life. It was five in the evening when he packed up his bag, including supper in a Tupperware to take to school, and water. It was a Friday and he was planning on getting a lot of work done, even if it meant coming back in the morning. He went past Khanyi's house first. Something in him was just craving to see her cute face. He waited at a distance as he listened to the radio in his uncle's car. Ever since he was inaugurated, Manqoba has been receiving comments about how its unsuitable for a chief to be driving around in a GTI. He laughed it off but he saw it too eventually.

Khanyi liked taking her time on the mirror. He was already used to this. Londiwe called and peeped out the window to see if Khanyisile wasn't in sight. She wasn't. He took the call.

"Baby", he answered.

"Hey unjan? You've been absent from the app today are you okay?", she rambled on.

"I'm fine. I'm just busy. I'm preparing for exams remember"

"I get it. Just wanted to check if you were fine. I miss you so bad", she confessed and mimicked a cry. He laughed.

"I miss you too princess"

"We'll be together soon"

He saw Khanyi walking towards the car on the side mirror.

"Look sthandwasami I have to go ne? I'll call you later"

"Alright and you had better call. You have this tendency of breaking your call promises"

He laughed lightly.

"I said I'll call you kant yin? Sharp", he then cut the call after she acknowledged that she understood. He got out of the car to hug Khanyi when she arrived.

"Hey you", she said as she stood on her toes. He brushed her back and broke the hug, then held both her hands.

He placed a light kiss on her lips and she blushed.

"I'm not staying baby. I just wanted to see your gorgeous face", he alerted and she bent her lip in slight disappointment.

"Don't do that", he laughed.

"Do what?", she asked and laughed as well.

"That puppy eye thingy. Don't do it"

"Why not?"

"I can't think straight when you start doing that shii"

He now had his hands on her waist.

"I have to do it because you have no time for me. You're always busy and you always have to go somewhere"

"I know. I'll make time after I'm done with these exams I promise"

"I know you're gonna tell me that you're preparing for finals" she complained and he laughed. He extended his arm and told her to take it. She was confused.

"No rip me into two so one half can go to school and you stay with the other", he said sarcastically and she chuckled. She snuggled up on his chest and he brushed her hair.

"I want you to do well at school. I'm just being a baby because I miss you. I enjoy spending time with you Sonke"

He sighed and kissed the top of her head.

"I know baby. After I'm done writing I'll dedicate an entire weekend to you. I double promise", he said and she smiled at the thought of that.

"I have to go now", he added after raising her chin so he kisses her.

"Can you drop me off at the mall?"

"Uyofunani e mall ngob' i-boyfriend yakho ila?"(What are you going to look for at the mall since your boyfriend is here?)

She laughed.

"No man my mom sent me to get baking essentials"

"Uzobuya noba?"(Who's gonna bring you back?)

"I'll catch a taxi"

"Uhlulwa yin ukuyi catch leyo taxi khona manje?"(Why can't you catch it now?), he teased while his nose rubbed against hers. She giggled.

"Ngiyak'cela"(Please), she pleaded.

"Fifteen randi", he continued to play with her.

"Ha! Kamarr loss. It's R8 to go to the mall wybo!"

He laughed.

"Ay ngiyadlala. Asambe ke. Do you have everything you need?"

"Yeah but I'm not sure about these shoes. Ziyang' mpintsha"(They're too tight), she said as she wiggled her toes inside the sneakers.

"You wanna go change?"

"I think so"

"But how else are you gonna get used to them if you avoid wearing them?"

"My mom got me a size smaller"

"Wenze kahle. If she got you your exact size they wouldn't look that good as you continued wearing them"

She nodded. He had a point.

"Asambe ke"(Let's go then)-Khanyi

"Are you sure you're comfortable though? I was just saying. Not really forcing you to wear them. I don't mind waiting?"

"No you're right. If I change the shoes I'll have to change the entire outfit)

"Yoh hayi let's go then because I know that will take seven years", he said as he hopped into the car. She laughed as she went round it to the passenger seat.

...

After dropping Khanyi off, he went straight to school. He found Dylan's car parked in the principal's spot and he laughed. He knew he did it on purpose. The principal specifically mentioned that he didn't want them using his spot. He dialled his number and put him on speaker as he took his bag out the back seat.

"Ma se kind. Where is you at?", he answered in his coloured accent.

"In the parking lot. Why are you parked... actually never mind. Where are you?", he asked and Dylan laughed.

He knew exactly what he was talking about.

"I am sir to you today. You better respect me hey"

"Uyanya", Melo said and Dylan laughed harder. He knew what it meant. Melo forced him to learn Zulu terms

because he refused to translate.

"Boy but I asked where you at?"-Melo

"Oh B6"

"Cool I'm on my way", he cut the call and kept walking. He almost bumped into Nomzamo since they were both typing on their phones. She had water over the entire area surrounding her mouth so it was obvious she was coming from the tap.

"Arg watch where you're going dammit!", she shot out when her phone fell to the pavement. He sighed. He knew it was one of those days where she hated his guts, his shadow and even his footsteps.

"Sorry", he flatly said to avoid an argument. She picked up her phone and immediately flipped.

"You cracked my screen protector and I just got this changed two days ago Melo!"

He was already walking ahead of her. He stopped. Then turned.

"Zamo, we were both on our phones so we bumped into each other. I did not bump into you. Please slip the fxck outta my skin?"

She was fuming. She walked towards him and challenged him with a deadly look.

"I need you to get this fixed", she hissed.

"Not a chance", he said and stared back.

"Prick!", she marched off and he shook his head. He was irritated. Zamo is very good at rubbing him up the wrong way. "Great!", he shot out when he realized that she was approaching the very same class Dylan was in. The other classes were also occupied by people he barely spoke to. He kept walking nonetheless.

"My buoyyyyyyy!!", Dylan exclaimed before getting up from his and taking off his airpods to greet him. They did their mini greeting dance while sticking their tongues out before they could bump shoulders.

"Now I have to also tell you that you're making noise?!", she reprimanded calmly from the back. With a bored expression on her face.

"You need to chill. Do you ever relax?", Dylan asked with an impatient and wondering look on his face.

"You need to keep it down"

Melo shook his head for Dylan to put a halt on the argument. He went to sit on his own desk. He was situated at the corner next to the window. Dylan at the front. He took out his books and got down to it after he was done replying to his texts.

Two hours passed as they all diligently studied. Zamo began packing up her books when she felt sleepy and hungry. Her phone vibrated from the desk and she picked it up.

"Thank God you replied on time today", she said and laughed.

"No daddy I'm sleepy I wanna go home. I'm gonna wait for you outside because I feel like I'm gonna sleep right on this desk"

Melo had his eyes on her the whole time, annoyed. The advocate of anti noise making was the one who was busy conversing like she wasn't vexed up about the same issue hours ago. He didn't move his eyes. He had one hand around a pencil that was busy digging a hole into his notepad. He didn't realize how hard he was pressing it against the book till the lead broke. Dylan was listening to music. He wasn't hearing anything. When the call

was over she then realized the pair of eyes that were riveted on her the whole time.

"What?", she shrugged.

"Have you ever cried in your life?", he threatened.

"Pssh and if I haven't? You think you're capable of making me cry?", she asked with her famous attitude as she stuffed her study guide into her school bag. Melo just stared as he felt a blue fire rising in his chest.

"If you think you can beat me up then bring it on"

"These karate classes you're attending are driving you insane ne?"-Melo

"I said bring it on!"

"Uzokhala Zamo. I'm done warning you", he said and sat properly on his desk, going back to his books. She stood up in a hurry and quickly dropped back to her seat, panic-stricken. He raised his head.

"What's up with you?"-Melo.

"Mind your own business Melo uhluwane nami"

He shook his head once again at Zamo's unnecessarily abusive and stupid acts and grabbed his phone. It was clear he wasn't going to be able to study if she was still in there. She texted on her phone and it rang immediately.

"Mama?", she tried to speak in a hush.

"Dad is on his way here and I stained my pants everyone is gonna see me there's blood on the desk--", she rambled before she could be interrupted by who she was speaking to. Melo heard her even though she tried not to be that audible to him.

"Yes"

"I can't tell him that you know how he feels when I talk about these things"

Melo sighed and pulled his white hoodie off his body. He stood up and went to hand it to her. She didn't know how to react. He never said anything.

"Mom I'll call you back", she said and cut the call.

"You were eavesdropping on--"

"Cut the crap and take it. Stop being stubborn"

She was doubtful. Pride had her by the ears. She took it eventually.

"I'm gonna need tissue paper", she said before he could walk away.

"I don't have it. Wrap the hoodie around your waist and go fetch it from the loo"

"I can't leave this desk like this. What if somebody sees it?"

"Nobody will. Just go fetch the tissue Zamo"

"Please", she said with difficulty. The word was like a fish bone travelling diagonally down her throat. Melo thought about it.

"You know they replace the rolls in the morning and amajita always take them home for the fun of it. I don't think I'll find one in there"

"Our loo is just three meters away"

Melo looked at her like a few marbles from her head fell and began rolling on the floor.

"You want me to-- are you insane?!"

"I have no choice", she was getting emotional. Dylan was still listening to music and minding his own. Melo sighed.

"I'll make a plan. Ngiyabuya manje"(I'll be back)

He went into the class next door and found a single guy in there. He greeted and passed. He knew for a fact that he didn't have it. He went to the next one and found two girls unwinding and laughing after a study session. One from 12B and another from C.

"San'bonan", he greeted as he stood by the door.

"Heyyy", they greeted with smiles.

"I'm sorry but I need your help. Can you please borrow me some tissue paper?"

They laughed.

"Borrow?"

He laughed too when he realized his statement didn't make sense.

"You know what I mean. Please, it's urgent"

"I wonder what you ate", one of them remarked as she searched her bag. He dropped his face and laughed. She handed it to him and he said his thanks. He went back to the class and Dylan asked where he was coming from.

"Just needed to get some fresh air. My head is hot", he lied. Dylan stretched.

"Eish... Think I also need to go out. Plus I need to call my girl"

"Yeah do that", Melo encouraged. Dylan stood up and left, leaving his books open on the desk. Melo handed the tissue paper to Zamo. She stood up and doubted tying the hoodie around her lower body.

"I'm not sure if the stain will come out", she said and looked at him for a response.

"You better make sure it does"

She frowned.

"Eish Zamo keep it then. Just do your thing so you can leave"

They challenged each other with a stare again.

"This is payback for my screen protector", she said.

"That hoodie pays for your stupid screen protector 15 times ungang'dini Nomzamo"(don't annoy me)

"Yet you said I keep it", she said as she tied it up around her.

"You can. Just don't play skipping rope ontop of my head I'm not your friend"

"I wouldn't befriend you even if you were the last boy on this planet", she said as she wiped the desk seat.

"I don't think the universe hates me that much to a point where it'd make sure you're the last person I get stuck with", he said and she stopped to look at him.

"Kukhona ofuna ukukusho?"(Is there anything you'd like to say?), he said with his hand on his ear. She frowned harder.

"Thought as much", he said and went back to his desk.

Chapter Fifty-Seven

"Waze wamuhle bo"(You look beautiful), Manqoba said to Sihle when she stepped into the car. She blushed and thanked him for the compliment. He couldn't stop marveling at how her dress hugged her figure, even when seated. She looked like she put zero effort into her look but she still looked elegant with her two thick cornrows on her head.

"Siyaphi?"(Where are we going?), she asked when he started driving.

"It's a surprise", he said with a smile and she smiled back but looked at him suspiciously.

Mona and sun's 'Via Orlando' was playing in the car. They share a music taste so there was nothing to disagree about there. They eventually arrived at Manqoba's "surprise" location. The fresh air hit her immediately the very moment she stepped out of the car. The green grass was calling. The big blue sky was waving. The trees were large with exceptionally good enough shade. He just watched silently as she walked ahead of him, admiring as nature showed off.

"I can't believe I'm only seeing this place for the first time", she said as continued to take patient steps.

"It's beautiful right?", he said. They could see and hear the waterfall from a short distance.

"Beautiful? It's gorgeous!"

He took her hand as they strolled around. The river was flowing right next to them.

"I come here whenever I feel I need to clear my head", he mentioned.

"It's a gem of a place but I don't think I'd be brave enough to do that", she laughed.

"Yeah you shouldn't come to such places by yourself. Perverts are always roaming around", he was serious.

"Apart from that, I don't like rivers much. I love them but... arg I'm not making sense"

"Yeah you're not", he said and she laughed.

"What I mean is, I always see stuff so I'd rather keep away from them"

"What stuff?", he stopped walking. Her hand was still in his.

"When I was a kid, bes'bhukuda angithi uyaz? So this one time, I was with my friends and cousins, swimming in the river. I saw a snake in the water but instead of telling them, I got tongue tied. I eventually convinced them that I was sick and that we should leave. We did that"

Manqoba was listening attentively.

"Another time, I was walking with my grandmother by the river bank. She liked drinking water from that river so whenever we would pass by it, she'd kneel to take in a few handfuls. I saw another snake but that one was colorful, tumbling in and out of the water. She didn't see it. I quickly pulled her back and explained to her what happened. She said I saw the god of that water and that it was her fault. I asked her how and she said she forgot to first ask before she dipped her hands into the river", she explained. MQ nodded.

"Yeah ayacelwa amanzi you don't just do as you please emfuleni"(That's true. You should always ask), he confirmed.

"I didn't understand then"

"You were still a kid I guess"

"A kid with weird vibes", she said and giggled. "Also, I grew up with a very strong intuition"

"Tell me more", Manqoba was fascinated.

"When I was around eighteen nineteen somewhere there, I had to catch a bus to Egoli to stock up for my grandmother's shop. I wasn't feeling that errand. At all. I stalled so much for no reason and I was almost late. On the way there, the bus ticket fell into mud water. I saw right there and then that I probably shouldn't go. I was supposed to meet up with my cousin at the bus because we didn't live in the same house. That was the very same day we lost her in a horrible accident. Nobody survived in that bus. Apparently it crashed into a truck and both went up in flames"

"If you forced it you also could've died"

"Most probably yes"

"You should learn to listen to it more, your instinct"

"It gets harder as one grows. It requires a certain level of control, and careful attention"

"Trust me. I know exactly what you're talking about"

He sighed.

"Anyway, I have great news", she announced.

"Okay?"-Manqoba

"I went to an interview for a managerial position about a week ago and they called this morning to let me know that I secured the job"

She was excited. He didn't know how to say what was on his mind without bursting her bubble. He felt like there was no need for her to work and he was not willing to compromise on that.

...

Betso was breastfeeding Liwe when Muzi was getting dressed. She was looking into her eyes like they were newly reunited lovers and humming as she rocked her softly, like a pendulum losing momentum. His eyes were glued and smiling at the two as he pulled his jeans up.

"Wenza kakhulu mkami"(You're doing a lot), he said and she raised her questioning eyes.

"The way umuhle ngakhona even breastfeeding looks like a new outfit on you", he complimented before pulling his red golf t-shirt down his torso. She laughed and sucked her teeth, speechless.

"Where are you going daddy?"

"I'm taking your son to initiation school", he said before pulling his sneakers forth and sitting on the bed. She pulled her brows together. He kept a straight, serious face.

"Initiation school?", she was concerned.

"Ngiyadlala. I'm taking Mxo sightseeing"

"Why him? What about Lwa?"

"Lwa is not interested"

"Okay. Where are the two of you going?", she asked and brushed Liwe's sleepy head. Her eyelids were fast getting attracted to one another, her pure white eyes half closed. Betso was in love with her existence, the sight

of her, just listening to her breathe unbothered.

"She's so peaceful", he remarked as he stepped closer.

"I would too if I had no bills and responsibilities", Betso joked around before pulling the sports bra so she places her bxxx back in it. Muzi laughed and said: "Leth' umntwanam ngoba ngiyakuzwa ukhathele" (Give me my child because you're tired of her). He extended his hands to take her. Betso couldn't stop laughing but gently pulled her away.

"She's sleeping baby man", she refused to hand her over.

"Manje?" (And so?)

"You'll wake her"

He stood upright and dropped his hands.

"Mrs Muzikayise?"

She dropped her laughing face and brushed Liwe's soft cheek. She was now sleeping and out of it.

"Hm-mm" (No) she calmly turned him down and kept her eyes to her daughter. He sighed and placed his hands on his waist. She raised her eyes for a brief second before shooting out a laugh at the expression on his face. He pulled his phone and started dialing.

"Who are you calling?", she asked and fixed Liwe's head lying on her arm.

"My lawyer", she shot out a sharp laughter and Liwe flinched in her sleep.

"Ashkiies baby ashkiies nana", she hushed her so she didn't wake up. Liwe slowly dropped the hand that involuntarily rised to the air when she perceived the noise. Betso had a strong urge to laugh. The phone was ringing on speaker.

"MK. What's up?", the lawyer.

"Melusi. Unjan? Ngihlangabezana nenkinga la" (How are you? I'm facing a problem here?), he also had an urge to laugh but he wasn't going to. Betso's shoulders were moving up and down as she laughed silently, trying hard not to wake the baby.

"Give me the summary", Melusi said expectantly.

"My wife won't let me take my kid", he briefed him. Betso was still stubborn with Liwe. She had tears coming out of her eyes from all the silent laughing.

"O-kay, you went your separate ways?"

"No. She is sitting right here holding the baby in her hands. She won't let me take her"

Betso continued rocking her baby as she wiped her tears with the back of her hand.

"I...don't think I follow", Melusi searched for clarification. Muzi sounded serious on the phone but his lips were twitching. Betso finally exploded. Melusi heard her and only then did he put two and two together. He laughed as well.

"Put her on the phone", he said to Muzi. He extended his hand with the same look a kid in Kindergarten would have after telling on another and the teacher tells him to call the bully. Betso's cheeks were burning.

"Melusi hi", she said inaudibly. She couldn't articulate herself well.

"My client tells me you're giving him problems with regard to the custody of his kids"

"I did no such thing"-Betso

"Mrs Khumalo, I would advise you to stop this behaviour before we take legal action. I don't lose cases"

Muzi was also laughing at this point.

"But I have good reason to--"

"That's it. We are done talking. Put my client on the line please", Melusi said.

"Sho?", Muzi answered.

"Can we prove that she's an unfit mother? That she's incapable of taking care of the baby?"

"Fully. She laughed recklessly just minutes ago, to the detriment of my baby girl's sleep. She is not good for her mental and emotional health", Muzi reported. Melusi couldn't keep up anymore. He laughed.

"I'm charging you for this phone call"

"Charging me for being useless? I still don't have my baby in my arms"

They were all laughing.

"Aysuka k sukela nini indoda yomZulu ihlulwa wumfazi?"(Since when does a Zulu man fail to get their woman in line)

Muzi laughed and they said their goodbyes.

"Mara wena...", Betso said as she failed to contain the smile on her face.

"What? I haven't seen you laugh in ages. I had to", he said and cupped her chin so he could kiss her. She reciprocated willingly and lovingly. He kissed Liwe's cheek and brushed her silky black hair with his large palm. He held the back of Betso's neck and kissed her forehead.

"Ngiyak'thanda mama", it came out as a rough whisper.

"I love you too", she blushed as she said it back.

...

"How are we feeling today?", Dr Vanessa asked as she held her notepad in hand, seated on a single lime green couch. Enhle was seated on the the double red one, in her oversized t-shirt, leggings and slip-on sandals. The doctor asked with a smile. She could see the glow on Enhle's face.

"I don't know really. I'm fine. We're getting there", she replied with a growing smile on her make-up free face.

"Apart from the conversation we had here, all three of us, did you ever speak about it at home?", Vanessa asked. Enhle sighed. She bit her lip and shook her head.

"We never...really talked but we connected yesterday. My husband is not much of a talker but we honestly connected yesterday"

"When you say connected, you mean sexual intercourse?"

She bobbed her head in agreement. Dr Vanessa sighed. Enhle could see the disappointment on her face.

"Honestly..."-Enhle

"And how did that feel?"

"Great!", she quickly said. Vanessa dropped her eyes, questioning the speed of her answer. Enhle exhaled the lying spirit evil spirit through her nose.

"The sex itself was great but it felt different. It didn't feel like it's supposed to", she confessed.

"And how is that?"

Enhle took a moment to accumulate the right words.

"When Manqoba makes love to me, the world stops spinning and everything around us comes to a complete stand still. He focuses on me. Yesterday... yesterday felt like he was trying too hard. He never made eye contact. He..."

Vanessa kept nodding for her to carry on, silent, uninteruptive.

"I don't know. I don't know if what I shared with Muhluri has a leg in this but..."

"What do you mean? That you were thinking of him during the act or that it was haunting your husband?"

"I don't know. Both. I want to forget Muhluri but it's not happening"

"You find him more... what's the word... satisfying?"

"It's not even that. Actually... in a way.. okay let me put it this way. Both these men know how to navigate their way inside me but with Muhluri, it feels safe. Secure"

"And with your husband?"

"There's this adrenalin that's attached to his name. I never know what to expect from him. He loves me so much but he's also capable of hurting me so badly"

"And that's exciting for you?", Vanessa asked as she wrote down. Enhle pulled her feet out of the shoes and brought her knees to her chest on the couch.

"Sort of. I think. Somehow I feel like our relationship without the pain would be doomed and go nowhere"

"Boring?"

"Yes!"

"Has it always been like that?", Vanessa asked.

"As far as I can remember, yes. He was that guy that every woman wanted. Still is. But I knew, I knew that if it came down it, he would always choose me"

Vanessa was quiet. She was intentional about her silence. She saw that Enhle was busy getting lost in reminiscence. She wanted her to go there. To go back and touch the parts of herself that had inevitably grown and feel the difference in the texture of her being.

...

Muzi got to the living room and found Mxo laying back on the couch.

"Mbulazi", Muzi said to him. He quickly removed his hand from his forehead when he heard his father's voice. He thought he was alone since Lwa was outside taking a phonecall.

"Baba", Mxo greeted back.

"Get up", Muzi instructed.

"Hawu. Siyaphi manje?"(Where are we going?)

"To work. You have a family to feed remember?", Muzi said as he grabbed his car keys from the coffee table.

Lwa walked in, typing on his phone.

"Come. Let's go. Bafana", he commanded to Mxo and greeted Lwandile in the same sentence.

"Dad. We are we going?", Lwandile asked.

"He was serious about taking me to work mfeth!", Mxo complained. Lwandile laughed.

"Lwa, go out, grab something to eat, go hiking, study but one thing you shouldn't do is to tell your mother about this. If she asks, say you were not interested in coming along. Okay?"

Lwandile raised both hands to show that he was unwilling to get involved in their mess.

"Woza", Muzi pulled Mxo by the wrist.

"If I die there, tell Ndalo that I love her and if she moves on she'll hear plates breaking for no reason for the rest of her life", he said to Lwa who was still laughing. Muzi was still pulling the reluctant Mxo out.

"But it's a Saturday today. Aren't y'all closed?", Mxo tried finding reasons why he should not go.

"Don't worry about that", Muzi said coolly as he strapped on his safety belt.

"Seatbelt", he said to the already irritated Mxo as he started the car.

When they arrived at the site, a grey double cab was parked outside. A man came out of the large building and Muzi stepped out to greet him. He was wearing blue overalls, work boots and a yellow helmet.

"Boss", the man said.

"Sho Thulani. I have brought your trainee", Muzi said as he typed on his phone.

"Mxo. How are you doing man?", Thulani extended his hand to greet him. As irritated as he was, Mxo greeted back.

"I hope we will work well together", Thulani said. Mxo just nodded.

"Today I am going to be teaching you how to mix concrete manually", Thulani said and led the way to the back, to the old mixing platform.

"You said manually?", Muzi was quiet and focusing on his phone.

"Yes", Thulani said. Mxo stopped walking and looked at his father.

"Isn't there like a machine you guys use for that?"

"Angiy'ngen mina Thulani is the one in charge here"

"Dad!"

"So Mxo, as a trainee you are expected to have done a bit of research before showing up here so can you please give me at least 2 steps involved in the general production of concrete?", Thulani asked. Muzi placed his phone in his pocket and folded his arms.

"Yes. Tell us", he said.

Mxo knew zilch. He sighed.

"I know there's pouring of water somewhere"

"We pour water when making pap but does that mean we can also use it for building purposes?", Muzi asked with a straight face. Mxo took off his bucket hat and wiped his face, then heaved a sigh.

"Okay Mxo let me make life easier for you. We have 5 steps involved. Namely, your batching, mixing, transporting, compacting and placing then curing. Today I am going to be showing you how everything works and what what is for. When you come back, I am going to need you to be knowing different types of concrete and what they're used for. This is inclusive of your plain and heavy weight concrete, amongst others", Thulani explained and Mxo's head was already buzzing. He was imagining himself doing that hard of labour and his

peace was disturbed. He knew Muzi wasn't joking.

"But honestly, technology is here to make our lives easier. Why must I do this manually?"

"To get the general idea and understanding of what you'll actually be doing. This is always the best point to start, especially if you have zero experience", Thulani said and Muzi nodded.

"Now I am going to fetch a wheelbarrow, he shovel and a bag of cement inside. You see that heap over there?", he pointed to the sand at a distance. Mxo nodded with a frown on his face.

"I will need you to fill the wheelbarrow and bring it back here", he said and Mxo popped his eyes.

"Let me fetch the stuff. There's a hose pipe. Connect it to the tap and drag it here", Thulani instructed. Mxo turned his eyes to see the pipe. It looked orange and heavy. The tap was also not that near. Thulani ran off and Mxo looked at Muzi hoping he will change his mind.

"It's not that difficult trust me. You'll feel the real heat when you have to make the bricks"

"Haa-ha! For sure you adopted me wena", Mxo said and Muzi laughed.

"Imagine consciously choosing you out of a bunch of sweethearts? Would you even choose yourself?"

"Dad please. I'll find another job then. I'll do radio. Not this"

Muzi placed his hand on Mxo's shoulder.

"Until you find that job, this is the hill you will die on. And that...", he said as he watched Thulani walking towards them with the wheelbarrow.

"That is the cross you'll die bearing"

Mxo had his hands on his waist. The look of frustration on his face was priceless.

...

"Heyyyyy", Oluhle greeted Lwandile as she approached him, dragging her small suitcase. He smiled and extended his hands for a hug.

"How you doing sis?", he asked warmly when they hugged.

"I'm good, I'm good. How are you? You look good", she complimented.

"I'm fine. Uth' uzokwenzan la?"(What are you doing here?), he politely asked. She jerked her face back dramatically.

"I just landed and you're already chasing me away?"

He laughed and grabbed the handle to the bag, dragging it to the car.

"No man. What I mean is, shouldn't you be preparing for your trial exams?"

"I am. I'm only here for the weekend. My friend is hosting a party for her 17th birthday", she informed and pulled her ripped shorts down. They were hiking up her curves.

"Does MQ know you here?"

She rolled her eyes and flipped her curly weave back.

"I couldn't risk him saying no"

Lwandile laughed before he could open the boot.

"You're heading to his brother's house and you think you'll be able to keep this under wraps?"

"I can handle ubab'mncan don't stress about him"

Lwandile huffed out a laugh and shook his head. They both hopped into the car.

"Anyway, how's boarding school?", he made simple conversation as he started the car.

"Arg school is just school. Ukuphi uMxo?"(Where's Mxo?)

"At work", he replied and laughed.

"Work?", her tone was laced with sprinkles of weird.

"Yeah. Long story", he kept driving as gospel played subtly in the car. She still had that weird look on her face as they drove home. Lwandile was praying internally for them not to find Muzi back because he knew he was going to give Luhle hell for her outfit.

...

The alarm went off and Melokuhle felt like screaming his lungs out. He was tired. Eyes were heavy. Shoulders were aching. His whole body was in pain because of his messed up circadian rhythm. His biological clock was confused. The alarm was for 15h30. He spent the entire night at school and only came back home at 9 in the morning. The alarm was for him to bath and go back to school. He sat upright on the bed and ran his hands down his exhausted face. His body was overworked and he felt it. He was willing to overwork it even further because he knew that if he relaxed, his mind was going to do as it pleased, misbehaving with unwelcome, unpleasant and uninvited thoughts. His train of thought would go through very dark canals and possibly get stuck.

He got himself cleaned up, made his bed, had a late lunch and drove to school. He arrived there and there was like one or two learners there. One had taken out a desk and was sitting under a tree. He found an empty class and occupied it. Dylan made it clear that he wasn't willing to go mad because of school. He told him that he wasn't coming, clear cut. The rest of his friends studied at the local library or at home. He stretched his neck as he yawned. His eyes were still stinging. He opened his books nonetheless.

An hour and a half later he was out of it. He was sleeping on top of his stationery. Nomzamo walked in and found him in that state. She had the hoodie with her, in her arms.

"Kuhle?", she shook him by the shoulder.

"Melo? Dude wake up", she was persistent. He raised his confused face.

"Hey", he coarsely greeted.

"How long have you been here?", she asked before she sat down on the desk in front, facing him.

"I don't even know", he said and gulped down the water in the pump bottle he brought with.

"You look terrible", she remarked.

"Thanks", he said and gave a quick fake smile.

"I don't mean it like that"

"One never knows with you", he said and purposelessly turned the page on his textbook.

"Mciim. Here's your hoodie. Thanks a lot", she said with a closed-lip smile. A genuine smile. One he barely

sees.

"How are you feeling?", he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Period pains and shii"

She laughed.

"I don't have those. That's why the blood caught me off guard"

"At all?"

"At all"

"But, not to disrespect you or anything, don't you feel it coming out?", he asked as he played with the rectangular eraser in his hand, rotating it.

"Not really. Well sometimes. With me it's confusing. I have a lot of discharge sometimes so--"

"You thought it was discharge instead of blood?", he was getting it.

"Yeah. And I had no pantyliner on", she went on. He nodded.

"Shxt. Too much information", she said and laughed.

"Hiding these things makes no difference really", he said and grabbed his phone.

"You only say that because it's not you we're talking about", she said and finally took off her bag from her back.

"Even if it was, I wouldn't mind talking about it", he said nonchalantly and she took out her Oreos from the bag and opened them.

"Lies", she said and offered him one. He smiled and huffed out a laugh before leading his hand into the box and plastic to take it out.

"Ask me anything then", he moved his tired eyes lazily.

"ANYTHING?", she made sure and laughed.

"Yeah. Anything"

"Uhm...", she was thinking of a question. She wanted it to be awkward as possible.

"What do wet dreams feel like?", she asked and he laughed.

"I knew that you were gonna ask me that", he said and shook his head.

"Answer then"

"They feel amazing as they occur but when you wake up you feel robbed and cheated because it was just a dream. Now you're outchea faced with the responsibility of making yourself cum to get the honorable speaker in your parliament to calm the fxck down", he explained and she laughed.

"Stop", she said. She was still laughing. He just smiled. He was too tired to laugh.

"You just admitted to jxrking off", she said.

"Every boy does. As I've said, hiding these things makes no difference"

She shrugged as she laughed.

"I guess you're right"

"And speaking of these things, mind explaining the menstrual cycle for me? The hormonal fluctuations, that 14 day thing and when the egg is released, degenerates and all that stuff about the corpus luteum? I thought I understood them but the last test showed me that I'm quite confused"-Melo.

"And what makes you think I understand it?", she asked with a challenging stare.

"Come on you got 97% I saw your script"

"And how much did you get?"

"70", he said lowly.

"I can't hear you"

He rolled his eyes.

"SEVENTY PERCENT"

She laughed.

"I wanted you to admit it"

"And I'm the a**hole around here?"

"Everybody knows you are", she said and took a bite off her biscuit. He laughed.

"Are you gonna help me or not?"

"On one condition", she mentioned. He looked at her suspiciously.

"If I hear one more word about your screen protect--"

"No silly. I help you with the cycle and you help with oxidation-reduction reactions. Plus projectile motion"

"That's two chapters in exchange for a PORTION of a single chapter. Quite unfair don't you think?"

"The deal is off then", she said and turned to sit properly on the desk. He sighed.

"Okay okay...", he gave in and she turned back around with a smile. "But I also have a condition of my own"

She thinned her eyes.

"I will help you with all of that on condition that you owe me a favour. I won't be bullied by you. You're making it a habit", he said and she laughed.

"I don't bully you"

"Yeah you don't. I just let you get away with shxt kodwa mhla ngivuka ngoleft uzothi unebhadi"(The day I decide to retaliate you'll even think you have badluck), he said and she fought the smile that was insistent on stretching her lips.

Chapter Fifty-Eight

"If I order pizza will you eat with me?", Zamo asked Melo as she sat on the desk in front of him. They were both revising business studies and it was getting dark outside. She didn't stop scribbling down on her book as she waited for an answer, nor did she turn to look at him. If somebody walked in there, they'd swear nothing was ever said between the two. Melo found her to be a bit weird sometimes.

"Debonairs?"-Melo

"Yeah. It's the only that does deliveries around here", she said.

"I don't like it much", he said in truth. She never replied. She continued jotting down her notes.

"But I do know a place where we can get the best dagwood?", he mentioned and watched her back to see her reaction. She kept her poise and calmly asked if it wasn't far.

"Nah. A seven minute drive from here", he replied.

"Mmkay. Let's go", she said and stopped writing, then stood up. Melo packed up his books and she did the same. They then left, conversing about nothings to fill in the awkward spaces.

...

Lwandile and Oluhle arrived home and he carried the suitcase in. They found Betso and Evelyn in the living room watching TV, Liwe sleeping on the couch next to her. She stood up with a wide smile, approaching her for a hug. Oluhle was also happy to see her.

"Hey you. Why didn't you say that you were coming?!", she questioned with a tone laced with excitement.

Luhle giggled.

"I wanted to surprise you"

She went over to hug her grandmother as well and it was all jolly spirits in the living room.

"I'll take this upstairs", Lwandile reported, referring to the suitcase. Betso, Evelyn and Luhle continued chatting up a storm. Luhle stood up so she could see Liwe and she immediately fell in love.

"Oh my word she looks just like you", she remarked before picking her up. Betso chuckled. She stood up to go get snacks and juice for the guest. Lwandile came back and joined them. They were busy discussing trendy topics, including the divorce of Blaze Hlongwane, a famous tycoon that was recently arrested for money laundering. Evelyn kept stealing glances at Lwa, baffled by how invested he was in the topic. His brothers couldn't care less about such.

Luhle had taken off her sneakers and lifted her legs to the couch in her white socks. Mxolisi and his father came back. He immediately dropped himself on the couch and curled up there like a millipede. He was dirty like a pig whereas Muzi was spotless. He couldn't even afford to complain to his mother since she did not know why he was being punished in the first place. Mxo was looking for the right moment to tell her, considering the mess that's being going on in the house.

"What happened to you?", everybody asked. Lwandile was trying hard not to laugh. Great concern graced

Evelyn's face. Violet was out running her own personal errands. She would've been the one to demand a sound explanation.

"Baby girl", Muzi greeted Luhle and prompted her to get up so he could hug her. She had a throw over her thighs.

"Bab' Pac'Money", she was also excited to see him. The throw fell to the floor when she got up and the smile on his face disappeared.

"You came all way from Durban looking like this?", He asked. She was wearing those ripped demon shorts with pockets sticking out like a rabid cow's tongue.

"Yeka umntwana hawu"(Leave the child alone)-Evelyn.

"Luhle?", Muzi called out in a threatening tone.

"Baba?", she answered with her fingers in her mouth.

"Sizoxabana", he warmed. She tried pulling them down but there was just not enough material.

"Soxabana Oluhle", he said with his finger pointed out. Betso knew not to get involved.

"I'll go change", she said and begged for forgiveness with through her eyes. She thought that she was at the right teenage age to be doing as she pleased. She evidently thought wrong. She dashed away. Muzi shook his head from irritation and sat down with the family. Everyone was focusing on his episode with Luhle that they forgot about the hissing Mxo on the couch. Lwandile tried to touch him and he flinched.

"Yey! Yey... don't touch. Handle with care", he said without raising his eyes to even see who was touching him.

"Umenzen umntwana Muzikayise?"(what did you do to the child?), Evelyn asked. Betso was breastfeeding. She was also curious to know.

"Mina?", Muzi asked and angled his chin towards his neck with his brow lifted.

"Yoh yoh yoh. Hayi cha. Mm-mh!"-Mxo. He was still hissing in pain. Evelyn got closer to Mxo and tried to touch him as well.

"Gogo please. If you love me, please, ungangibambi kub'hlungu nobhozo"(Don't touch me everything hurts)

"Baby?", Betso looked towards Muzi with questioning eyes.

"Kdliwan lay'khaya?"(What's for supper?), Muzi asked after standing up to pick up the bowl of peanuts and raisins on the coffee table, completely ignoring their concerned faces. Mxolisi's phone rang and he slowly, carefully took it out like he would break if he was abrupt.

"Baby?", he answered in front of everyone.

"Angikho right", he reported.

"Ngiyafa Ndalo", he said and Lwa's concern flew out the window. He exploded at Mxo's drama, laughing into the glass of apple juice he had in hand.

"Bayangizonda lay' endlin"(They hate me in this house)

"Uzondwa uba'?"(Who hates you?), Evelyn questioned.

"They don't know that before I am a son, a brother and a grandchild I am somebody's boyfriend"

"WOW!", everybody simultaneously shot out as if was something they'd agreed upon. Muzi was laughing before his phone rang. He asked to be excused and went out to take it.

"Shuluza", he answered.

"Eish skhulu"

"What's going on? Is she giving you trouble?", he asked.

"Nie man. I can explain", Shuluza began beating about the bush.

"Khuluma ndoda you're wasting my time"

"She's not here", he reported.

"What do you mean she's not there?"

"She escaped MK"

"Escaped?"

There was regretful silence from the other end of the line.

"Shuluza what do I pay you for exactly? Awungikhumbhuze?"(Remind me)

"It was a mistake. I swear"

"How does something like this happen? When did this happen? Today?"

"No it's been a couple of days now..."

"A couple of-- ! Shuluza? Ikhona I toilet kini?"(Is there a toilet at your place?)

Shuluza did not answer.

"No ngifuna ungitshela ukuthi why unyela phez'kwe khanda lami?"(I want you to tell me why you're shxtting on my head)

"Bozza askiies esnet, we thought we could find her without involving you in this mess yabo? Manje siyamfuna asimtholi yabo? And yabo manje--"

"Ngibonani Shuluza? Ukunya? Nxn!"

"Sizomthola MK. Ngiyathembis--"

Muzi cut the call and sighed in frustration. He could feel the hot air leaving his nostrils. He scratched his head before unlocking the phone so he could make a call. It rang. It was one of the men he hired to find Bongiwe's aunt.

"Ta?", he answered.

"Sho MK"

"You had better be calling for a damn good reason"

"Ah when have I ever disappointed you? She's in Mshongoville, le emikhukhwini", he briefed him.

"She lives there?"

"Yoh she's a busy woman this one. If you want to catch her you had better arrive today"

"Where do we meet?"

"I'll come to your house then we will take it from there. Thato will keep an eye on things"

Muzi cut the call and made another one.

"Philani, find Gugu and find her today", he instructed and cut the call before Philani could even say anything.

He was frustrated because he didn't know what was on Gugu's mind.

...

Melo and Zamo came back to school after getting the food and a litre of Coke, plus disposable cups. A private number kept calling and he ignored, everytime.

"I don't wish to be the person you're avoiding right now", she said and huffed out a laugh as he drank from his white cup.

"I don't take private numbers", he mentioned as she took a bite of her food.

"Why? It could be important..."

"No one important would ever call you with a hidden number trust me"

She shrugged and continued eating.

"This is actually really good", she said as she danced while seated. The food was hitting the spot.

"Is that a birthmark?, he asked while looking at the area on the side of her neck. It was too brown, in the shape of a round circle. It looked like it was drawn with precision and careful attention to detail. She nodded.

"You've known me for approximately 3 years and you're only seeing this now. I have another one that looks exactly like this"

"Where?", he asked, fascinated.

"Somewhere I can't show you", she said and continued chewing. He laughed as he picked up the sandwich.

"You have a birthmark on your bxtt?"

"No man", she laughed.

"What? You have it on your man cave?", he said with a smirk.

"My what?!", she shot out a laugh.

"Man cave. A place where a man is at his happiest"

He took a bite.

"You're naughty and abak'tsheli"(They don't tell you), she shook her head and picked up her drink.

"Nobody needs to. I already know", he said and kept a stare. She didn't move her eyes. She wanted to laugh. At the same time, she didn't want to blink. That would define her loss. He huffed out a laugh and backed out of the stare. She came out victorious. The hatred they had for one another was bathing in rose water today.

When they were done, Melo complained of a cramp and stood up to straighten his leg. Zamo went to throw the empty containers into the bin right in the classroom.

"Today was a waste. We didn't study much", Zamo said as she walked back. Melo raised his eyes and said:"No it wasn't", as he continued stretching his leg. She caught the message in his eyes. She fought the urge to blush and looked down. According to her, she was not even supposed to be having meals with him. He's an a**hole remember? Her alter ego said to her numerous times. She raised her t-shirt and he frowned, surprised.

"What are you doing?", he asked.

"Here", she pointed at the birthmark. He dropped his face and laughed when he realized what she was showing him.

"You're weird", he mentioned. She had a persistent smile fighting to occupy her lips.

"I know. I spent almost the whole day with YOU. If that's not weird I don't know what is", she said. Melo just laughed. She quickly and impulsively stole a kiss from his lips. He widened his eyes because he wasn't

expecting it.

"Uhm...", he didn't know what to say.

"I don't know what happened there. I'm sorry!", she turned away and tried to grab her bag. He pulled her back by her wrist and their chests collided. There was a hot and cold feeling in his chest. The last time a girl made him that nervous was when he started dating and had to kiss her. That feeling was back. Zamo wasn't just any girl. She was his equal. Not romantically per se but she matched his energy in a lot of things.

"Melo, I shouldn't have kissed you let's pretend it never happened", she said breathlessly. He placed his hand behind her head and his forehead against hers.

"Do you believe that?", he asked, gazing into her glassy eyes. She was also nervous.

"Hm?", he was persistent. She never replied.

"Come on. I don't even like you. I hate you Sonke and you hate me too", she defended before a smile defeated her. They both laughed but there was no shift of body posture from the two. They were exchanging breaths as their hearts threatened to beat out of their chests.

"Yeah I do", he agreed and she laughed, dropping her eyes to his slides on his feet.

"You have ugly toes", she mentioned. He laughed.

"Your eyebrows look like they were mowed by a bat at the ends", he jabbed back. She shot out a sharp laugh. He softly brushed her ear with his thumb. Suddenly she couldn't challenge him with stares anymore. She couldn't bring her eyes back.

"Your feet are hairy, australopithecus afarensis", she said.

"I can shave. What are you gonna do about your almost none existent bxxbs?", he asked and she laughed.

"That's below the belt", she was in two battles. The one with Melo and another one with her smiles.

"Unlike some of us, you have nothing to protect below your belt so no worries", his tone was coming out hoarsely now.

"You're an idiot"

"Our I.Q is almost the same so what does that say about you?"-Melo. She was defeated. He placed two fingers below her chin and raised her face. He bit his lower smiling lip first before slowly going in for the kill. She didn't fight him. She didn't protest. She allowed their lips to make love to one another and enjoyed his patience. He wasn't sloppy. She liked that.

"I don't wanna kiss you Melo", she whispered in between the kiss.

"Then stop", he said and continued kissing her.

"I'm stopping", she said and proceeded to kiss him back.

"Okay...", he said, but didn't put any halt on it.

"I'm really stopping"- her.

"I know you are", he smiled and gently grabbed onto her lower lip with his teeth.

"I'm glad there's something you're good at", she teased.

"What am I bad at?"

"Biology", she stated. He laughed lightly.

"I'm good at the practicals. The kind that's not allowed in school", he mentioned and she laughed, carefree for once. It was a blue moon.

Chapter Fifty-Nine

In his frustrated state, Muzi went back into the house to go sit with the family. Betso could see that all the laughs and smiles he was dishing out were forced and fake. The rest of them were still focusing on and laughing at the whining Mxo, who was still on the phone. Betso stood up and threw Liwe's extra pink blankie over her shoulder and communicated with Muzi through her eyes that he should follow her to their bedroom. He sighed before he standing up and took the madam's wish as his command.

She got to the room and placed the sleeping Liwe on the bed carefully before fixing her vest and taking both his hands into hers.

"Are you okay?", she asked, sincere and comforting in her tone.

He stared for a moment, digesting her question and wondering if he should tell her the truth. He heaved yet another heavy sigh and suggested they sit on the bed. They did that and he angled his body in such a way that he was facing her.

"Sthandwasami...", words under processing.

"Mbulazi?"

"There's something I need to tell you", he stated and brushed her hands with his thumbs.

"Okay?"

He thought about it speedily and decided against it, well not entirely.

"I can't quite tell you the details right now but there'll be a few men patrolling around here today, until I've sorted everything out. I'm telling you so you don't get surprised"

She frowned thoughtfully.

"You mean like... bodyguards?"

"Yes. For you and the kids"

"What is going on this time?", the frown on her face creased and sharpened.

"Please don't force this to turn into a fight. Just, trust me"

"But how do you honestly expect me to just sit around here, in the dark and not worry? Our lives are obviously in danger!", she snapped. Her ran his palm over his face.

"Yehlis' umoya sikhulume kahle mkami angith uyangizwa angik'raseli mina?" (Calm down so we can talk properly. Isn't it I'm not yelling at you?)

She pulled in some air to cool down her already flaming nerves.

"I'm sorry", she apologized and looked away. She also felt that the tone she used was off.

"I will tell you everything when I get back. I promise", he said and kissed the back of her hand.

"Back where? Uyaphi? I don't like this one bit"-Betso

"When it comes to protecting you as your husband, have I ever disappointed you?", he asked calmly and she shook her head.

"Then trust me"

"I can know what is going on and still trust you. These two things can co-exist"

He knew his wife. He knew how stubborn she was. He stood up and got her to stand also. He then cupped her chin and brought her face towards his.

"Hm-mh", she said no. He was persistent. She knew he wasn't going to give up so she gave in. He locked his eyes into hers.

"Ngiyak'thanda mommy", he said, almost voicelessly.

"Whatever you do, don't get hurt. The boys still need you. Liwe needs you", she begged with growing sorrow in her eyes. There's just never peace. Even when it's there, it's always shortlived. He turned his face to marvel at the adorable princess sleeping on the bed. The freshly picked apple of his eye.

"I know", he assured, still looking at her. He wasn't afraid of his jailbird of a wife. He was afraid of what she might do when revenge decides to stand up and make a toast before speaking on her behalf.

"What about Melo? Are you sure he's safe? Is he not affected?"

He was about to speak when his phone rang from his pocket. He took it out and swiped his thumb across the screen.

Poeletso, Tebogo's younger brother was calling to let him know that he was outside. Muzi dropped a quick smooch on Betso's cheek before leaving the room.

"Please be safe", she said desperately. She thought he was going to face the direct threat that was the cause of all this bodyguard mess.

...

Melo couldn't understand the happenings of that day as he drove back home from school. Something didn't make sense but that nonsense felt good. He got to the royal house and parked just outside the garage. Zamo to him was like a puzzle with a few missing pieces. She could wake up tomorrow and never speak to him ever again. The conclusion to his overthinking was that he was going to let her take the wheel. He caught himself smiling like a lottery winner dreaming on the first night after receiving their cash.

"Home safe?", he texted her. She immediately blueticked him and never replied.

"Mciim fxck you Nomzamo", he said and laughed to himself. He stepped out of the car and pulled his bag from the passenger seat.

While walking into the house, he called Khanyi since he promised that he would. It was late, approaching midnight.

"Baby", she answered, sounding like a person who's been quiet for way too long.

"Are you okay?", he asked as he took agile steps up.

"Yeah I'm fine. Wena?", she stated flatly.

"You don't sound fine though. What's up?", he stopped walking.

"Arg it's nothing major. I'll be good. Are you back from school?"

"Yeah. Tell me what's going on?"

"As I said, it's nothing major. How was school? Or studying rather?"

"The usual. Don't make me come over there because I'm tired"

"That's why you need to get some sleep", she giggled, a giggle that sounded like it fought layers and piles of sadness to show it's scalp.

"Let me take a quick shower I'll see you just now", he informed before cutting the call. She tried saying no but she was left to speak to herself. He took some BioPlus to liven his cells a bit before freshening up. He dashed out after he was done, to go see her.

I'm outside -- Melokuhle

After sending that text he stepped out of the car for some fresh air. He could feel that he was going to sleep if he sat in one place. He was tired and he felt it. She made her usual unlawful plans to go out and appeared a few minutes later. She blushed at the sight of him and fell into his arms. He kissed the top of her newly braided head.

"I love your hairstyle", he complimented her on the 'straight up'. She giggled like a teenager in love, which she was.

"Thanks"

"Manje tshel' isoka lakho ukuthi uhlushwa yin emoyen?"(Tell your boyfriend about what's bothering you)
She sighed.

"It's my sister", she disclosed.

"Wenzen uSis wakho?"(What did she do?)

The side of her face was still on his chest, arms wrapping around his waist as he played with her hair.

"She can't be happy for me. I initially thought the snide comments she made were indeed jokes as she made them seem but now I can see that she just can't be happy for me", she let out.

"Did something happen today?"

She nodded.

"We received trophies today at school, for netball. I brought it home and mom was over the moon, she even baked a cake. My sister kept saying that I'm busy collecting accolades for sports like it's ever going to take me anywhere in life. She went further to say that I got lucky I came out of the car accident with my legs still intact otherwise I would've been a useless paraplegic. She made it all sound like a joke but it's bothering me man", she let her chest rip and Melo listened attentively, encouraging nods here and there.

"You were in a car accident?", he asked curiously.

"3 years ago. I lost my bestfriend in that accident. Her mom still hates me because I was the one who convinced her to come along with me. I feel like we should've just stayed at home that day. She'd still be alive. I feel like I'm responsible for her death and I'm here still breathing just fine then Lizzy goes and makes jokes about something like this?"

"Askies. But it's not your fault. You couldn't have possibly known that she would die that day. Maybe she was going to die some other way or the other. Look I don't understand death myself but I know that once it targets your life then no one can save you. You couldn't have known. Stop beating yourself up about this", he said

softly and rubbed her upper hands. She kept quiet.

"About your sister, try not to let her get to you. She sounds to me like somebody who is bitter and battling with her own issues. Mam'Nokwanda always says that people who behave like that are reflecting what's on the inside of them-- the demons they're fighting. She says it's rarely ever about the next person. You probably remind her of certain failures she's struggling to deal with", he shared and she thought about what he'd just said in silence.

"Don't let her stress you okay?", he reiterated and she nodded after a sigh. He pulled her head closer to his chest and kissed her forehead.

"Can I ask you a question?"-- Khanyi

"No"

She laughed and drew her head back.

"No?"

"Yes, no. You gave me a choice and I chose the negative, nothing wrong there. If you wanted to ask you would've asked and I would have no choice but to answer"

She laughed harder than the last time.

"Okay let me just ask then"

"Ngilalele"(I am listening)

"Are you serious about us? And what do you like about me?"

"Yeah I am. Why do you ask?"

"How serious?"

"Rephrase your question so I can understand it better"

"Uhm... where do you see us in 10 years?"

He cleared his uncomfortable throat.

"That's a long time", he said as he thought about it. He never thought that far. That kind of thinking still had Busi's face embedded in it.

"Yeah. Now answer me"

"To be honest, I really don't know"

This answer was not exactly what she was looking for.

"I just want us to enjoy our relationship and if it works out we will obviously grow together. My dad once said something that stuck with me", he mentioned.

"And that is?"

"That dating is a trial and error"

"What does that mean?"

"He was basically saying that I can't really know for sure who I'm gonna end up at this age. It might work out, it might not. If I tell you that I'm sure right now, that's what you're gonna keep in your heart. When it doesn't work out you're gonna be twice as heartbroken as you would've been had I just told you the truth", he explained.

"I don't even know what this means", she said in a tone dressed in a bit of disappointment.

"Khanyi bheka, I'm here with you at this very moment. That's the only thing you should care about. A lot of things could happen between now and another moment 10 years later. I could promise you forever and die two

years from now. What then?", he questioned while staring into her eyes, which were trying hard to dodge him.

"Melo what are you saying? That I'm a side and you're not sure if you'll break up with your main?"

He ran his hand above his forehead, twice in exhaustion coupled with frustration.

"There is no main"

"There's no main?", she repeated his statement as a question and scoffed. He puckered his lips and shook his head calmly.

"That could also mean there might be somebody else but we're all sides. It's possible", she said and he laughed.

He pulled her by the chin and kissed her. He picked her up and placed her on the bonnet of the car. He then separated her legs and got in between them.

He kissed her again and said: "You stress too much".

"You're confusing me", she said with a sulking face.

"Where would I get the time to be entertaining another side?", he asked and she gasped.

"So I AM a side?!"

He dropped his face and laughed.

"Angishongo njalo mina" (I never said that)

"What are you saying then?"

He placed his hand on his neck and massaged it.

"Ngithi, in simple terms, ngiyak'thanda Bhelekazi" (I'm basically saying I love you)

She fought the blush that was insistent on making an appearance on her investigative face.

"Mciim", she was rendered speechless. He gave that charming smirk that always drives her nuts, the same smirk that pushed her into the arms of this boy. His hands travelled all the way into her dress, landing on her soft and bare skin.

She giggled when she saw the look of surprise on his face.

"Do you ever wear underwear?", he asked with his hands still under her dress. She chuckled and shook her head.

"Only when I'm on my period for the sake of the pad", she explained.

"Why don't you wear it?"

"It's uncomfortable"

"Hayi baby so you just walk around all day with no underwear on?", he questioned.

She continued to giggle and nod.

"What if you fall or faint someday?"

"Never"

"Heee. Ngath' ngiyabona", he said as he went down to squat on the ground, hands on her thighs.

"Haibo wenzani?" (What are you doing?), she was startled when he separated her legs.

"I want to taste you", he said and pulled her closer. She laughed and tried to close her legs.

"What if somebody sees us?"

"It's dark. Nobody will"

"What if--"

"We'll hear their footsteps before they can even get here"

"But baby mmm!", she couldn't finish her sentence. His moist and warm tongue was already on her clxt.

"You asked me what I like about you?", he said as he transferred his breath to her sensitized parts.

"Yes"

"I like that you're sweet", he said and licked it up.

"Okay?", she was fast running out of breath.

"I like that you're yourself around me. You don't pretend. From day one where you rapped for me till now where you send me random twerk videos", his tongue was swirling in there as he spoke in bits and pieces.

"Kuhle...", she breathlessly said as she kept her eyes shut.

"You're beautiful Khanyi. It's the random things I notice about you. From your hairline to your short fingers. From your loud giggles to how your voice always, always runs out when you speak too fast". She was trying hard not to moan and make noise, an operation headed towards a complete fail. He intentionally got up before she could reach her peak and kissed her on the lips.

"Why did you stop?", the freak in her was mad. Big mad. He rubbed his nose against hers adoringly.

"I have go", he reported and swallowed lower lip.

"Why?"

"I don't remember the last time I got proper sleep. I just want to go home, get there and die on my bed. I'll probably wake up tomorrow at midnight", he joked and shut his reddened, bloodshot eyes and she laughed.

"Go get some rest baby"

He rubbed his entire face with his palm. He then kissed her neck up all the way to her lips. When he stopped, he stared.

"What?", the question was followed by a light giggle. She had a readymade laughter, always sitting at the tip of her tongue.

"Ngiyak'thanda yezwa Khanyisile?"

...

Lwandile was skeptical about agreeing to the coffee date but he eventually went, 30 minutes late. Quinton anxiously stood up when he saw him enter through the restaurant door. Lwandile stopped to sigh before walking on. Something in him instantly regretted going there.

"Hey. I thought you weren't coming no more", Quinton greeted. Lwa didn't bother separating his lips and straining his cords to greet him. He pulled out a chair and sat.

"O-kay. I guess I deserve that", Quinton said before awkwardly sitting back down on his chair.

"What am I doing here Que?", he asked and kept a piercing eye contact. Quinton couldn't look him in the eye.

"Lwa I'm really sorry. Trust me I am. I could've handled that situation better I know but it was all so overwhelming for me", Quinton confessed.

"And it wasn't for me?"

"You're... seemingly handling it better than I am"

Lwandile scoffed.

"You're full of shxt you know that?"

"I'm sorry"

"When those screengrabs got leaked the first thing you thought of was saving yourself. I was also worried about my dad finding out that I am gay but if he did I was going to handle it without dropping you. I fell for your stupid a** and now I'm the one looking dumb. You twisted this whole situation so it suits your narrative.

Everyone who's seen those grabs and saw that long ass post you wrote on Twitter thinks of me as the typical gay guy harassing a straight dude!"

"Lwa I deleted that post later on in the day..."

"And that's supposed to make it all better? Undo it? You're slice of badly burnt toast. Not even margarine and jam can fix your fxcked up mentality. Your emotional intelligence is counting negative!", he spat out.

Que nodded slowly.

"I guess I deserve that too"

Lwa deflated his high chest and clucked, looking away.

"I want us to try again. To come out to everyone. Together", he tried to take Lwa's hands before he quickly yanked them off.

"I don't need a coming out buddy. The only reason you're here is because I didn't die just cause you gave me an ice shoulder. That bothers you. All because you think the world revolves around you", Lwa said in contempt. He was about to say more till he saw a guy waving at him at the back. He waved back and Quinton looked back to see who he was waving at. He frowned.

"You're sitting with me here but you're busy flirting with somebody else?"

"It must be a sport being you", Lwa flatly said. The guy stood up from his table and approached theirs. He looked like he was in his mid 20s.

"What's that supposed to mean?", Que asked.

"Hi", the guy simply said and Lwa was immediately taken by his deep voice. Que fell back on his chair and exhaled heavily from annoyance.

"I...hope I am not interrupting anything? I just--"the guy.

"Where here? Not at all", Lwa confidently said. Que felt a crack travelling across his heart. He calmly stood up and grabbed his phone.

"Guess I'll see you at school then?", he said to Lwa who just nodded and waited for him to leave. He did.

"Is he your... I'm sorry I didn't mean--"

"Sit", Lwandile said with a smile. The guy smiled back. He looked like a computer geek with the specs, oversized hoodie and the laptop he left at the back, the ones you see in movies. Lwandile was thinking to himself.

"The name's Bokang", he said and extended his hand.

"Boikanyo", Lwandile plainly introduced himself. The handshake took longer than it was conventionally supposed to...

...

Muzi got to Poeletso's car and got in.

"Pope", he greeted him and she greeted back. The Pope was a generally laid back kind of human being. Nobody really knew if it's an innate character or it's the weed he smoked. People could be talking about booze and he'd start an out-of-the-sky-blue topic about nanoscience when he's high. He rushed no where. He spoke with patience.

"Sho groot", he greeted back before he could start the car. They joined the road and it led to Mshongo.

When they arrived, all the Pope had to do was to point at the shack with his head before lighting up his weed.

Muzi went straight to it. He felt he needed answers. He got there and knocked three times.

"Who is it?!", the grumpy Gertrude yelled from inside. He never replied. Silence. He knocked again in the same manner. He heard shuffling from the inside and waited. When the door opened, a thrashing whip landed on him and he quickly held it. Gertrude was sitting on the bed. The man who was already attacking Muzi thinking he's a criminal was her boyfriend. Muzi held the whip by the thin end and there was a struggle till it slit him slightly on the palm.

"Let go of this thing man uyangilimaza!"(You're hurting me)

"Who are you and what do you want at this time of the night?!", the man was persistent on not listening to Muzi speak. He looked way younger than the woman he was sleeping with. Muzi managed to take it from him and whipped him back on his feet like a naughty child. He was in his checkered grey boxers so he felt the pain burning directly from his skin. He kept jumping around begging him to stop.

"Haibo. What disrespect has just entered this house?", Gertrude asked, on her feet. Muzi was still reprimanding the boyfriend.

"Take whatever you need mfethu just stop. Ibuhlungu lento"(This thing is painful)

"Oh now you know that it hurts? You're learned huh? Well we're still on undergrad. You haven't learned enough. I'm gonna whip your stupid a** until you graduate with a Masters degree in sjambok management studies!"-Muzi

"Mfethu!", the man was trying to duck and dive the beating but that bore no fruit. He grabbed Muzi by his t-shirt and Muzi stopped.

"Wang'bamba ngath ubamb' i-gown ka gog'wakho ekseni uyangazi?"(Why are you grabbing me like you're grabbing onto your grandmother's gown in the morning?)

"Exactly! Asikwazi manje ufunani la? Nayi ingulube isinonela wybo!"(We don't know you so what do you want?), Gertrude shot out from her initial position. Muzi thinned his eyes at her, nauseated. The man was trying to push him out.

"Ey izandla zakho zibusy man. Zibusy ziyang' bamba bamba yazin. Broer angijoli nawe don't touch me!", he snapped.

"Mkhiphe!"(Take him out!), Gertrude instructed sharply to the boyfriend. The man was conflicted. He tried touching Muzi again but the look on Muzikayise's face looked like a braille written warning.

"Broer, idlozi lami zanga lalibhada esontweni I'm telling you this for the last time, don't put your Ben-3 hands on me"(The ancestor in me has never set foot in any church...)

Chapter Sixty

Gertrude eventually jumped in between the sjamboker and the sjambokee because it was clearly never going to end. She flinched of pain that was obviously coming from her foot.

”Umtshelile lo Talking Tom ukuthi uyathakatha?”(Did you tell this Talking Tom that you’re a witch?), Muzi asked Gertrude. She drew her head back as it creased into a sharp frown. The man turned his questioning face towards her.

“Who are you?”, she asked.

“You don’t know me yet you’re busy bewitching me?” – Muzi

“I think you have the wrong address”, she said.

“Wrong address? Where’s the fxck is my handkerchief?”

It took a short moment for her to remember and shame graced her face like a thick splash of salad dressing.

“So you know this man?”, the boyfriend scoffed. He approached the bed and went to put on his clothes.

Gertrude was still tongue-tied and speechless. The guy unplugged his phone from the charger and went to fetch his braaipack from the fridge.

“Hawu—”, she tried to protest.

“Yey!”, he shot out angrily before opening the rack to take out his canned goods, the fish, the baked beans and all.

He scanned her from top to toe with disgust weighing down and hanging from his lips. He then walked past and left. Muzi was observing all of this quietly with his hands in his pockets.

Gertrude tried moving her lips to voice an explanation but nothing sensible came out.

“What? You can explain?”, Muzi asked in reproach.

“Let’s sit down so we can talk”, she directed him to the couch. His eyes were shooting bullets at her as he stared. She looked down. Only then did he start walking to the seat he was being offered.

“Please explain to me ukuth um’thakatha kanjani umuntu ongamazi? I could’ve lost my wife, my whole family...”, his voice was pained, she could hear it.

“I’m sorry. I really am. I tried finding you but Bongiwe did not give me the chance to explain to her about what happened. She is always busy”

“Finding me? What for?”, now he was confused. She sighed.

She bent her spine towards the floor and took off her brown sock. Her whole foot, starting from the toes to her ankle was swollen and black.

“What’s going on there and what does it have to do with what I’m asking you?”

“You’re blessed. I am finally paying for messing with the wrong person”, she stated with grief accompanying her tone. Muzi was now drowning in a pit of confusion.

“26 years ago, my husband left me after finding out that I was using umuthi to keep him. I remember his parting words very well”

“What did he say?”

“Uthe ngilibambe lingashoni. I thought he was going to harm me but he said my actions will come back to me one day”

Muzi kept quiet, processing this.

“All I wanted to do was to help my brother’s child. She has everything, but children and a man who deserves her. Bongiwe is too much of a beautiful woman for the lonely life she won’t admit to living”

“Help her using witchcraft?”

“Love portions and spells have always worked. That’s what I thought was right. That’s what I knew”

Muzi laughed in disdain. He stood up a moment later.

“This was a waste of time”, he said, deciding to let her be.

“Where are you going? I need your help. Please don’t go”

Muzi turned in her direction with a lifted, questioning brow. She got up with difficulty and took two limping steps towards him.

“If I don’t get a drop of your wife’s blood, this wound is going to spread and my whole body will rot”

“Happy dying days”, Muzi

With that, he left. She tried grabbing his wrist but he was too quick for her. She wiped the fast tear that raced down her cheek, thinking of how her brother must be disappointed in her. He once warned her about being all over the place with different sangomas. Did she listen? She dropped back down on the couch and took out her phone from the pocket of her skirt. She dialed Bongiwe’s number and the subscriber was, like most times unavailable.

He went out the shack and found Pope still smoking his blunt.

"Should I go fetch the body?", he asked and Muzi frowned in confusion. He shortly laughed after realizing what the Pope meant.

"Let's go. Ukuphi uThato?"(Where's Thato?)

"Somewhere around here", Pope replied as he put the key in the ignition.

Philani called Muzi's phone and he answered.

"Tell me you found her", he immediately said.

"Eish Pacman..."

"Don't give me that"

"I'm certain she is still in the country though. I'll make sure she doesn't skip but at the moment I can't find her. If she was making calls from a number we know or using her cards to swipe we'd find her. She's invisible right now"

Muzi exhaled through the nose, frustrated.

"But I did find one of the guys who was driving the garbage truck the day she and her friend escaped. I can't think of any other way they would've pulled this off. They're inexperienced"

"Where is he?"

"La endlini"(Here in the house)

"Where's your wife?"

"That one is for me to handle. Wena just arrive", Philani said and Muzi huffed out an unintentional laugh. Philani is an incurable chauvinist, always has been.

..

Muzi told Pope where to drop him and he did just that. He found Philani smoking outside the house.

"Pac man", he greeted him and Muzi greeted back before they could bump shoulders.

"Grand?"-Muzi

"Very much fine. Umuntu wakho is inside", he informed before pulling on his cigarette, then releasing the smoke through his nose and a little through his mouth.

"Who is he working for?"

"He won't speak"

"Where is the other prisoner?"

"Also lying low"

Muzi exhaled before rubbing his forehead in frustration. He walked inside the house and Philani squashed the cigarette stompie he had thrown on the wet grass. He then followed him in. The guy was blindfolded and tied to a chair in the living room. Muzi went over to sit on the couch. Philani lightly slapped his cheek three times to wake him up.

"Remove the blindfold I want to see him", Muzi instructed.

Philani gave him an 'Are you sure?' look. Muzi nodded. His phone vibrated and he took it out of his pocket.

"Mkami", Betso sighed in relief.

"Where are you? Please come home kago kopa"

"I'll be there just now"

"Please"

"I am fine baby but I'm on my way. We'll talk properly when I get there I promise"

Betso did not reply. The coldness in her chest disabled her from thinking straight.

"Don't stress too much I am fine. Ngiyak'thanda mommy but I have to go now", he said before cutting the call.

The guy was nobody he had seen before.

"What's your name?", the guy kept his tight silence.

"Eh mfethu ngeke siwuphinde lo mbuzo"(We won't repeat this question), Philani warned as kept his index finger pointed at him. The guy cleared his throat.

"Ngcicela amanzi"(Can I have some water?), he said instead of answering the question.

"There's plenty of time for that. Just tell me who you are and who you are working for?"

The guy kept quiet once again.

"Philani?" - Muzi

"Ta?"

"Uthi ufun amanzi lomjita. Mzele na manzi"(He says he wants water. Bring him water), Muzi said and Philani laughed. He knew from the onset of that statement that Muzi didn't mean exactly what he said. He left the room.

Muzi had his hands in the pockets of his pockets.

"I don't like begging. It is not in my DNA. I also hate being forced to do stuff I don't want to do", he calmly said and the guy looked away. Philani came back with a jug full of ice cubes and cold water. Muzi took it.

"Do you need a straw?", Muzi asked and before the guy could respond, he had already sent all the contents in that jug to the man's face. He immediately gasped and couldn't close his mouth after that.

"Who are you and who do you work for?", Philani repeated the question. He swallowed and looked away once again.

"Someone you should be afraid of", he finally spoke. Muzi scoffed. He grabbed him by the neck and slammed him down along with the chair. He had one knee on the floor.

"I'm a very busy man and you're wasting my time. Where did you drop them off?"

He still had his hand tightly wrapped around the guy's neck. He was running out of breath.

"So you'd rather die than tell the truth?" - Philani.

Muzi let his grip loosen. He raised the chair and untied him.

"Wenzan manje?", Philani asked.

"I wanna beat the stupidity out of this mongol but I want it to be a fair fight", he said as he threw the rope towards the couch. The guy remained seated. Muzi pulled his sleeves to his elbows.

"Let's see if le nkani yakho has back up or it's just there for fun"(...if this stubbornness you have...)

"My name is Victor. I work for Sjapero", he confessed. Muzi and Philano frowned.

"The fxck issat?"(Who is that?)

"He's a friend to Spinach's brother"

"Who is Spinach?", Philano asked.

"Forget that. Where did you drop them off?"

"I took Spinach to Atteridgeville and the other one to some place in Sandton"

"You said a whole lot of nothing" - Muzi

"She mentioned someone by the name of Bongwiwe when I asked if the place is safe. I think it's her sister or something"

"That's exactly what I want to hear", Muzi said before taking his phone and car keys from the couch.

"What do I do with lodoti um' umshiya la?", Philani asked and Muzi laughed.

"Make friends. Bury him. Angina ndaba"(I don't care), he said as he walked out.

"Tsek", Philani said and Muzi laughed harder.

"Ungang' bulali mfethu ngiyak'cela"(Don't kill me bro I'm begging you)

Philani lit up another cigarette.

"What do you feel like doing today, Victor?"

Victor wasn't comfortable with the tone of voice Philani was using.

"I need a drink", Victor answered cautiously.

"A drink?", Philani asked as his eyes landed on the Nando's hot sauce he always placed next to the TV stand.

...

Lwandile got woken up by a phone call. He screamed into his pillow thinking it was Que. When he finally decided to answer, it was a Bokang.

"Hi there", he got the call with a smile.

"Hey. You sound very much asleep"

"It's half past five in the morning what did you expect?", he answered and laughed.

"The day starts at five"

"YOUR day starts at five. It's a Sunday. Why are you even up so early?"

"My body is already used to waking up at this time. I can't sleep beyond 5h10", he said and sounded as if he was sipping on something hot.

"I only wake up at five on weekdays. I'm not registering myself under that game on weekends", Lwa said and sat up.

"Can I make a proposal?"

"It had better be good"

Bokang laughed before he could speak.

"I'ma let you sleep for now only if you join me for lunch at my place this afternoon. I'm cooking"

"Hol' up. Just who the hell do you think you are? I don't need your permission to sleep in my own bed", Lwa said and they both laughed.

"Please...", Bokang humbly begged. Lwa sighed.

"Since you're asking nicely, I can't really turn you down now can I?"

"Nah you honestly can't"

"Okay. Don't add turmeric to any of your dishes. It gives me a bad rash", he instructed with his finger raised as if Bokang was standing right in front him.

"Noted. Anything else?"

"Don't make corny jokes or else I will leave immediately"

Bokang shot out a laugh.

"That too is noted. I'll come pick you up?"

"No you will send me your location and I will arrive"

"Cool. Looking forward to seeing you again"

"Stock up on some good wine also", he said.

"That's not how it works"-Bokang

"How does it work?"

"You're the guest. You're the one who brings the wine"

Lwa sighed with a smile.

"You think this is America I see. Hase mo States mo"

"It's pure manners", Bokang defended.

"Okay fine. Rupert and Rothschild?"

"I don't know. That ball is entirely in your court. Let's see if you know your wine", Bokang said and Lwandile scoffed flirtatiously.

"See you then, Mr examiner"

"Let me get some work done"

With that, they ended the call and he slipped out of bed. He went over to knock on Mxo's door and let himself in, thinking he was still asleep. He was on the phone.

"I'm busy. Go away", Mxo said to him and Lwa sat on the bed without any care in the world. Mxo laughed as he sat against the headboard.

"As I was saying sthandwasami, I really miss that hot, slippery, wet... mh!!", Mxo said deliberately. They weren't even talking about sex before Lwa walked in. Lwandile turned in his direction with a face that yelled "Too Much Information". Ndalo caught on and she couldn't stop laughing.

"Mm! I can just hear you moaning softly in my ear telling me not to stop. Dammit Ndalo ngiyak'khumbula baby!", he continued joking around but he meant it. Lwa stood up and raised his hands in the air in surrender. Mxo exploded in laughter.

"Lemme talk to this nosy duplicate I'll call you back. And go eat. Stop starving my baby"

He laughed at the response and cut the call.

"Tell why I had to drop the keeper of my heart, the MOTHER of my child to speak to you and the reason had better be good"

Lwandile laughed.

"I am going on a date", he informed. Mxo frowned.

"If it's Quinton I swear I am going to carry you out of here myself to go throw you in the pool?", Mxo threatened and Lwandile sat down on the corner of the bed, facing away from him. Mxo got out of the sheets and went to sit beside him.

"Lwa, Quinton is not the only guy on this planet. There's plenty of guys who'd see it as a blessing to have you in their lives. Let this fool go. Ucelwa yimina ke?"(I am begging you)

"It's not him", Lwa corrected before biting his upper lip, blushing.

"Oh?"

Lwa shook his head.

"Then who is it?"

"His name is Bokang. Met him in a coffee shop when I was meeting up with--", he stopped himself from finishing that sentence. "I met him in a coffee shop"

"So you like him?"

"I don't know but I think he's my type. From the little I've seen, he's very intelligent. Easygoing. He's a computer scientist"

"How old is this person?"

"24"

"He's 8 years older than you?"

"Nobody judged you when you slept with a woman old enough to be your young aunt", Lwa said and Mxo laughed.

"That was a once off thing. Not an entire relationship"

"As MQ would say, ihhashi ne donkey. Konke kyafana"(A horse and a donkey. They all the same)

"Speaking of which, what happened with her?"

"Who? Belinda?"

Lwa nodded.

"I've no idea. Guess she stayed in her loveless marriage. I wasn't interested in having anything proper with her.

MOVING ON, you said you have a date?"

"Yeah and I have no idea what to wear"

"Don't try too hard. It sends all the wrong signals", Mxo advised and Lwa received a text on his phone. He attended to it.

"Are we gonna ask or just let things be?", he questioned as he typed.

"Ask what and who?"

"Mom and dad. She drops a bomb on us, they both end up in hospital and when they get back they're lovey dovey again? Naaahhh"

"Angisay' ngen min iyndaba za bazali bakho. They happy now and that's all I want to see. We almost lost them both. They're alive and here. Everything else is insignificant"

"I guess. You'll fetch Okuhle from the party right? I promised her I would", Lwa said before he could step out of the room.

"What time is her flight?"

"I think she said half one"

"Ngimlanda manje"(I'm fetching her now), Mxo's bully self said. Lwandile laughed.

"Please don't ruin this for her. Fetch her at eleven at least"

"Ngithi ngimlanda manje manje manje"(I'm fetching her now now), he insisted as he typed on his phone.

They were both laughing.

"Mxo..."

"Okay fine. I'll fetch her at ten"

"ELEVEN"

"TEN"

Lwa shook his head as he laughed it off then closed the door.

...

When Melo woke up at midday, he was disoriented beyond immediate repair. Hungry and sickly like he had borrowed his stomach to a reckless alcoholic. He could smell the fresh cookies all the way from the kitchen. While making his way there, he hopped onto his WhatsApp to reply to texts. He was still left on read by Zamo. Khanyi had sent him a meme and Londiwe was mad that he went to bed without saying goodnight, which he did but the message did not go through. He rang her up and she answered.

"Hey"

"Hey kuba'? Ngoban?"(Who are you saying "Hey" to?)

She sighed.

"Baby", she said.

"That's my girl. Are you okay?"

He was taking slow steps downstairs.

"Melo I can't be telling you the same thing over and over again. I hate it when you go to bed without letting me know because I'd be worrying about you whereas you'd be sleeping peacefully"

"Okay let's start here. The first time it happened, my battery died and I was too tired to charge. The second time, I was at the hospital. Yesterday, I sent the text but for some reason it didn't go through"

"I saw that text but you could've easily sent it now"

"You want a screenshot of the time I sent it?"

She kept quiet.

"I'll do no such thing. I'd never lie to you about something like this. If I didn't send it I would've simply apologized", he said and she didn't reply. "Londi? Ha.ah baby we can't be fighting over this ngikukhumbule kangaka. I want to hear your cute giggles. They brighten up my day", he softly said and she couldn't hold them back.

"This is exactly what I want to hear"-Melo

"Udlala ngami yaz"(You're playing with me)

They both laughed.

"Hawu, can't a man crave for his woman's laughter? I hate it when you get mad"

"Then stop making me mad"

"What should I do? Make you cum?", he asked with a naughty tone and she cleared her a speechless throat, laughing. Mam'Nokwanda heard him speak inaudibly but he just wasn't arriving.

"Makhosonke!", she called out.

"Ma?!", he answered and blocked the voice receiver with his hand.

"I haven't seen you in a while woza man. It's like you don't live her anymore"

He laughed.

"This conversation is not over", he said to the obviously blushing Londiwe and cut the call.

"Good morning family", he said cheerfully when he walked into the kitchen. Enhle laughed when Nokwanda gave him a look. She had flour on her cheek and a red apron on. He avoided Nokwanda and laughed as he opened the fridge. He knew a lecture was coming.

"Why is your food still in the oven? Boy what did you eat last night?", she interrogated with her hands on her waist. He took out a bottle of water and started drinking, in a rush to swallow so he could answer before she fires some more.

"I had take-aways", he lied. He never ate.

"I cook and you prefer to go eat outside?", she asked with a pretentious frown. He laughed and approached her.

"It's not like that", he tried to assure as he dropped his hands on the shoulders of her short self.

"What is it like then?", she was on the verge of laughing.

"I will eat just now I promise"

"Of course you will. It was not not a request", she said sharply before hitting him with the dishcloth in her hand.

He ducked and laughed.

"Let me go check on the laundry. Make sure my pots don't burn", she said before leaving. Melo grabbed a chair and a cookie from the table. Enhle hit his fingers but said:"These are not for you!"

He laughed as he took a bite.

"Since when do you bake?", he asked as he chewed. She laughed.

"Forever", she continued painting the top of the raw cookies with whipped egg.

"These are actually very nice", he complimented.

"And here you are thinking I can't bake"

A light laughter left him.

"I've never seen you do it that's why"

"Mciim. Please add some sugar to the gravy", she instructed and he got down from the chair. He searched the cupboard for the jar and found it.

"So, have you found a date for your matric dance?"-Enhle. Melo was trying to find a spoon.

"There's no need. I'm not going"

She stopped what she was doing and placed her hands on the kitchen counter.

"Why not? One teaspoon should be enough", she said and he did as instructed.

"I just don't feel like it", he let out and she couldn't conceal the surprise on her face.

"Every kid wants to attend their matric dance"

"I went as a date last year. Nothing much to see there"

"I am not having that. We are calling in a designer to take your measurements. Call your date to the house so we can have her measurements too", she instructed and was not willing to take any no for an answer.

"Kodwa aunty..."

"No buts. Melo you have been through a lot. You need this"

He grabbed his bottle of water and stood thoughtfully against the fridge. She nodded softly with care in her eyes.

He then sighed.

"Okay fine. I'll call her"

"Yay!", she danced in excitement and he laughed.

"Just don't make me wear anything crazy"

She laughed.

"Don't you trust me?"

He thinned his eyes and walked to the microwave to get his plate. She hummed blissfully and continued with her task.

Chapter Sixty-One

“Hey, stranger”, Bokang greeted flirtatiously as he stood against the side of the door. Lwa smiled and handed the blackish brown bottle over. Bokang took it. Lwa’s eyes couldn’t help but explore his skinny shaven legs.

“Please, do come in”, Bokang offered courteously and made way. Lwa did exactly that.

“What’s this?”, asked the host, inspecting the wine curiously.

“I have no idea. Took it from my dad’s stuff”

Bokang laughed.

“You mean stole it?”

“Depends how you choose to look at it”, Lwa said as he laughed and took a seat in the lounge.

“Come with me to the kitchen. Not done cooking”

“It’s just eight steps away from here”

Bokang released a light laughter.

“Are you undermining my place?”, he asked and Lwa stood up.

“I have a huge problem with how you interpret things” – Lwa. He spoke as he walked behind him and fixed the back of his t-shirt.

Bokang laughed and proceeded the kitchen.

“How come you never speak vernac?”, Lwa questioned before hiking up the chair.

“My pronunciation sucks. I always sound like a stuttering parrot”, he stated stirring the samp in the pot.

Lwa exploded in a fit of laughter.

“But you can hear Pedi perfectly right?”, he asked, in between laughing breaks. Bokang was laughing as he attended to his pots. He nodded.

“Ere leina laka ke nna Bokang ke dula Fischer Estate and ke rata makhelwane waka?”(Say ‘My name is Bokang and I reside at Fischer Estate and I love my neighbour?’), Lwa teased. He was still laughing. Bokang laughter harder, with his back on Lwa.

“Mciim stop it please”

“Just say it and die once?”

“Lina laka ki Bokang ke dola Fischer Estate akimrati makhwelwan wak kagori ke stlatla. There. I’ve said it!”(… I don’t like my neighbor because he is an idiot), he shot out and punctuated with a laugh. At this point, Lwa was dying.

“Wait. What?”, Lwa asked in ridicule, wiping the tears in his eyes.

“You asked for it”

“But how can you not speak your home language? Were you raised by white people? Hope I’m not striking any nerve here”

“Not at all. I went to multiracial schools. All my life. Even at home, my parents spoke to me in English. There was no opportunity for me to learn”

“That’s not cute at all”

Bokang shrugged.

“What about other family members?”

“Yhuu. I used to feel like an outcast at family gatherings as a kid. I didn’t understand why they never wanted to play with me. I thought they didn’t like me as a person, only to grow and realize that it was because of the language barriers”

“Do they like you now?”

They shared a two second look before exploding in laughter.

“As kids, it was purely the language barrier. Now, I’m labelled a snob. As if they know the meaning of the word”, he explained as he poured Lwa some cold orange juice from a glass jug he took out from the fridge.

“Ice?” – Bokang

Lwa said no and took the tall glass he was being offered.

“And you?”

“What about me?”, Lwa asked as he took a slow patient sip.

“What’s your story?”

“What do you wanna know? I’m 16, I have a twin—“

“Wait. You’re what?”

“Sixteen”, he repeated shamelessly.

“No way”, Bokang said and a laugh of disbelief left his lips.

“How young do I know?”

“I don’t know... 19? Your body structure, the things you say”

“I get that a lot”

“You’re a rich kid ne?”, Bokang asked with his glass angled towards and pointed at Lwa as he stood against the cupboard. Lwandile laughed.

“What makes you say that?”

“It’s all the vitamins your parents bombard you with”, Bokang said and Lwandile let out an even louder laughter.

“That’s utter bullshxt. Where do you even get that theory?”

“It’s a hypothesis I happened to put—“, he cut off his sentence when he realized that the steam from one of his pots was lifting the lid and making that burning sound when water comes into contact with hot surfaces. “It is just a theory I happened to put together. It makes sense”, he completed his statement when he was done giving his pots the attention they required.

“Rubbish...” – Lwa.

“Anywaay, you said you have a twin?”

Lwa nodded and swallowed the juice.

“Identical?”

“Yup”

“A boy?”, Bokang asked and Lwandile shot out a laugh.

“Identical twins are ALWAYS the same, in everything. It’s only in fraternal cases where you find differences”

Bokang laughed at himself.

“THAT, that actually makes sense. Now I feel dumb”

“Yeah that was a very blonde moment for you”, Lwandile said, doing absolutely nothing to console his bruised intelligence quota.

“What’s the difference anyway?”, he asked, genuinely curious.

“Identical twins form when one egg is fertilized by the same sperm and then it divides—the egg. Fraternal twins according to me are just your usual siblings who just happened to share a womb—different eggs fertilized by different sperm cells”, Lwa elaborated.

“Interesting. So you look alike? Everything and all?”

“No one can tell us apart at first and second sight. Except when he’s wearing a short sleeved t-shirt”, he laughed as he spoke.

“Why is that?”

“He has a tattoo now”

“Personality wise?”

“TOTALLY different people. Everything that I am, he’s the polar opposite”

“Do you have a life outside of your relationship with him?”

“Yeah actually. We started growing apart when we were 12 or 13 I think”

“Apart?”

“Not that kind of APART. We’re still close but we can’t be at the same places at the same anymore. It used to hurt me till he made it make sense”, he stated before taking out his vibrating phone. Mxo was calling.

“I am fine and still alive thanks for checking up on me bye”, he began rambling after answering the call. The twin laughed.

“So you still good?” – Mxo.

“Yeah”, he answered and smiled.

“Cool. You have me on speed dial if you need anything”, he said before cutting the call.

“Was that him?”, Bokang asked.

“Yup”

“Sounds like a level-headed individual. I’m getting those vibes from—“

Lwandile exploded before he could finish his sentence, laughing.

“Level what now?”

...

Bongiwe and Gugu sat in the lounge watching *Desperate Housewives*. Gugu was having white wine while Bongiwe drank milk, sharing a bowl of seasoned popcorns.

“He’s still not taking your calls?”, Bongi asked when she realized Gugu’s mind was far and wandering. Gugu shook her head and pursed her lips sadly.

“He’s not taking mine too. I hate being caught up in this. Now my godson hates me”

A knock sounded from the door and Bongiwe stood up and placed the half a glass of milk on the coffee table.

“That must be the pizza...”, she said as she walked barefoot in her black jeans, headed towards the door. She opened the door and instant panic flushed down on her. She impulsively closed the door but Muzi had already placed his foot in.

“Uhm... MUZI, what are doing here?”, she said loudly so Gugu hears her and runs. Gugu popped her eyes and immediately stood up, tip toeing her way upstairs.

“You never call me that. Where is she?”, he gravely asked and Bongiwe swallowed, trying to piece together a convincing answer.

“She—“

“Get away from the door I don’t want to hurt you”, he said and kept a warning stare.

”Mr K Gugu is not her—“

“NGITHE, suka emnyango Bongiwe”(I SAID, get away from the door)

Bongiwe sighed and Muzi walked in.

“See, she’s not here”, she tried to convince. He scanned the room in silence. Two pairs of slippers next to the couch. He saw them and looked at her, silent.

“Those belong to my sister, who’s also not here. She left them there yesterday”

“You’re still lying?” – Muzi

She kept quiet. The bottle of wine on the table.

“So, you’re drinking both milk and wine all at the same time? What a cocktail”, he said and continued scanning around, slow steps, both hands in his pockets”. He went up.

“You’re invading my privacy”, Bongiwe said as she walked behind him. Muzi never replied, instead he kept walking.

“Nice pictures. How old were you here?”, he asked nonchalantly as he passed by her childhood portraits on the wall. Bongiwe exhaled from impatience, praying that Gugu found a good hiding spot.

Doors to three of the rooms were closed, except one. He twisted the handle and it refused to open.

“MaDlamini. I know you’re in there. Open the door”

Bongiwe just stood behind him with one hand on her waist. He wasn’t willing to repeat himself. After a moment, she unlocked the door but never opened it.

“If you hurt her...”, Bongiwe warned.

“Uzokwenzan?”(What are you gonna do?), Muzi asked and Bongiwe frowned. He raised both brows to emphasize the fear he did not have.

“Mr K...”

“Please excuse me. I need to speak to my wife”

She sighed and left in defeat.

He walked in and found her sitting on the bed, eyes dropped to her thighs. He studied her for a moment.

“That look doesn’t suit you. Drop the act” – Muzi

She exhaled and raised her eyes.

“You look good”, she complimented without a shadow of a smile. He walked over to go sit next to her. He loosely intertwined his fingers

Silence...

He eventually turned his face towards her.

“Gugulethu?”

No response. He turned his sight back to his hands.

After a while...

“Did you mean it?” —Gugu.

“Mean what?”

“When I called. You said there is no us. Did you mean it?”

“Did I sound unsure?”

She scoffed.

“For what it’s worth, I feel I need to say this since you never gave me the opportunity to. I am sorry”

“For which part?”

Silence.

“Sleeping with my brother and lying about it? Trying to murder my wife? OR trying to kill me tell me which part”

“Everything”

“I wanted to keep you locked up because I can’t kill you. Here you are, out and free. What happens now?”

“Now?”

He nodded.

“Now you will keep me out of that horrible place and allow me to have a relationship with my son”

He scoffed and fixed his watch.

“You hate me MaDlamini. You tried to kill me. How do I know that you’re not going to kill him just because he will obviously remind you of me?”

“I’d never— Dammit I gave birth to him. He doesn’t belong to you!”

“You’re right. He doesn’t belong to me. He belongs to nobody. I raised him to become a man and men make their own choices. You cannot dictate to a man. What’s gonna happen now is that we will both meet up with him AFTER his final exams and tell him the whole truth”

“Tad too late for that”

Muzi frowned.

“I told. Everything”, she added.

He kept silent.

“I told him everything and he stormed out. He isn’t taking any of my calls and he doesn’t want to speak to me. So listen up hubby, I will be a part of my boy’s life and you make sure of it. You owe me that much. I agree, all this should be done after his exams”

Muzi exhaled from a place of taxed patience.

“I’m gonna need you to disappear. I’ll set you up in a different country and make sure you have everything you need. Just make sure I never see your gorgeous face again and we’ll be good. I’d hate to make you a statistic”, he said and stood up.

“Angiyi ndawo”(I am going nowhere), she firmly stated and folded her arms.

“Angizwa?”(What was that?)

“Stop abusing your power Muzi and think of our kids. I’ve managed to reach Ava and we’re sorting our issues out. Don’t stand in the way of my relationship with Melokuhle. We both know you won’t kill me”

He stood and watched the audacity unravel. He leaned as if wanting to kiss her and placed his hand on the back of her neck.

“Mabuyi?”, he eventually said something, lowly.

“Zikode…”

“Ngizok’nyisa ugcine usufunana nomuntu ok’thakathayo engekho. Don’t test me” (I’ll fxck you up so bad you’ll end up blaming nonexistent witchcraft), he calmly warned.

She remained quiet but kept the attitude. He stood up straight and watched her for a brief moment before leaving.

…

The thing about secrets is that they have a heavy presence. They demand to be treated with respect and delicacy for as long they’re adorned in a dark robe. Manqoba walked into the living room and found Evelyn seated by herself, clearly stressed as she massaged her temples. She had her legs elevated on an ottoman.

“Have you tried aspirin?”, he said and unintentionally startled her. She jerked up from her seat and only started relaxing when she saw that it was just him. She sighed and shook her head.

“Has Muzi spoken to you about Odaliwe’s ancestral ceremony?”, she asked and he nodded.

“Speaking of uMuzi, when are you actually planning on telling him the truth? You cannot hide such a big secret forever and I am surprised the ancestors haven’t exposed you yet”, he said and looked at her for an answer. She anxiously shook her head.

“Not yet. Manqoba he will never forgive me. You know your brother and I cannot afford to lose him”

”You lost him the very same day you betrayed him. Now you’re pulling me in on this”, he scolded and she swallowed a rough lump.

“I have a bad feeling about all of this”, he said and his phone began ringing from the table. “I am giving you 72 hours to come clean or else I will do it for you”

She was about to protest but he had already answered the phone.

“When did this start?”, he continued speaking on the phone.

He sighed and cut the call.

“What’s going on? Who was that?”

“Administrative office. Apparently uSabelo no bab’mncan are busy selling pieces of land for R2300”

He dropped and rested his head on the leather couch.

“Wait. They scamming people now?”

“Seems like it”

He felt the headache coming back.

...

Melo sat on his bed lying on his back. Different thoughts kept fighting for top priority in his mind. He sat in the dark with the back of his hand on his forehead. The phone screen lit up from the charger and glanced at it. A call was coming through. He deflated his cheeks and accumulated the strength to get up. He smiled when he realized that Zamo was calling.

“Missing me already?”, he answered. She laughed.

“You’re so full of yourself. I need a favour”, she said.

“I wonder. What is it?”

“Jessica left with my textbook and she’s gonna bring it with to school. I amnot coming in so I am gonna need you to take it off her hands and I’ll take it from you. If you don’t she’s gonna give me the runaround when I need it. Can you do that for me?”

“I get the book from Jess, keep it with me and you’ll get it the next day at school. Got it baby girl”

“No I need you to bring it to my house around 5. Please I’m gonna use it at night”

“Just say you can’t go a day without seeing my face. Today was torture wasn’t it?”

She tried to conceal her laugh.

“Sonke are you gonna bring the book or not?”

“Not until you admit that you miss me”

“I don’t fxcking miss you’re a** I just need my book”

“I’ll tell Dylan to bring it. It makes more displacement sense”

“I don’t want Dylan anywhere near my house”

“But you want me?”

She sighed dramatically.

“Yekela” (Just leave it)

“Fine I’ll bring it, your Nkani-ness”

She shot out a laugh and said her thanks.

Chapter Sixty-Two

Muzi arrived home and found Mxo talking on the phone, watching television at the same time. He removed the phone from his ear and greeted his dad, who was already changing the channel.

“Ja saan”, Muzi greeted him back. Mxo laughed at the provocative tone his father used.

“Ukuphi uLwandile?”, Muzi asked as he channel-hopped.

“Taking a shower”, Mxo answered.

“Come call me when he’s done”

Mxo gave him a thumb up and Muzi left. He got to the bedroom and found his wife carefully putting Liwe to sleep in her cot.

“Baby”, he greeted as he closed the door behind him, slowly and cautiously. She never replied, nor looked in his direction.

“Sthandwasami. Ngicela s’hlale phansi sikhulume mama” (Let’s have a seat and talk), he requested chivalrously before sinking down on the bed. Nothing on her face said she was mad but he knew she was. She tried to settle down next to him but he placed his hand underneath her bxtt and made her stand up again. She knew exactly what that meant. She got in between his legs and sat on his thigh. He had his hands stroking and placed on the small of her back.

“There’s something I want us to discuss. Angazi ukuthi ngizoy’ qala ngakuphi le kodwa... UMadlamini uphumile ejele”(MaDlamini is out of prison)

Betso kept her poise.

“Ungizwile makaLiwe?”(Did you hear me?), he asked. She nodded.

“Is that where you’ve been when you were away?”

“Not necessarily but yes”

“Do you have her number?”, she questioned and kept a grave stare. He frowned.

“We can’t live with guards forever. You’re having the kids watched without their permission and that’s not okay”

“You don’t need to worry about—“

“Apart from the guards and all, I just want to speak to her. Please”

Muzi scratched his head. He was about to reply when he felt his phone vibrate.

“Uxolo kancan sthandwasam”, he asked to be excused before taking it.

“Yes?”

“Wenzen uLwandile?”(What has Lwandile done?), he questioned with a raised brow and Betso unsuspectingly paid careful attention. Muzi laughed.

“I know”, he continued speaking to whoever on the phone.

“Yes. I know. Your job is to make sure he’s safe. Nothing else”

He cut the call and Betso asked what was going on.

“Nothing you need to worry about. As I was saying—“

“If it concerns my son then I need to kno—“

“I know that uLwandile is gay”, he said, deadpan. Betso’s face went pale.

“Huh?”, her brain was still a scrambled.

“Uthi huh? Aikhulume ngento esiy’hlalele la asseblief?” (Can we please discuss the topic at hand?), he was a second away from a sigh.

“Wait. How long have you—“

“Doesn’t matter. If you want to meet up noMadlamini then I’ll have to be there”

“That will defeat the whole purpose. I want peace”

“And how do you plan on achieving that? Mabuyi is very unpredictable and I don of put out fires. Let me handle her”

“Do you want her back?”

“Iqhamukaph’ manje leyo?” (And where is that coming from?)

“Don’t get me wrong. This is not an attack. Answer me Mbulazi”

“Cha” (No)

He dropped her slightly smiling face and looked at him suspiciously”

“Yin manje? Ngithe cha” (What is it now? I said no), he gave a sober response. She exhaled and took his hand.

“There’s a lot at stake here. I know you haven’t but I’ve been forgiven her. We can’t live this. Melo needs his mother”

“This is not only about you sthandwasami and k’fanele ukuzwisise lokho. Nicabangela yena uMelokuhle and everyone else around him. I could’ve handled this whole situation better from the start ngiyavuma, but everything she has done is unforgivable. Ngiyaxolisa”

“Can I give you some advice?”

“Cha. Lala ngoba ukhathale” (Sleep cause you’re tired)

“No baby listen. I believe she acted out of anger. I know I haven’t been saying anything but I’ve been thinking about this whole situation all these years. Plus Melo not wanting to come stay here, it made me question a lot of things. Our relationship is fine noboy but there is this holding back he always does. Like he feels as though he’d be betraying his mom if he displayed all the love that’s due to her, to me. That hurts me because I love him. However, in my being hurt, I also understand that he needs his own mother”

“Ngicela ukuyogeza?” (Can I please go bath?), he kept a straight face and she sighed, before standing up. He took moderately quick steps to the bathroom. Liwe started crying.

“You’re cranky today nana. Hm? Whats long?”, she babied her as picked her up. She sat with one foot on the bed and the other hanging. Muzi came back shirtless.

“Can I?”, nothing about his foul mood had changed but he still wanted to hold her. She knew better than to argue. She handed the baby over. It took him a minute to calm her down. A smile grew on his face when she began dozing off and smiling in her sleep. Betso stood up to watch this. She smiled too and brushed Liwe’s chin as she laid in her father’s arm.

“I wonder what she’s dreaming about...”, she said adoringly. Muzi snorted a laugh before saying:”Ukhuluma nokhokho bakhe” (She’s speaking to her ancestors)

He continued rocking her to complete sleep. A knock sounded from their door and Betso went to get it.

“Nithe ngin’ bize” (Y’all said I should call you”, Mxo said with both his hands languidly hanging from his sides.

“Nna?” (Me?)

“Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. Genesis something verse something. Are the two of you not married?”, he asked with a straight face and his parents were already laughing.

“Ulazeph ibhayibheli wena?” (Where did you get that?), Muzi asked from within the room as he placed Liwe down.

“I heard it from a bishop this morning on some prayer show”, he said passively and walked in.

“Oya kae nou?” (And where are you going?), Betso asked.

“I’m taking the baby sis with me”, he said and climbed on the bed.

“But she’s sleeping nje!”, the rents shot out at the same time. Liwe started crying.

“See what you’ve done now? Woza baby there’s obviously no peace in this room”, he picked her up and left. They laughed a moment later”

“Are you sure this is our son?”, Muzi asked, still laughing.

“I am sure he’s YOURS!”, she said with humorous vehemence. Muzi clucked before heading back to the shower.

...

After another identity fight with his mother, Mthokozisi left her house and headed towards Sfiso’s.

“Baba!”, he yelled to no response when he found the front door unlocked. He yelled once more but Sfiso never replied.

He walked into the first room to search for him but he wasn’t there. He stopped walking when he felt like he was hearing moans from the next room. He paid careful attention with a frown on his face. The moans grew louder and confirmed what he thought was happening. He sighed and shook his head. He dropped his weight on the bed, lazily looking around. The fxck-me-harders were getting louder and more irritating. He shot up from the bed wanting to leave but the forest-green checkered sleeve that appeared from the slightly open wardrobe caught his attention. It looked new and expensive but definitely on his father’s style. The same Sfiso who wore washed out worksuits to his friends’ weddings owning a designer item? Nah.

He walked closer to inspect it. He loved it for himself. He took it out and fitted it. It was a bit big on him. He walked to the mirror to check himself out. He laughed to himself when he imagined Sfiso in it. The mere image of that didn’t make any sense. He inserted his hands into the pockets and shrunk his face when he felt a hard item in one of them. He took it out and immediately popped his eyes when he realized it was a Hublot watch he was holding in his hands. There is no way Sfiso could afford that. No fxcking way. He inspected the watch some more and started doing the math. Rain drops started hitting the roof.

He scoffed before taking the jacket off so he could raid the room more comfortably. He threw it on the bed and knelt down next to it, looking underneath. A thin and long box was carefully placed under the bed on top of the brown and never vacuumed carpet. He could see it was a box even though it was dark under there. He thought

about lifting the bed but decided against it. It was going to waste time. He went back to the wardrobe and searched it. He skipped Sfiso's usual old clothes and took out the brown box he noticed on the floor of the wardrobe. It was a storeroom for Sfiso's old shoes, soccer magazines and ancient cassette tapes and vinyls. He unpacked them to find anything suspicious. He found exactly what he was looking for. Stacks of cash and three more designer watches.

"What the—", he had two in his hands when he heard Sfiso and lady laughing. He dropped them in the box and dashed out of the house.

...

Evelyn took her usual evening bubble bath and brushed her teeth, watching the rain fall through the window above her square mirror. She was a lover of rain. She enjoyed the smell of the soil after it stops. She took longer than usual to brush her teeth – distracted. When she finally spat out the paste and washed her mouth, she took some mouthwash into her mouth and spat that out also. She then grabbed the towel meant to wipe her mouth and did just that, standing upright with her eyes shut. She kept the towel there and opened her eyes. Her heart almost stopped when she realized a figure standing behind her. Her late husband stood there calmly like there was nothing wrong with that set up. Her breathing rate was untamed and out of control.

"Awulaleli. Awuzwa" (You don't listen), he said with so much dominance, looking at her through the mirror. She wanted to speak, but yet again, her tongue was tied and twisted like a wet and rusted old rope.

"Ngizamile ukuk' khulumela. Ngethembe uma ngithi ngizamile. Kodwa ngoba ufuna ukubona ngamehlo, impela yilokho ozok'thola"(I tried to advocate for you. Trust me I have tried but because you're a Thomas, that's exactly what you're going to reap"

Her heart thudded against her chest and she felt the ice cold blood in it mix up abruptly. She quickly turned to face him to beg for mercy but it was like he was never there.

She ran out of the room like a madwoman in her long silky nighty and matching robe.

"Haibo ujahwa uban?!"(Who is chasing you?!), a stupefied Manqoba questioned after catching and stopping her from running past him. Her breathing was labored and rough. She pointed forward and he nodded so she could speak. Her knees couldn't sustain her. She fell back in his arms as her eyes slowly shut.

"Ma?!", he yelled out and gave gentle slaps on her cheek to shake up her sinking consciousness. She felt her temperature and it was normal. Melo came out of his room to see what was going on and he immediately ran towards the room to check on his ugo.

"What happened to her?", he asked before he could also feel her temperature with his palm.

"I have no idea", Manqoba said as he waited for the family doctor to answer her phone.

"Dr Xulu hi. I am terribly sorry for calling you this late but can you quickly, quickly come to the house please?", he politely asked and waited for a response. "Sure thanks", he cut the call and handed Melo the phone. He then carried Evelyn back to her bedroom.

Meanwhile in the living room...

Enhle was passively scrolling through her WhatsApp stories, watching a movie and having a slab of white chocolate at the same time. He noticed Muhluri had posted an update during the day but doubted viewing it. She scrapped the idea and clicked on it. She almost choked on her chocolate when she realized that he had posted a picture of himself. A hand with long white manicures was hugging his forehead. It seemed like he had his head in between the owner's thighs. Something in her did not like that picture, heavily. She drank her juice and continued inspecting the picture. She hated that she knew his smile and what she saw there was the genuine version of it.

The doctor arrived ten minutes later and the guards let her in. Enhle was walking into the kitchen to go put away her glass when she saw her running up the stairs.

"Hey what's—", she wanted to question her but the doctor afforded her no time. She carelessly placed the glass in the sink and also ran up.

Evelyn was awake when the doctor arrived. Manqoba was sitting on her make-up chair and Melo on the bed with her. They placed her under her sheets and forced her to remain in that position and not sit up. The doctor checked her pulse, if her pupils are equal and react normally to light with her penlight torch.

"Everything seems fine to me. However, I am going to need you to bring her to my surgery first thing tomorrow so I can do a full inspection and run some tests. She is at a very critical age where anything from a stroke to a cardiovascular arrest can occur"

"I am fine. There is no need for that", Evelyn said weakly.

Manqoba kept a death stare. The doctor laughed. She knew him quite well.

"A cardiovascular arrest is a heart attack Mr Khumalo", she mentioned and he scoffed. Melo laughed. Enhle's eyes moved from the laughing doctor to the smiling chief. She didn't understand whatever was going on but she didn't like it. However, she was proud of herself. The old her would've reacted irrationally, propelled by a burning chest. But the her that's undergoing therapy understood that jealousy was something she couldn't control feeling but she also understood that she had full control on how much she allowed it to control her.

...

Muzi sat with his whole family in Lwandile's bedroom. Betso sat on the chair next to the study table, breastfeeding as the boys sat on the bed. Muzi was standing, hands in the pockets of his trackpants.

"Uhm... You both know that umama ka Melo has been in jail ever since you were born right?"

"Even though you refused to tell us why", Mxo mumbled and Muzi asked him to repeat what he'd said even though he heard him quite clearly since he was standing next to him. Mxo kept quiet.

"Please behave ngifun ukulala mina" (I want to sleep), that was the other duplicate reprimanding his lawless twin.

"Long day?", Muzi asked with a suspicious look on his face.

“You could say that”, Lwa answered and prayed that the topic ends right there and then. Betso cleared her throat. He changed his mind about speaking about Gugu and decided to tackle the other issue he meant to discuss.

“A lot happened before the accident and I know you have been picking up the tension between your mother and it”

They both nodded.

“There was no third party in our marriage. Actually there was but not in the manner that you think”, he explained and they both raised their brows. He explained everything to them from the handkerchief to Betso falling in love with Bongiwe. He kept the part about Bongiwe dying to himself. She should die in peace and unbothered - according to him.

“Uhlalakuphi logogo?” (Where does this old woman live?), that was the first thing Mxo asked.

“Muphi yena?” (Which one?) – Muzi

“This muthi DJ. Where does she live?”

“Ayy let it go. It is over now”, Betso said before standing up. She was already yawning.

Mxo was about to ramble some more when Muzi laughed and pulled him up.

“Leggo uLwandile ufun’ ukulala. Goodnight boy” (Lwandile wants to sleep), he spoke to both boys in the same sentence. Betso had already left.

“Night dad”.

They got out and closed the door. Lwa did his daily devotions before retiring to bed.

...

-The next day at Melo’s school’

Melo wasn’t expecting to see Zamo at school and this created a little hollow feeling in his heart he didn’t like. He sat through the physical sciences class, a third period, trying very hard not to think about her. She walked in panting and Mr Mbokazi asked her where she has been. She approached him and whispered into his ear. He nodded and told her to sit. She did exactly that, looking nowhere in Melo’s direction.

“Alright minions that will be all for today. I am almost done marking your assignment. I will definitely be done by one o’clock. Your monitress will come and collect them so you will get them from her, Right Nomzamo?”

She nodded as she took her out her math notebook.

“Good. See you on Wednesday AND behave!”, he said with a smile and they laughed. He was everyone’s favourite teacher even though most hated the subject he taught. He packed up his markers and left. Zamo caught Melo looking at her and she blushed, quickly looking away.

Smith walked in with his mountain of a calculus textbook and began writing on the board. He never greeted, nor smiled with a learner. He doesn’t even smile at the award-giving ceremonies so everyone gave up on him, including the other teachers. He eats alone and always has minestrone soup dried on his gold and unkempt moustache.

“Ja today we will be revising double angle identities and Euclidean geometriiii. Dylan, come solve this equation on the board!”, he said and Melo laughed. Mr Smith and his friend were sworn enemies and he knew it for a fact that within those few seconds, Dylan had already cussed him out with all the derogatory terms he knew in his head. Dylan shook his head but stood up to go fight the Vegeta of an equation that was written on the board specifically for him. He took the blue marker from him.

“Tuck in your shirt and fix your tie this is not a shebeen fokon yerry”, Mr Smith said and Dylan sighed dramatically. He placed the marker down and did as though. He had seen enough of the principal’s office.

“And where in the brown milky way is your blazer Daniels?”

Dylan fetched it from his seat. Melo sent a “Couldn’t stay away?” text to Zamo. She was made a loud beep and her heart almost stopped. Smith shot a bullet stare at her and she gave a voiceless sorry. He kept staring.

“I’ll just put it on silent”, she took it out and read the message as she silenced it. She couldn’t conceal the insistent smile. Smith was back to minding Dylan’s business. Zamo looked at Melo, thinning her eyes and blushing at the same time. He winked and smiled, slouching lazily with his head against his corner. Zamo blushed harder. The smile disappeared in a quick zap when she realized Smith staring again. The class was dead silent. Everyone was afraid of Smith except for a few incurable hotheads in the class.

“The two of you, mind sharing the joke with the rest of the class?”, Smith said to Melo and Zamo. Melo laughed silently as Zamo acted surprised. The class laughed as well with mumbles rumbling amongst them. Smith hit the desk with his fist and they all went dead silent again.

“You want to be their spokesperson hey Buhle?”, Smith asked. Buhle was sweating bullets. She shook her head.

“Then what are you saying to Jessica?!”

“No sir we were just saying that can’t be right”, she rambled with a twisted and vibrating tongue.

“What can’t be right?”, Smith took a few intimidating steps closer. He stood in front of her and pulled his pants. As per usual, he had missed a few belt loops. Buhle swallowed.

“You better speak now”, he stated with an unnecessarily deep voice.

“No sir we were just saying that they’re enemies and everyone knows that”, Buhle confessed.

“Is that so...”

She nodded.

“Are you saying I’m crazy Buhle? Hm? That I see things?”, he hissed towards her and she shifted her face with shut eyes. She knew he had anger issues.

“FROG JUMP! 15 TIMES WITH YOUR BAG ON YOUR BACK!”

Melo exploded and the rest of the class joined him.

“But sir...”, Jessica tried to protest.

“You want to join her? JOIN HER THEN!”

The class died twice and harder. He hit the desk with his fist again and they went silent like they weren’t laughing milliseconds ago.

Chapter Sixty-Three

Unlike hosiery and open-toe sandals, rain and cuddles never put a foot wrong as a great combo. Manqoba pulled Enhle closer under the blanket in her sleep. He planted a kiss on her shoulder and she sighed heavily before opening her eyes and asking for time.

"I thought you were sleeping", he mentioned.

"I was"

"Sorry I woke you", he apologized before placing another kiss behind her ear. She smiled.

"It's okay. What time is it?", she reiterated. He quickly extended his hand towards the pedestal to grab his phone.

"Five minutes past four", he informed. She yawned and pulled the headwrap that was halfway up her head, slipping off.

"Let's go back to sleep", she suggested before closing her eyes and snuggling up against husband.

"You and sleep", he laughed. She snorted and laughed as well but never opened her eyes. He placed his chin comfortably over her shoulder, thoughtfully silent for trickling minutes. He eventually heaved a sigh.

"Ngiyathemba uyazi ukuthi ukuthatha kwami omunye unkosikazi akusho ukuthi angisakuthandi. Ngiyak'thanda Enhle. She's not here to replace you baby. There's only one you and that's what I love about you. As much as we drive each other insane sometimes, I can't imagine my life functioning well beyond your absence", he gave an unrushed confession and shortly realized that she was gone. He huffed and shook his head.

"I love you", he whispered before planting another kiss on her warm skin. He gave her a brief bxxtxy rub as she slept before he also registered to nap, he only had about half an hour to go.

...

"Hm-mh!", Muzi exclaimed in his sleep.

"Hm-mh man!", he continued to mumble under the influence of his nightmare. Betso woke up and squinted her eyes trying to figure out what was going on. She sat up before switching on her low-light side lamp. She turned in his direction and shook him, trying to wake him up.

"Baby? Tsoga wa lora"(Wake up you're having a nightmare)

His body was stiff except for the head and neck he kept on moving sideways.

"Don't touch me!", he jerked up and both his hands landed on Betso's neck. He strangled her for a moment before popping his eyes when the nightmare wore off his brain. She was gagging and trying to pull his hands off of her. He quickly removed them and she rubbed her neck.

"I'm sorry baby. I'm really sorry I don't know what--", he rambled out an apology and she interrupted him. She was still coughing and rubbing her neck.

"It's okay. What the hell were you even dreaming about?"

He let out a very heavy breath. He was soaking wet, covered in his own sweat.

"I don't remember", he lied. His eyes were still shut as he tried to catch his breath, both palms on the bed.

"You kept saying they shouldn't touch you. Who was touching you?"

"Baby ingan ngiyak'tshela ukuthi angisakhumbuli mus!"(I'm telling you I don't remember!), he shot out before shooting out of bed. She was baffled and offended. She felt there was no need for him to shout at her like that but kept it to herself. He walked to the bathroom and she got up to check on Liwe. She was still having smiley lip twitches in her sleep.

Muzi got in there, switched on the light and closed the door. He washed his face with cold water before holding tightly against the basin, watching his dripping wet face in the mirror. The dream kept replaying itself in his mind, putting all the other thoughts on hold.

...

Evelyn struggled with sleep till she saw it best to kick the blankets and go have the daily glass of milk she forgot to drink the previous night. The weather no longer allowed for the loose and light fitting material of her silk gown so had to go find a thicker one before her feet could lead her downstairs. She tied it up as she walked, turning every light on. She didn't want anything catching her off guard in the dark. She kept walking but looking back and over her shoulder. She was still jittery from the previous incident. The rain never stopped. It was still patiently blessing the surface of the earth with its wet presence. She got to the fridge and took out the glass bottle of her favourite dairy substance. She placed it on the table before dragging her feet to go take out a glass from one of the top cupboards. A very quick and loud thunder struck and the glass slipped off her shaky fingers. She held her chest and balanced herself with the other hand. She could feel the secrets digging their pointy claws into the inner of her heart.

"He is never going to forgive me for this", she whispered to herself as a tear skated down her cheek.

"Hawu kant--"

"Ay fuseg!", her fear and anxiety shot out at Manqoba and a frown grew on his face. She barely swears and in the rare case that she does and just like everything else, it is always done with some level of class.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you...", he mentioned as he approached her. She was still trying to piece the scattered pieces of her calm and sanity together. She got down to pick up the glasses and only then did he notice them.

"Leave those I'll get rid of them", he assured but he was talking to himself.

"Ma?!", he yelled and only then did she raise her face.

"Hm?!"

She was far. Her mind was far. He pulled her defeated self up by the shoulders.

"I said leave them before you cut yourself. What's wrong? I feel like there's something you're not telling me?", he said and watched for a reply. She breathed out loudly through the nose. Even her sigh was tired.

"I need to... the ladies... before arrive... I'll tell him. I'll confess. I need to go freshen up", she gave an almost incoherent statement before she got herself out of his hold and left. Manqoba wanted to speak but he ultimately declared it pointless. She was too much of a zombie to care about anything he had to say.

..

"Mxo! We're getting late!", Lwandile yelled from the end of the corridor. Mxo got out of his room with a toothbrush in his mouth.

"Ah jo. I specifically told you that coach wants to see me before class starts buka wenzan?!", Lwa angrily shot out. Mxo had his tie just sitting over his shoulders. His shirt wasn't even tucked in properly. No belt yet. He was nowhere near ready. Muzi appeared, ready for work. He left Betso still sleeping in their room.

"Ah ah ah. Awukakagcoki?!"(You're still not dressed?!) - Muzi

Mxo took out the brush and spoke with toothpaste painting his entire mouth white.

"I am not naked. I am partially dressed", he reasoned and Muzi thinned his eyes.

"What the hell were you still doing?", Muzi questioned.

"I was exercising. You said we must keep fit. So I was doing a few push ups to build up these muscles", he continued to reason.

"Yewena tough'arela, finish up or else I'm gonna leave your black a** behind. Your hair is not even combed"

"Can the two of you have this conversation in the car? I really have to go"

"I'm no where near done. Yall go. I'll take myself to school"

"You know very well that I hate it when you take a car to school", Muzi said in a bored and impatient tone.

Lwa's phone began ringing.

"Dad!"

Muzi was hesitant.

"Dad just go. I don't want Lwa to be late. The swimming tournament is coming up soon. I'll be fine. It's just this once", Mxo said and went back into the room.

"Once?!", Muzi shrieked in disbelief. Mxo laughed as he walked further back into the bathroom.

"I am still waiting for your business plan!", he yelled as he walked. Lwa was already on the last step down the stairs.

"It's coming!", Mxo yelled back as he continued to chuckle.

"Nxn", Muzi exclaimed and they walked out. Mxo had a way of sweeping over his nerves using a brush with metal bristles.

He quickened up when the two left to ensure that he wasn't extra late. The principal was definitely going to sit on his neck as always. A text message from Ndalo came through and he read it as a pop-up while putting on his shoes.

"The baby wants neck kisses 😊", it read and he laughed.

"Mciim yaz wena. When we first meet you nizenza ngath anihlanyi kant weee"(You pretend like you're not crazy whereas the truth lies in the total opposite direction)

He locked the phone and put it in his pocket. He was gonna reply to her when he made it to school. He thought about breakfast when he passed the kitchen but decided against it. He was in too much of a hurry to stomach anything.

While on the way, he remembered that it was traffic time and if he used the straightforward route to school, the convoy was going to delay him much worse than if he actually took the longer one. He changed direction and put on some music. He figured he couldn't be late and bored at the same time. He saw two traffic cops standing in front of one car and only then did he buckle up. They indicated that he should stop and he sighed, but did as requested.

One of the gents looked into the car from the passenger seat and studied the interior.

"Sawubona", he greeted. The other one remained in his initial position - in front of their car.

"Sho", Mxo greeted back.

"Mind getting out of the car for me?", he calmly said and Mxo frowned.

"Why? If it's a bribe you want let's get this over and done with. I'm late", Mxo stated with impatience. The other gent approached Mxo's door.

"Mjita don't waste our time. Asifuni ukuk'khawatha ntwana"(We don't want to hurt you), he said while opening the door and taking out his gun. A car swiftly passed by and he never stopped to panic. The one by the passenger door wasn't liking the direction his colleague was taking.

"Get TF outta this car. Who TF do you think you are driving a Mercedes at your lousy age?", the second gent was pointing the gun at Mxo.

"Ayy man Siph. Put the gun down iyaphuma lentwana"(he's getting out", the first gent pleaded.

"Fuseg wen ungibangela umsindo masimbakho. Uyayaz' lentwana?"(You're making noise do you know this kid?)

Another car abruptly parked behind Mxo's and Siph saw that the two guys were armed. He shot at one of them and the other panicked and shot at Mxo who was trying to run, straight at the back of his head. That was before he also dropped dead due to countless bullets that ravaged his entire body. Mxo was lying flat and motionless, front parallel to the ground.

One of the guys ran to check on him and carried both arms over his head. The other widened his curious eyes.

"Yoh yoh yoh. Usibulele uMK. Sfile. Fi!!!"(We're dead. MK is going to kill us). The disbelief and fear that glistened in both their eyes were beyond scientific measure. The other one quickly dialled for paramedics on his phone with the gun still in the other hand. He was limping since he also got shot. His eyes got more glossier from tears that just wouldn't fall down. Another car stopped by to help out.

The paramedics shortly arrived and they were quick in their assistance. One man and one woman. The woman knelt down to check on Mxo's pulse. The scene was now surrounded by people in disbelief, trying to figure out what actually went down. The two just decided to brave it out and called Muzikayise. The paramedic checked numerous times for a pulse but it was nowhere to be found. She let out one of the many disappointed sighs she always does at scenes similar to this one before raising her face to her colleague who was done checking the other two. She shook her head slowly.

"Time of death: 08h48", he recorded before they zipped Mxolisi Kopano Khumalo up in a body bag.

Chapter Sixty-Four

Muzi almost spilt coffee on himself when the phone vibrated from his pocket. He felt his heart momentarily go cold before even seeing who the caller was. Something about that call made him feel uneasy - the aftermath of late intuition. He placed the brown disposable cup on the desk and flattened his tie against his chest. He took out the phone and realized that one of the guards he'd hired to be discreetly on Mxo's tail was calling.

"Small?", he answered with urgency.

"MK..."

He did not like how shaky the pronunciation of his name sounded. He kept quiet. Small did the same. Muzi could hear the commotion behind him.

"Something bad happened. We were following him well till he lost us for a few minutes and when we found him..."

Muzi's heart began racing.

"What the hell have you done with my son you idiots?!"

Small couldn't answer.

"Ushonile MK. UMxo ushonile"(He's dead. Mxolisi is dead), he eventually accumulated enough particles of his guts to voice it, to say the heavily dreaded words. Muzi immediately felt a consistent, echoing sound in both his ears. UMxo ushonile ushonile ushonile...

His hearing ability went completely dumb and maladjusted. The heart was no longer beating out of control; it was spinning at the same vortex speed as his brain. He stood up from his desk and shortly sat back down again.

"MK?"

"Where are you?", he questioned apathetically. The information he'd just received was failing to register in his brain.

"I'll send you the location. I'm sorr--"

Muzi cut the call before Small could afford to finish his sentence. He grabbed his car keys and ran out of the office, leaving his suit jacket behind.

"Mr K the--", his PA tried to inform but he ran past him like he was a pole.

"Mr K!!!", he yelled before dropping both his hands, dismayed.

He drove hell for leather to the scene, desperate to find that a mistake was made somewhere. Mxo couldn't be dead. It just wasn't possible; unimaginable. The crowd had to abruptly make way for his car to park since nobody there had such a death wish. He ran out and left it open. They were still busy unloading the corpses into the back of the forensic pathology van. He felt his whole world coming apart and going up in flames at the mere sight of this. He ran towards it and two policemen caught him to restrain any further movement towards that vehicle.

"Mxolisi!!! That's my son in there aningiyeke!!!", he yelled furiously as they both held him back. Some of the people around were taking videos whereas most were traumatized.

"Sir please. I know this is a difficult time for you however please allow us to do our job. You will get a chanc--"

"Don't fxxking give me that!!!"

His eyes were already red-rimmed and swollen. The policemen were not having it and he didn't understand why they were being unreasonable. His chest was on fire but he had no words to express himself. The grip around his arms loosed when they felt like he was calming down.

"MK...", he heard Small's apologetic voice from behind him and something in him snapped then broke. He charged towards him and grabbed him by the neck. The people there were available for all this drama.

"Haibo kwenzakalani manje?" (What's going on now?), a startled voice from an old woman stood tall amongst baffled mumbles. The police tried breaking this strangle duo apart but Muzi was having none of it.

"Sir, you're advised to let go otherwise you will be arrested for assault. Sir!!", the white constable said, trying to reason with him.

"Assault ngunyoko! You had one job you fool! ONE JOB!!!!"

They eventually managed to save Small from falling prematurely falling into heaven's door.

"Sir, please calm down. We are going to ask you a few necessary questions. Do you know that car?", the other young police officer asked. The hyperventilating Muzi turned a side eye towards him.

"You're either new to this job or you're inconveniently slow"

Another police officer approached and greeted. Muzi was fast running out of patience.

"Are you the father to Mxolisi...Kopano Khumalo?", he asked as his eyes scanned the I.D he found in Mxo's wallet. Muzi nodded, realizing that his worst fear was becoming more real with each passing minute. There was nothing but pity in the eyes that surrounded him. He hated it. He hated it badly. Why were they even there anyway?

"I am sorry Mr Khumalo. Your son became a casualty of a hijacking gone wrong", he explained, trying to be as gentle as possible. Muzi immediately shut his eyes and faced the sky. His shirt had found its way out of his formal pants somewhere in that mess.

"There is a syndicate that works with corrupt police and traffic officers. These people trick people using state uniforms and vehicles to carry out these hijacking. There have been complaints and incidences but no killings till today. Once again, I am sorry for your loss. Please follow me if you would like to make a formal identification"

Muzi's eyes were flaming up. His heart needed a release. He badly wanted to cry. He felt like it was the only way to extinguish the anguish in his heart. He walked slowly behind the officer in defeat. His heart hit the cold floor of his stomach when they unzipped the top of the bag. He knew Mxo like he knew his vowels. That was his full son lying lifeless in there. He squeezed his eyelids together so badly that he felt a ring emanating from both his ears. He felt like the biggest failure to ever walk the earth. Out of all his kids, Mxo was the one who was most afraid of losing him, of losing his dad. It showed. Little did he know that one day, his dad would have to lose him and he would have no idea how to digest that pain.

"Ntwana... no man", Muzi let out, painfully, voicelessly.

...

The class was rumbling with its usual noise since the accounting teacher wasn't showing up. Lwandile was sleeping on his desk over his lower arms.

"Ey man. You okay?", Brandon asked from behind him after pausing the YouTube video he was watching.

"Ndile?!", he emphasized when he wasn't getting a response. Lwandile jerked his head up and replied: "Hmn?!"

"Are you okay? It's unlike you to sleep in class", he mentioned. Lwa sighed.

"Nah I'm good. I just have this terrible headache", he informed and massaged his temples with both fingers.

"Maybe you should go home you don't look too good"

"Ah hopefully it'll go away soon"

He hissed immediately after saying that, feeling a sharp attack that came without any warning from that very same headache.

"This don't look like something that's gon go away soon. Should I go get Mxo?"

Lwa huffed.

"Stop being dramatic. He's in class and you know that life sciences teacher of theirs never misses a lesson. I'll be good"

Brandon shook his head and shrugged. Lwa genuinely didn't look good.

Ms Ngema still wasn't arriving for their lesson. Sne barged into the class and everyone went silent, watching her with surprised, interrogating looks. She searched for Lwa with her eyes and found him. Panic and pain filled her eyes.

"Sne what's wrong?", Lwa stopped massaging his head and questioned. Sne swallowed and wiped her tears.

Lindsay stood up.

"Sne are you okay? Here...", she offered her a water bottle, seeing that she was on the brink of collapse. Lwa stood up and approached her. Sne turned down the water. She was gripping tightly onto her phone with both hands, tears free-flowing down her cheeks.

"What's wrong?", Lwa softly asked once more. "You're scaring me"

"There are pictures and videos circulating...", she tried to speak but fell apart even further. Lindsay hugged her.

"Speak Sne you're scaring me...", Lwa said as he felt his heart warming up for a marathon.

"Hayi mus this is Mxo!", Diketso exclaimed from his desk with his eyes riveted on his phone screen, shocked beyond description. Lwa moved his eyes from Sne to DK, then back to Sne.

"I'm sorry...", Sne said, suffocating on her own tears. Lwa marched to DK and grabbed the phone from him before DK could stop him. The whole class was now surrounding his desk. Lwa saw him. He saw him lying there in a red pool of his own blood. He knew Mxo in his sleep. Even if he didn't, everything that was responsible for aiding his memory was there. The uniform, the tie, the uncombed hair, the eagle tattoo. Mxo was wearing a short sleeved shirt that was prohibited from his school. He knew very well that boys were not allowed to wear short sleeved shirts but he still did it anyway. He hid it under his blazer but he didn't die wearing it - the blazer. The same pity that filled the eyes at the scene relocated to the classroom. They tried to touch Lwa but he pulled away and shook his head, not moving his tearful eyes from the screen. The caption said it all but he still refused to believe that his duplicate was dead. He took out his phone wanting to call his dad and Muzi appeared at the door. He then just knew.

"Come boy", he said, still pained but trying so hard to keep it together in front of the kids. The principal was behind him. He on the other hand, couldn't hide the pain in his eyes. Mxo was a walking and talking headache but he adored the fuck out of that delinquent of a child. Lwa looked around trying to find answers in any pair of eyes. He found nothing but pure sympathy. The cries that were breaking out were slicing his heart. He stormed out of the classroom and Muzi bowed his head, grabbing onto his upper lip, trying to restrain it from trembling. Brandon packed up Lwa's things and zipped up his bag. Muzi was already on the way to the car he had carelessly parked at the gate. Lwa was already in there and crying his lungs out. The principal received the bag and called for Muzi. Muzi turned back and took it. He then continued walking to the car. He didn't know what to say to Lwa. He knew Betso was still sleeping because her phone was off, like it was when he first got to the office and tried to call her to apologize again for strangling her. Lwa was in the backseat, wiping his tears with the collar of his blazer.

"Ncese boy", Muzi said gently. He had no idea what to say because he was feeling the exact same thing Lwa was feeling and he also needed to hear something that could make it all make sense. He still had Betso to tell and he knew she wasn't going to take it well.

"Ncese...", he said it again breathlessly. He languidly started the car and left for home. Dark and grey clouds were closing and occupying the whole of the visible sky.

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When they got home, Lwa ran into the house, ran as fast as his feet could carry him to his room and shut the door. He instantly locked it. Muzi tried running after him but he was late. He knocked and knocked but Lwa ignored every attempt to get him to open up. Betso approached in her pyjamas, dragging her feet and yawning. She had her thumb on her power button, switching on her phone.

"What's going on?", she questioned, still confused from the long and unusual sleep that had drugged her half-dood. A thought that Muzi might've found out about Lwa's sexuality was lingering about in her brain. She didn't want to make it obvious but something about that whole setup wasn't making any sense. Where was the other twin? Why would Muzi fetch Lwa from school to confront him, bring him and then turn to beg him to open up so they could speak? Muzi stopped knocking and looked at his clueless wife, already sorry for being the bearer of these news. Betso could see the pain in her husband's eyes. That was her man and she knew him. She knew where his tears start and end. They begin and end with her. However, she also knew the in-between of these two points.

"What's going on Mbulazi?", she asked as she fastened the belt to her gown. He parted his lips to speak but his tongue failed him. He turned towards the wall and hit three consecutive yet defeated fists on it. He tightly shut his burning eyes once more and she came closer. She was beginning to feel that something was terribly amiss. He turned in her direction again and she was looking at him with fearful yet anticipating eyes.

"Gorileng? O kae Kopana?" (What's wrong? Where's Kopano?)

Her phone rang from the pocket of her gown and she took it out. Tumi was calling. She wanted to answer but Muzi promptly took it and silenced it.

"Where is my son Khumalo?"

He drew her into himself, hugging her. She tried to break free but the hug was tight.

"He's gone", he whispered regretfully, and she still tried to break free but still failing.

"What do you mean he's gone?"

He heaved a sigh.

"He got shot. They were trying to hijack him"

"No no no. NO!!!!", she went completely frantic, feeling herself going nuts.

"Koppie is not dead man Muzi I would've known I am his mother dammit!!!", she yelled, still trying to break free. Muzi kept quiet. He could feel a physical pain emanating from somewhere in his chest due to the perpetuating heartbreak.

"Muzi ntlogele! Ntlogeleeeee!!!"(Let go of me!), she was now crying and screaming at the same time, hitting his chest with both fists in that restrained position. He wasn't letting go and he wasn't willing to.

"Eseng Koppie waka kea gana! Ake dumele!!!"(Not my Koppie I refuse!)

He tried to hold the back of her head towards his chest, but she was shaking it non-stop and very vigorously. She was sinking to the floor and he was sinking with her, still holding onto her.

"Ha ah. Muzi no!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!", she screamed so hard he felt like her voice was no different to a sharp and new dagger twisting into his heart. A mother's cry filled the whole house and possibly the entire neighbourhood.

Chapter Sixty-Five

Sobs mixed with hiccups. Betso cried so badly she was even running out of breath. Muzi looked to Lwa's door before picking her up from the floor, taking her to their bedroom. After hours of screaming and disbelief. She could only afford the strength to carry a single strand of her own hair on credit. Muzi was numb. Lwandile's pillow was soaking wet, saturated and satiated with his own tears - the form in which the heart bleeds. The images he saw of Mxo refused to leave his mind. He'd never seen Mxo that helpless before. Mxo fought both their battles. He was always fearless and unfazed. He was quick to welcome a fight, quick to entertain the devil in boxing shorts. His voetsek was physical. It had hands and a dictionary. The only word in there was smackdown. He never gave up on any fight until he won that fight. In all this, Lwandile questioned how he could just agree to die like that? Just like that? So quick? So simple? He was fine and fully himself in the morning. How do you talk to a person a few hours ago and later be told they're gone? Never to be seen again? How do you go on when the only person you've known since conception is no more? How is life supposed to make any sense when the only person who achieved that for you is dead? How?

Betso turned her back on Muzi and hugged her pillow, continuing to let her heart crack and bleed onto her organs. It felt like it. It felt like the coldness that was emanating from the engine of her body was affecting everything else; including the womb that once carried the child that she's being told she's never going to see again. The child who looked at her like she was the love of his life. The child who "flirted" with her in a way that only a mom could understand. The child who drove her sanity to the edge only to bring her back to the center of serenity by forcing her to laugh. Muzi laid on the bed on his back and faced the roof. It was raining outside, heavily and violently. If the two cared enough to watch they'd see only the grey that appeared on the large window. She sobbed loudly and wiped her nose before she could speak.

"I want to see him. Today", she directed without moving a limb and he also stayed put with one hand behind his head. None of it was sinking in. It all felt like one dragging bad dream. He got up from the bed and promised to be back. He walked to his study in his socks. He didn't bother wearing any shoes. Muzi got in there and found the extra keys to every door in that house. He searched for the sleeping pills he'd bought when him and his wife were having problems and dragged himself to the kitchen. When he got to Lwandile's door, he knocked again and went unanswered. He inserted the key and turned it once. He hated invading in kids' privacy but something in him was afraid Lwa would do something stupid. Lwa pretended to be asleep and Muzi fell for it. He was still in his school uniform, except the tie and blazer he threw on top of the single couch at a lonely corner. His father sighed and closed the door again. He continued with his trip to the kitchen. He got there, poured Betso a glass of sugar water and dropped two pills in there. He then stirred the mixture up waiting for the solids to dissolve, getting completely lost in his own thoughts while he was at it.

Lwandile got up from the bed with his red eyes and irritated nose, heading to Muzikayise's mancave. The pain was too loud to be ignored. It needed some silencing. He only drank alcohol once and decided he hated the bitter taste of it. Mxo suggested he should try ciders instead of beer but he had already given up on the drunk man's

love potion. He heard Liwe crying loudly from his parents' bedroom since Muzi had left the door open. He walked in cautiously and saw Betso just lying there on the bed on her side, still hugging onto her pillow- eyes wide open; no blink in sight. He heaved a sigh and went to pick Liwe up. He tried to hush her but she wasn't having it. She was burning up also. Liwe was crying uncontrollably as if something was consistently pinching her. Betso was completely deaf to all of this as her tears penetrated her sheets straight into her mattress.

Lwandile was busy trying to baby her to silence with his own salt water wetting both his cheeks. If Mxo was there Liwe would be laughing. He didn't have that effect only on her, he had it on everyone. It rippled from his own non-belief in dwelling in sadness, ultimately becoming contagious to everyone he came into contact with like a dangerous virus. He tried mimicking how Mxo used to play with her when she cried but it wasn't working. He wiped his tears with the back of his hand before his dad could walk in. Muzi saw his struggle and took Liwe from him. He handed him the 'cocktail' and asked him to beg his mom to drink it. Muzi was speaking so gently like he was afraid that the frequencies of his voice would break him.

"What's this?", he asked flatly as he inspected the glass with no interest at all.

"It will help her sleep", Muzi assured as he cuddled the hysterical Liwe. Lwa nodded and went to kneel with one leg up in front of his mom's side of the bed.

"Mom. Ma?!", he shook her three times before she could flight down back to earth. She released a heavy breath when she saw him, then smiled before placing her palm on his cheek. The volume of the tears that were coming out of her eyes went up. She loved Lwa. Wholeheartedly. She could always tell them up but at that moment, she wished she couldn't. She wished to see Mxo's face in his and maybe understand why he had to go. Lwa placed his hand over hers lovingly before offering her the drink. Muzi had went downstairs with Liwe to give them space.

"I don't want--"

"Just drink up mama it will help you", he impatiently said. She picked it up. The impatience in his voice, she picked it up. She got up and asked him to sit next to him. He placed the glass down and she pulled him gently so he lies his head on her thighs. He instantly broke down. She didn't try to hold back her own tears. She knew the effort was going to be pointless.

"It'll be alright. Okay? It'll be alright", she lied. She didn't believe it. It wasn't going to be alright. It was going to be incomplete and empty. It was going to be lonely and hurtful. She brushed his neatly cut hair as she hummed a lullaby she also didn't know she could perfectly concoct till that moment. It wasn't comforting for Lwa; nor was it distracting. It made no difference. He raised his head and handed her the glass. She drank up because she didn't want to disappoint him any further than life already had that day.

Muzi came back with a sleeping Liwe. Lwa asked to be excused so he could go nap.

"Don't you wanna sleep on mom's bed?", Muzi offered. Lwa gave a fake smile capable of convincing a stranger.

"I need to be alone. But thanks dad", he said and Muzi nodded. He shortly decided against letting him go and took a few steps after him.

"You'll make things worse. Motlogele"(Let him go), Betso said and he stopped walking. She knew that Lwa

slept his sorrows away and as much as he was different from the temperamental Mxo, he also had his flaws when pushed beyond limits. If he wanted to be alone he wanted exactly that. Lwandile went straight to the mancave and went to help himself to his dad's expensive, potent and alcoholic property without doubt. He hated the taste of it but he was desperate to reach the blurry side of life. He poured himself a glass of whiskey and cringed at the thought of what he was about to do. Bokang kept calling and he kept ignoring. He gulped it all down and hissed at the sharp taste that spiked its way down his throat. He did the same with the next one, and the next...

Muzi sat next to his wife and took her numb hand. He had so many problems and so many things to do he didn't know where to start.

"I was waiting for the right person to tell you this himself but now that he is gone...", he scraped the outer layer of the issue he wanted to tackle. Betso frowned and turned towards him, giving an interrogative look.

"Ndalo is pregnant", he just said it, not understanding the look on her face. At first he thought it was shock. When she further relaxed it wearing a baffled look over her puffy eyes, he no longer knew what to expect.

"What?", she softly let out. He sighed then nodded. Her tears were on pause. They suddenly pressed play on themselves again. He pulled her with one hand to hug her as he also felt his own share of the parental pain. He comforted her until she was out of it. He placed her into the sheets and kissed her forehead, remembering the day she went through an obviously unbearable labour 16 years ago, giving birth to two beautiful copies of the love that was shared between the two of them, a love that was written in italics right in the stars.

He went out to go speak to Lwandile but when he got into his room it was empty and unoccupied.

"Lwandile?!", he called out as he searched the house, including Mxolisi's room. He was met by Mxo's unmade bed and his heart sank. It was at that moment where he realized that none of everything he taught him really mattered. The stuff about making his bed every morning for higher chances of having a productive day. How school was more important than his love for music. None of that mattered. What should have mattered hours ago and beyond that was that he was there- alive and breathing. He sighed and closed the door, continuing to look for Lwandile. He was nowhere to be found. Worry hovered over his head. There was one place he hadn't searched and the chances of finding him there were slim. If it was Mxo it would've been the first place he raided. He still went there anyway. He found two empty bottles and he immediately dashed out thinking Lwa was drinking and driving. He tried calling his phone on the way out but it was off. He felt the panic itching on his scalp and extending to his face. However, all the cars were there except the one he felt he shouldn't have given to Mxolisi. He tried calling again as he went around the yard looking for him, walking in the rain. He immediately dropped the phone when he saw a half full bottle next to the pool. He ran towards it and dived in to get him. Lwa was drunk and drowning. He pulled him out as he squinted in the rain. He then carried him to the veranda with pool chairs next to that area. He placed him on the floor and performed CPR on him.

"Come on Lwandile man!!!", he snapped as he gave consecutive short presses on to his chest to get the water out. Lwandile coughed it out and Muzi slapped him on the face.

"DON'T YOU EVER DO THIS SHXT AGAIN DO YOU HEAR ME?!"

Lwa was still disoriented and coughing out water. Muzi's wet chest was on fire.

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"Boyza", Manqoba teased when he answered Muzi's call. Muzikayise didn't laugh or swear at him like he playfully would. He just kept dead quiet.

"Hawu. Kwenzenjan?"(What's going on?), he questioned in great concern before placing the green bottle of ice cold beer he had in his hand down on the coffee table.

"Usishiyile uMbulazi omncan bafo"(Our young Mbulazi has left us)

He informed. Manqoba frowned. He was hoping Muzi wasn't saying what he thought he was saying.

"What are you talking about? Which one?"

"UMxolisi. He got shot this morning. They were trying to hijack him and they killed him bafo. They fxcking killed my boy instead of taking the car and leaving him the fxck alone. They...!", Muzi vehemently explained in a pained voice.

"Mntungwa!", Manqoba exclaimed from utter disbelief. His head was already buzzing with different closure seeking questions. He was about to question his brother further but Muzi couldn't speak anymore. He was too furious to control his voice. The kind of anger that's always accompanied by shaking hands, bloodshot eyes and trembling lips. Manqoba tried calling him again but the subscriber was no longer available. His mouth hung loose. Evelyn walked down the stairs in her night gown- nonchalantly wearing it at half past 2 in the afternoon. She had black eye bags from all the guilt that was eating her up. She sat on the couch like a gent in her long cotton pyjamas and rubbed her palms together.

"I have spoken to one of the drivers. He will take me to Johannesburg today so I can confess before something bad happens. I can't keep this secret anymore, she said with no second thought and Manqoba never replied. Only then did she realize that he was dumbstruck and confused. Clearly heartbroken too.

"Are you okay? What is it?", she asked with expectancy. Manqoba fell back on the couch and locked his eyes to the roof.

"Phakamani just called. He... Mxo was shot this morning and..."

Evelyn's hands ran to her mouth as she popped her eyes, listening to her heart fighting with her rib cage.

"... it sounded like he died on the spot", Manqoba further explained. Patient tears went down his face. They both heard something drop and Evelyn turned back to see what it was. Manqoba sat up and they saw Melokuhle just standing there. He dropped his backpack and the laptop inside was the first to collide with the floor. They both stood up. Melo shook his head looking at Manqoba.

"Tell me I heard wrong?"

"Boy...", Manqoba tried to comfort him and Melo just saw the look in his eyes. It confirmed everything. He was losing control of the the rhythm of his breathing. He placed his fist against his mouth as his eyes wet up. Evelyn was crying deeply against the couch, standing behind it. Melokuhle just stared at Manqoba who was also still in a state of shock himself. He had no idea what to say to the boy.

"Wh... what? Why? HOW?", he managed to voice out his excruciating bafflement and Manqoba regretfully shrugged. Melo shut his eyes tightly before he collapsed. Manqoba failed to catch him quicker before he could hit the floor.

"Makhosonke!", both him and Evelyn yelled out. Mam'Nokwanda appeared and Enhle appeared shortly after her. Manqoba was trying with him, trying to shake him to consciousness.

Chapter Sixty-Six

Piercing sorrow struck the royal house like a missile. After the doctor assured that Melokuhle would be fine and should be left to sleep, Manqoba stood with his back and one foot against the wall in his bedroom. Enhle was busy wiping her tears, with a box of tissues near her. Manqoba stood with his hands in his pockets, digesting his new reality.

"AND drive safely"

"Your car is gonna come back in one piece. I promise"

"It's not the car I'm worried about. I can always get another one but there's only one you"

"Technically, that's biologically incorrect"

He remembered this conversation as it echoed endlessly in his head. Something in him knew for a fact that it had everything to do with the ancestors. Skhumbuzo wasn't seeing or saying anything, meaning they were purposefully keeping him in the dark. He failed him. He felt he failed Mxolisi. He was only trying to keep the peace in the family but it was at that moment where he realized that it wasn't worth it. Mxolisi's life was priceless and he felt he failed to protect that gem. Enhle stood in front of him and this startled him. He didn't see her stand up. She sighed before wrapping her arms around him. He hesitated before hugging her back.

"I don't know what to say...", she mentioned voicelessly. She had no idea how to comfort him. He wiped the wet trail of the tear that had just raced down her cheek.

"Don't say anything", he breathlessly replied, politely. He brought his foot down and asked to be excused. He never waited for any response. She walked back to the bed defeatedly and went to dump herself there. Her mind trailed off...

Manqoba was headed to his office when he ran into one of the helps. She adjusted the laundry basket on her side after greeting him humbly. He greeted back and kept walking.

"Masha?", he called out after turning back quickly.

"Mbulazi?"

"Please get ugogo ka Sonke for me", he requested and she nodded promptly. He kept walking. He got in there and poured himself a stiff drink. He gulped it down and shrunk his face at the sharp taste. His shoulders were heavier than usual. He tried to shake off the weight but it was all futile. He was so heavy it was even painful. He threw the glass against the wall and it went down in several pieces. He pressed onto the table and shut his eyes. Evelyn walked in, still in her pyjamas. The sun was setting, saying goodbye to that part of the world. She was a mess. A zombie walked faster.

Manqoba turned only his head as he stood against the desk. He shortly went round it and took a seat on his chair. He brought the bottle closer and drank out of it. Evelyn took her seat and wiped her tears with the tissue

paper she had in hand.

"I killed him didn't I?", she emotionally said before wiping her red nose.

"Yes you did", Manqoba confirmed, empathetic. She broke down even further. He sniffed and sat up straight.

"Here's what you're gonna do: You are going to call Muzi today and tell him the truth", he instructed and handed the phone to her. She raised her alarmed face. His was as straight as the road to hell.

"Over the phone?"

He nodded once.

"My silence in this makes me an accomplice. He is going to hate me too but rather than losing anybody else to death. I have a very bad feeling about all of this"

"He will never forgive me after this!"

"I know, he's my little brother. If you don't tell him today I will tell him myself and then, then things will get really ugly"

Manqoba said and emphasized that she should take the phone. He knew the possibility of Muzi skinning Evelyn alive was there. He'd regret it later because he loves his mother but his anger knows no bounds. It disconnects him from his memory. Manqoba knew because he created this Muzi. He's the one who always encouraged violence in him. From the first day he learned that Muzi was being bullied, he knew he had to teach him how to defend himself and maybe he went over the top with it. Violence became gospel when matched with fury for him. Manqoba found it hard to forgive Evelyn but he couldn't access the grudge in full because he had a hand in her sewage of a secret. Him keeping quiet made him accomplice in this mess.

"This is going to destroy the family...", Evelyn was still crying her guts out. Manqoba lost it and broke the bottle against the hard wood of the desk. The alcohol blessed the floor.

"Dammit Evelyn just...!!!!", he got himself to calm down. He was on his feet.

"Mxolisi is dead. If this fact is not loud enough for you then I don't know what it'll take. I respect you, kakhulu futhi but right now you're forcing me to walk into church with a pig strapped on a leash"

He had his index finger pointed out at her. She was saved by a knock.

"YINI?!"(What?!), he snapped before even catching the face at the door.

"They need you outside", Enhle reported. His chest deflated. He nodded and she left. He left without saying any additional word to Evelyn. Her wrecked emotional presence was suffocating his grieving self.

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When he stepped out of the house, it was a mess outside. The guards and herd boys were hyperventilating, some with their palms against their knees.

"What's going on?", he questioned. One of the herd boys approached him, running out of breath.

"Mbulazi, the heavily pregnant cow went crazy and began running kicking and making funny sounds. It broke out of the kraal and ran straight here. We were trying to restrain it but we failed", he informed without taking any second to breath. MQ frowned.

"I don't see or hear any cow?"

"It hit the wall, then just fell down and died. It was also bleeding from behind"

Manqoba felt himself running low on battery. He sunk down and sat on the 'stoep' next to Evelyn's flowers.

"Mntungwa, Mbulazi. Ngibiza wena Zikode. Khuluma nami mkhulu"(I'm calling upon you Zikode, speak to me)

He put his hands over his bent neck and dropped his exhausted head.

"Khuluma nami angisazi. Ngcela ungibonise indlela siyangishisa isihlalo sakho"(Show me the way because this task is heavy)

Melo came out of the house in shorts and flops. Manqoba asked him where he was headed. His eyes snatched on the condition of his heart.

"I wanna go get some fresh air...", he reported. Manqoba was doubtful.

"I'll be back just now", Melo assured. The more he had to speak the more impatient he got.

"Okay. But you're taking Musa with you", he commanded and Melo sighed. Musa asked the other guard to give him his phone back so he could leave with Melokuhle, who was already walking near towards the gate. Melo took a purposeless stroll with no particular destination, wondering who the universe will take next just to spite him. He lost three people he values dearly in a single year. Musa tried making conversation but got blatantly ignored. He understood and left a safe following distance between them, with Melo walking in front. He passed by the tuckshop near Ndalo's house and it was still open. She was completely off his mind until she appeared. He stood still and stopped walking. The streets were too quiet. He could clearly hear himself think.

"Hey!", she greeted him anxiously He just knew she had no clue and there were questions coming. He instantly regretted taking that street.

"Hi", he greeted back with a faint and fake smile.

"I'm glad I bumped into you. I've been trying to reach Mxo all day and he's not answering my calls. Do you have any idea what's up with him? He's also off WhatsApp. It's so unlike him I'm worried", she rambled with her small chubby hand on her tummy. Melo sighed and looked back at Musa. He also didn't know what to say. He decided to give them a little space. Far enough not to hear anything but close enough to act quickly if something dodgy was to occur. This made Ndalo more anxious. She could feel her intestines tying up into a hard knot.

Melo wasn't okay and she was realizing it with each passing second.

"What's going on?"

"It's not my place to tell you this..."

"What do you mean it's not-- Melo you're his older brother if something is wrong with him who do you expect to let me know if not you?"

Melo sighed. They were standing right in the middle of the road. Almost at the same spot where Mxo first swept her off her feet, when he refused to take any of her NOs for an answer.

"Okay...prrrr", his lips vibrated as he went speechless.

"Melo!"

"He's dead. He got shot this morning", he let out and she slowly closed her mouth with both her hands, agape under them. Melo's eyes were welling up. Ndalo tried to speak but no sound was coming out. She felt hot and cold as a crack travelled down and across her heart.

"You're joking right?"

She was desperate for him to say yes. She was already crying.

"Ndalo...", he softly said sympathetically. She bent her sad lip as it trembled under the upper one.

"How could Mxo just... how could...", she was struggling to breathe. Melo had no choice but to hug her. He knew her pain. He knew how deep it cut. It had no floor; a bottomless dark pit.

"I'm so sorry..."

They were both crying at this point. Melo was fighting it but Ndalo couldn't.

"Mxo can't leave me now. He can't! Not like this Melokuhle not like this!!!", she was losing it. Melo had no idea what to do. He agreed though. Mxo couldn't just leave like that. He felt like his phone was going to ring any moment from then, and when he answered Mxo would go "Answer the phone demet!!!!" while laughing.

When Melo would also laugh and tell him that: "It is answered demet it is answered!", Mxo would go "Ebaba, ebaba, I said answer the phoooooone jou msotjhovitjho!!!!". Then they'd both laugh at their stupid selves before diving deep into the call.

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THE NEXT DAY...

Betso and Muzi watched Lwandile as he slept on the couch. Betso covered him up with a heavy blanket and fetched a proper pillow for him. She sat and placed her aching head on Muzikayise's shoulder. He was deep in his own thoughts but this took him out of that hell but not entirely. He was glad to adjust his body for her comfort. They never said anything to one another as they sat in the silent dark. Betso ordered all of Lwa's favourite goodies but they were still kitchen - untouched. The process of identifying Mxo traumatized the both of them. Muzi had no choice but to take them there. He ordered for the car that Mxo was driving in to be burnt down. It was just going to be a constant reminder and as much he knew it for a fact that he's never going to heal from this, he had to try achieve that for his family the best way he could. There's a lot he didn't know but he knew someone had to pay. The clock on the wall showed it to be five minutes past five in the morning. Violet was already on a flight back home. She and her husband were on a retreat. Tumi was also on his way from Polokwane. Plus other family members.

When it hit seven, Lwandile woke up only to realize that his nightmare was ongoing. The house was oddly quiet. Mxolisi's presence could be felt even when he was out of sight if he was somewhere in the house. But that particular morning, something was off, something was missing.

"Morning", the parents greeted him with weak but genuine smiles and he just stared. He breathed out loudly and rotated on his bxtt so he sat up.

"Morning", he finally replied. They both didn't know what to say from there. Any of the courteously questions to conventionally follow would be stupid questions.

"Ngisayogeza"(I'm going to bath), he shortly stood up and dragged himself to his room.

"My baby hle", Betso sadly commented and Muzi distorted his lips to the side. He shook his head and dropped his face. Family meeting was really no more. This fact was forcing its accuracy down his throat.

Lwandile found his parents still seated in the same spot after his shower, with a blanket over their thighs. Betso almost had a heart attack when he appeared and she saw him for the first time. He was wearing one of Mxo's bucket hats.

"Kanyo man!", she shot out. Muzi took her hand. "It's too soon for this please take that off"

Lwa just stood there, insubordinate.

"Boy please listen to your mother", Muzi calmly pleaded.

"Why?"-Lwa

"I said it's too soon!"

"Well fuck all corners of too soon!!"

"LWANDILE!", Muzi reprimanded. Lwa stormed out of there and went back to his room. Betso tried to follow after him and Muzi held her back. He knew it wasn't going to end well.

"I'll go", he softly said before removing the blanket off of him and standing up. Lwa called the tattoo artist he knew as he walked and she answered.

"Hey babes. Look I'm so sorry about Mxo I saw the photos", she said. She was Quinton's big sister.

"Cool. I sent you a picture on WhatsApp do you think you can reproduce that for me?"

Another call from Bokang came through. He looked at the screen and ignored it.

"Uhhh, sure love but it's gonna cost you hey. It's too complicated", she mentioned.

"When can I come?"

"This week I'm fully booked. How about next Monday?"

He was hesitant to agree. He felt he needed that tattoo as in yesterday. He agreed anyway.

...

WEDNESDAY

Muzi and his family arrived at KZN around twelve in the afternoon. Mixed emotions flew all over the place.

They were all still shocked but some were also excited to see Liwe, especially Enhle. Despite their differences, Betso handed the baby to her with a smile. They were all standing outside, having just come out of the car. Melo just hugged Betso when he saw her and a smile grew amidst a very sad face. Evelyn was too quiet for Muzikayise's liking but he just assumed she hurt beyond utterance. After they'd all settled down and the family was focusing on Liwe, Betso pulled Muzi aside and requested that she wanted to see Ndalo.

"Baby we just got here. And you've already seen the body"

"And that means?"

"You will harm her and the baby. These things can be dangerous sthandwasami"

"I thought she's not supposed to come to the funeral?"

"It doesn't end there. She has slept with Mxo AND she's pregnant with his baby. Ngesintu we have to take extra

caution when coming to death and a pregnancy. A life is going away and another is being brought to earth. When these things clash danger can occur I don't want to take any chances with her", Muzi explained and she understood his point of view.

"I'm sad she won't be able to come bury him even though it is for the best. It's heartbreaking when you think about it. Le bona ba bule stout"(They decided to be naughty), she mentioned.

"Yeah well. If she wasn't pregnant she probably would've. She would still have to turn and look away when the coffin came in and out though"

"Why is that?" - Betso. They spoke as they stood outside.

"In a lot of cultures one is not supposed to see the coffin of their deceased lover. You don't even go to the cemetery. It's believed your blood will rot and you'll follow them"

"What about Lwa? Is there anything special he needs to do?", she questioned. She realized how ignorant she'd been all along.

"He can go but for us to keep him alive we will have to first put him in the grave before Mxo could go in"
Betso widened her eyes.

"What?!"

Muzi nodded. "He gets in there and lies on his back for a brief moment then we take him out. Some people put him in the coffin together with his twin", he explained further.

"What if he says no?"

Muzi frowned a bit, thoughtfully. He remembered how Lwa was prepared to die as well not long ago. Lwa could. He could say no.

"Eish I don't know baby. We'll see. Any other question? I need to go back to Joburg", he said and said his pockets for his phone. He insisted on bringing his family himself. The morgue guys assured that they'd transfer Mxo successfully but he heard none of that. He wanted to be there in the flight with him. Manqoba offered to go so Muzi stays behind to take care of things and rest but Muzi said no. He hugged Betso and kissed her cheek.

"Please drive safely"

"I will"

She wanted to ask him if Mxo's coffin was going to enter the yard since she heard that any person who enters their home after such a death(by a knife, a gun, etc) will bring that pattern of death into the family. She decided to let him be since he looked like he was in a hurry. She also hated it when he drove at night.

...

Ndalo laid awake in her bed, sobbing so much but at the same time trying hard not to let her mom hear her. She felt like she was going to boast about this for some reason. Ever since she fell pregnant, Nomcebo has been unsupportive in all areas of her life. She felt she needed Sjava's 'Ikhandlela' even though it made things worse. It twisted the knife further into her fragile heart. She wore a sports bra and pyjama pants, exposing her growing tummy. She kept rereading old conversations between her and Mxolisi. The 'last seen' remained unchanged: Monday, 06:13. She sent a sad emoji hoping it'll go through but it gave her only one tick. She has felt pain

before. She has definitely cried before, but whatever it was she was feeling and doing was unbearable. She brushed her tummy as the hot tears fell down. Her wallpaper wasn't helping also. On it was a picture of them together in the car. The day he forged a letter for her do he could have the means to speak to her. The day he proudly said "No matter what you say Ndalo mina nawe siyafanelana mama!". The day he proved that he'd do just about anything to have her in his life. Everything happened too fast. How quickly and heavily he loved her, even from a distance. How he couldn't wait to make love to her, which in turn resulted in a baby. She didn't know if this was a blessing or a curse.

"Ungishiyelani Mxolisi...", she cried. In as much as it was an inaudible whisper, she couldn't finish that sentence.

Chapter Sixty-Seven

Manqoba was busy turning sideways absentmindedly when Evelyn let herself in without knocking in his office. He just stared with the glass of alcohol in his ring hand. She paced towards the chair across him and offered herself a seat, troubled and antsy.

“Did he take umlahlankosi with him?”, she questioned, referring to Muzikayise.

Manqoba stared for a second before sighing, then placing the glass down on the shiny, wooden desk.

“There’s a family meeting tonight at eight. I expect to see you there”, he stated with no trace of doubt in his low voice. Evelyn swallowed a hedgehog.

“Can’t we wait until after the funeral? I know and acknowledge that all of this is my fault. I wish I could reverse time. I really wish I could. In fact it all feels so unreal. Like—“

“Please save this speech for the meeting tonight”

She sighed and placed her sweaty hands on the table top.

“Can we just wait until we lay him to rest? This will cause havoc and right now... right now is not the time for that”

Tears were freely racing down her face. Manqoba threw his head back against the headrest after gently pushing the box of tissues towards her.

“I am begging you Mntungwa. Ngiyak’cela Mbulazi. Let us wait until after the funeral. Help me respect his spirit just this last time”

Manqoba stood up from his chair and asked to be excused. He stood up and left her highly emotional self seated there.

He got to his room and closed the door. He took off his shoes and his watch before pulling the blue metallic dish from under the bed. He dropped his head as his palms laid flat against the floor. Exactly two drops of tears fell down onto the border-edge of the dish. The muscles around his shoulders felt like they were pulling on themselves. He swallowed his pain and exhaled - a breath pulled from the bottom of his spiritual exhaustion. He took hold of the large box of matches and set the incense alight. It did not contest, it just caught fire.

“Ngibiza nina oMntungwa, oMbulazi. Nina bakaBhej’ eseNgome...”, he greeted and felt himself get heavier and heavier. He was no longer alone in that room and he instantly knew it. The hairs on the back of his neck were sweeping, creating a cold and chilly sensation that sent goosebumps to the rest of his body.

“Zikode kaMkhatshwa, ngiyazi ukuthi nikhona futhi ningilalele. Ngiza knina ngithi ngizoshweleza dlozi lami elihle...”(I know you're here with me and that you're listening to me. I'm coming to you with aims of apologizing), he said while humbly and subtly clapping his palms together.

“Ngithi ngizithobe ngixolise ngakho konke uMa wami akwenzile. Nginge sqiniseko sokuthi bekungeyona inhloso yakhe ukunithukuthelisa. Ehlisani ulaka nigeine iympilo zeyngane zethu, iyngan zenu”(I am asking for your forgiveness on my mother's behalf. I am pretty sure it wasn't her intention to infuriate you. Please calm down and spare our children's lives, your children's lives)

...

Violet knocked once on Betso's room and let herself in since she was sure that Muzi wasn't in there. Betso had wrapped a thick blue fleece around her shoulders, hugging herself as she watched the twins' childhood videos. She never turned in her mother's direction- she just kept her eyes glued to the screen. Violet's heart dropped before she slowly closed the door, carefully. She walked over to sit next to her and wrapped her arms tightly around her. Betso still did not move. The five year olds on the video were riding barechested on their tricycles in their striped shorts, their hair wet. They were laughing hysterically until Mxo fell and Lwandile screamed for Muzi at the sight of Mxo's injury. Mxolisi was quietly seated on the grass, licking his own blood from his bruised knee. The next video was of their first day at school. There, Mxo was crying dramatically wanting to go back home. A breathy laughter betrayed the true state of her heart as she watched this. She could hear Muzi's voice from behind the camera. She remembered taking over the camera so Muzi could speak to him. He went over to the youngins and picked Mxo up, who was sobbing and wiping his tears with the back of his small fingers. Lwa was getting impatient, all ready for school, something he also had absolutely no idea about. "Mxo? Boy?", he called for his attention as his eyes followed Mxo's.

"It's a school day. Something that's going to happen to you five times in every week. Are you going to cry five times each and every week?"

Mxo said yes. Muzi laughed.

"I wanna go back home. I wanna watch Transformers", Mxo was not catching any of Muzi's plea to keep him in those hellish premises. Muzi placed him back down and squatted in front of him. He placed his hands over Mxo's shoulder who was still moody but had stopped crying. Muzi told Lwandile to come back. He was already a few steps ahead. He held both their wrists before he could speak.

"Okay. If you behave for this whole year and be good to your teachers, dad is going to get you that electric car you said want"

Both their faces lit up.

"Ha ah baby these two have enough toys", Betso could hear herself.

"Mom focus on the camera", Mxo said, in a way telling his mother to stay out of their business with their dad. They all laughed. Violet smiled at the sight of this.

"Promise you're gonna get it?", Mxo made sure. Muzi nodded. Betso remembered Muzi getting that toy a month later.

"Okay. Can we have money for ice cream?", Mxo asked.

"And popcorn", Lwandile added.

"But you have lunch bags full of food", Muzi complained. They both sulked. Betso laughed adoringly.

"Okay. Nizowa thenga kuphi lama ice cream wenu?", Muzi asked from defeat.

Lwandile pointed at the shop across the street. Muzi had to wait for the three cars to pass before he could see it. He took no notice of it on their way there.

"Ha ah. You are not crossing such a busy road for ice cream. You'll get it at home", he said and Lwa stomped his feet.

"NO", Muzi said slowly so it sinks in before he could pull both of them into a hug. He brushed their heads with adoration.

“Hayi baba umosha iynwele zami mama onkamile”(You're ruining my hair mom combed it), Lwa complained with irritation. He's always been fussy about his neat and well-kempt appearance, even as a child. Muzi and his wife laughed before Muzi could apologize. Mxolisi couldn't care less. She watched him as Muzi tied up his short laces on his tiny school shoes and tucked in his school shirt properly. The next video was about to play when she grabbed the remote and switched off the screen.

“How am I supposed to go on without him mama?”, Betso broke down in her mother's arms. Violet did not say much ever since she received the news. She was too shocked to be throwing emotional tantrums. It hadn't sunk in yet. All Betso could do was to allow herself to break even further apart in her mother's arms. Violet rubbed her back as he fell apart. There was a knock on the door. Violet yelled for the person to come in and Betso quickly wiped her tears with a pocket tissue. Tumi peeped in. He was with Enhle in the kitchen and other ladies- lending a hand in the baking process. Throughout all this, he questioned how Enhle could be the one captaining the ship that held a hot oven inside it.

Violet politely asked him to come back later, with her hands still wrapped around her daughter's upper arms. Betso was too tired to speak. Tumi nodded with understanding then left. Violet brushed her head over her doek. “I know your pain ngwanaka. You know I do. But even with this knowledge, I have nothing to say to you because I know. I know that it'll take way more than just a few wise words to ease the pain”, she stated while still brushing her back.

“It's too much mama. It is too much. I-can't-handle...”, she could not see to the end of that sentence.

“Oh ngwanaka hle...”, Violet let out as she felt herself also tearing up.

“He didn't deserve to die like that. There was no need for him to die in that manner. NO NEED”

“I know baby I know...”

Betso was struggling to keep her breathing stabilized and her chest still.

“You should've seen him just laying there. I thought he'd wake up and call me Sthandwasami, like he always did but he didn't. He was just there but at the same time, he wasn't”

“Cry it all out. Lla botlhoko boye le meetse”(Cry and dissolve the pain), she continued to comfort her. It shattered all of her heart seeing Betso in that state. She was an insolvable mess. Nothing anybody could ever say could even attempt to scrape the first layer of that heartbreak away.

“You need some sleep. Should I make you some tea? It'll make you feel better”

“Akebatle teye mama I need my so-huh-nnnn!!”(I don't want tea...), she yelled in broken pieces as the pain twisted itself into her heart.

...

When Manqoba got up from the floor, he had exhausted all the bundles for his physical strength. He desperately wanted to sleep. He could barely keep his eyes open. He dropped his weight on the bed and he was gone minutes later. However, in that sleep, he felt somehow awake. He could see the door opening and a tall male figure taking patient steps as he walked in, then closing the door again. He knew his father even in the dark. He immediately knew. The whole setup felt dreamy but real. The late chief Khumalo found his way to the chair next to the bed and placed his panama hat on his knee, right after pulling his pants and exposing his socks.

“Vuka sikhulume”(Sit up so we can talk)

Manqoba was already on his way sitting up.

"I am not here to give any explanation for anything. The only reason I am here, is to let you know that there is a child, our blood that is busy growing in its mother's womb. I need you to make sure that none of our children grow outside of this fence. I have been preaching this even when I was still with you and I still stand by it. After you put one of us to his final resting place, make sure that none of our children grow outside of this fence.

Nathi?"

"Baba?", he answered. He knew exactly who Khumalo was talking about.

"I trust you. It is not by mistake or chance that you're the one sitting on that chair. Your duty is to dig up old skeletons and put them out in the open. Do this without any fear or favour. Ngihlezi nginawe ngaso sonke iskhathi. I just wish you'd master how to listen to me more however, it is not my duty to teach you how to unlock that gift. Uzoyinqoba lempi just as your name suggests"(I am always with you... you'll win this war..), he said before he could stand up gracefully. He held the hat in his one hand and placed the other in his pocket.

"Make SURE that none of our children grow up in the wilderness"

"I understand that but..."

"There's no room for any buts"

"UMxolisi. Can't you undo--", Manqoba wanted to ask but Khumalo was already on his way out. He ran after him but failed to catch him, regardless of the consistent slow pace his father maintained. He actually felt like he was running backwards. He stood and watched the busy kitchen floor from upstairs. He then saw him walk past all those women and none of them saw him. Whatever confusion between being asleep and actually being awake was wearing off. He tried to make sense of everything; Of what had just happened. He questioned his meta self.

...

Muzi came back on Thursday with Bab'Bayede. They both weren't talking to one another and to anybody else. Those were the rules. Bab'Bayede was the one who was talking to the tree branch - Umlahlankosi. They were met at the gate by a goat held in position by Sandile. Manqoba was also there, trying in all his might to keep it together. Underneath all that charade, his heart was breaking. All of their hearts were.

"Mxolisi, Mntungwa, Khumalo. Ses'fikile ekhaya manje ndodana. Awukaka lahleki. Nje ngoba bengikuchazela endleleni ukuthi siyaphi, sesifikile. Angifuni uduke Mbulazi. Ngifuna wazi ukuthi kusekhaya lana"(We are here now Mxolisi. We are home son. You are not lost. Just as I was explaining to her on our way here about where we were headed, we have now arrived. I don't want you to get lost Mbulazi. I want you to always know that this is home), Bab'Bayede continued speaking to him as they took the way leading to the ancestral communication place known as emsamo. They continued with this process amongst wails and cries from the female family members. Sandile wiped the corner of his eyes and collected himself when Bab'Sizwe gave him a side eye. Men don't cry. That's what they were taught. That's what they uphold. Unfortunately for Muzikayise, this was something that was decided for him by ancestors long before he could even know how to say his own name.

After that whole process was done, he attended to the call he deliberately missed from the school principal.

"Rashmid?", he greeted.

"Mr Kumalo hi. I just wanted to confirm with and let you know that the we have one full bus making it's way there. I have given your number to Mrs Nkosi who will be riding with the learners. She will be in contact. I will also arrive at a later stage. I just had a few things to sort out. My condolences once more", the principal informed and Muzi acknowledged the receipt of this information. Manqoba approached and gave him a firm pat and squeeze on the shoulder. Muzi gave a weak smile before lifting his leg off the log he had placed it on.

"Everything okay?"- Manqoba

"Yea. I just need to sort out the accommodation issue for his mates"

"Hawu. They'll sleep in the house"

"Sleep in the house? A whole busful in the house?", Muzi asked with his eyebrow raised and a twitching lip, wanting to laugh.

"Hayisuka. This is a funeral. Not a vacation. Who sleeps at a night vigil? "

Muzi finally laughed.

"Uyabheda. Bus rides are exhausting. They'll need a place to sleep and to bath. I don't want commotion in the yard. Plus, these are Purity and Cerelac kids. I doubt they'll be able to function if they don't sleep", he mentioned and Manqoba nodded.

"I guess you're right. Plus we both know what Mxo would've said", Manqoba said and they shared a look before simultaneously going: "Dad, please don't embarazz me. Don't embarazzzz me my guy", then exploded in a fit of laughter.

"Arg man intwana yami...", Muzi said with deep sorrow and the smiles on their faces slowly faded. They still couldn't believe he was really, really gone.

Bongiwe parked the car and Gugu asked her for the hundredth time if she's sure that she wants to attend the funeral.

"I'll be fine. As long as I do not see the coffin or the body then the baby and I should be good. I'm just here to offer my condolences then I'll go back to the hotel. You'll stay if you want"

"We'll see how it goes", Gugu said and Bongiwe looked at her with begging eyes.

"Please don't stir up any trouble, especially for Betso"

"I won't. I'm just here to see and support my son. That's it. He may not be taking my calls but I know for a fact that he is shattered by this", she said and stepped out of the car. She fixed the black see-through doek around her face and fixed her shades. Bongiwe sighed before also stepping out of the vehicle. She doubted taking her handbag with but eventually took it from the backseat. Gugu just had her phone in her hand and her heels on. They walked in and saw Muzi and Manqoba still conversing next to the huge Morula tree, just a few meters next to the gate. Manqoba was the first to notice them and of course, he did not hesitate to let Muzi know by pointing at them with his head. Muzi turned in the direction and released a very heavy and exhausted breath. He just stood there and waited since they were obviously coming towards them.

"Sanibonani", they both greeted at the same time. The brothers greeted back. Bongiwe offered her condolences

and the two hugged her back. Gugu was just standing there.

"I'll go check on the boys at the back", Manqoba excused himself and Bongiwe did the same.

"Where can I find the loo?", she directed this towards Muzi and he told her to walk into the house and ask in there. She did exactly that.

"I'm really sorry about what happened. He didn't deserve any of what happened to him. My deepest condolences", she offered. Muzi bit his lower lip thoughtfully.

"Thanks. Melo is at the back", he mentioned. She nodded and took a few steps away from him.

"And Gugu...?", he called out. She looked back.

"Stir up any funny soup and I'll make you drink it with a paper straw. Are we clear?", he warned and she sighed. She walked back towards him.

"Muzi, I am not here to cause any trouble. You of all people should know that I am not a bad person. What happened was a mistake. I did not think it through. Give me a chance to prove myself. I am not saying take me back. I am saying, give me the space to build a relationship with our son and to apologize to Betso. I am not trying to destroy your family. I am just trying to find my feet in society again. I have, to a certain degree moved on but I can not fully do that without uMelokuhle"

"Madlamini. Move on, off, backwards, sideways and upside down I don't give a fxck. All I am saying is, cause trouble and you will know me since you've been guessing all this time. CLEAR?", he warned once again and she sighed before nodding. She then walked off. He did the same but in the opposite direction. He went to check on Betso and found her asleep. He thought it best not to disturb her and went to find his big bro.

He found Manqoba in the study and walked in. Manqoba was seated on the couch with his legs outstretched, hands in the pocket. He was clearly drowning in his thoughts but he took notice of Muzikayise's appearance.

"How did it go?", he asked. Muzi huffed out a laugh before pouring himself a drink also.

"Was I attending a job interview yin?", he said before taking a sip and sitting down next to Manqoba.

"We need to do something about uNdalo", Manqoba mentioned.

"Something like what? Endanger her by allowing her to come to the funeral?", Muzi snapped. He was frustrated.

"Ehlis' umoya. I'm not the one who invited your wife here"(Calm down) MQ said calmly. Muzi clucked and took in a huge gulp of his drink.

"You know how dad always urged that no kid of our blood will be raised from "outside the fence?"

"But yours are", Muzi mentioned.

"Because their mothers are crazy and stubborn. Plus you know how the Khumalos are with disrespectful women. They cut them off", Manqoba commented and his thought magnet couldn't help but attract Enhle's image. He wondered how she managed to last that long. His and Enhle's case was spiritually complicated.

"She's too young for marriage man. Way too young. We obviously won't allow another man to raise our baby but right now I think we should just take care and keep an eye on her but at the same time, let her be"

"You have ungovernable ancestors Muzikayise. Don't gamble with this child's life"

Muzi raised his brow.

"Why do you sound like you know more than I do?"

Manqoba grabbed his glass and consumed it all at one go.

"I'm older. Wiser. Just listen to me"

Muzi laughed as he poured himself another drink.

"Older... wiser...", he mocked. "Okay Wiseman. What do you suggest? We marry her off to her late boyfriend?"

"I was thinking... Lwandile takes over from his twin", Manqoba said and looked to Muzi for an answer. Muzi took a calm, slow sip.

"That won't work. Maybe Melokuhle"

"Why not?"- Manqoba.

"She's not his type"

"You don't even know her that well. I'm the one who's supposed to attest to that"

"I've seen her on several occasions. Trust me. She is not his type", Muzi continued to lie on Lwa's behalf. Well he wasn't exactly lying, just covering up the truth. He knew Manqoba wasn't open to homosexuality and anything that deviated from his own idea of normalcy.

"Lwa is a far better option. Melokuhle is careless when it comes to girls. He is going to shred her innocent heart to dozens of pieces"

Muzi exhaled and sat back. Why did Mxo have to die? He did not like this. He did not like this one bit.

Chapter Sixty-Eight

Mixed emotions tumble around themselves as their eyes meet. Melo was seated at the back of the house with the men and boys who were preparing a fire. Gugu stood at a distance but he saw her. Everyone was busy laughing as they held usual ceremony banter. He looked around leerily. He stood up from the brick he was seated on and it immediately fell. He then walked towards her and she swallowed as she waited.

"Hey baby", she greeted nervously before he could officially get to her. He sighed before greeting back.

"Mom...", he flatly said. She found assurance in that word. "What are you doing here?", he questioned seconds later.

"I'm here to see you", she said with a face dressed in sympathy. Melo just nodded and looked away.

"How are you?", she asked. That question. He did not like it, especially when he was a vulnerable mess. He looked up and pushed down the lump he felt down his throat. Gugu immediately took him in her arms and he shut his eyes. The tears did what they knew best. They were not on good terms but there was something about his mother's presence that provided the necessary comfort. Something that only a person with enough knowledge about the bond that occurs in the womb could destroy. He decided to dwell in that instead of all the negatives that surrounded their relationship.

"I'm really sorry boy..."

He bowed his head into her shoulder and wiped his cheeks, trying to hide from whoever was watching. He collected himself and cleared his throat. He resigned from the hug and they held hands. He was about to speak when he saw Zamo awkwardly standing at a distance, clearly waiting to speak to him. He immediately smiled at how awkward she looked, yet so beautiful in a dress. It was the very first time he was seeing her in such an attire - which she was obviously uncomfortable in. Gugu noticed her too and she smiled.

"Is that her?", she asked. Melo looked down and laughed, still holding hands with his mother.

"Her who?", he asked shyly. He then gestured with his hand, telling her to come closer. She frowned and shook her head, still standing on the same spot. He knew she wasn't going to come but he felt he just had to try. Gugu waved at her with the widest smile. Zamo blushed and waved back.

"She looks shy"- Gugu. Melo laughed.

"Can we talk later?", Melokuhle politely asked. Gugu dusted off his shoulders lovingly before nodding. He walked towards Nomzamo.

"Ja wena nomadressana", he mocked her outfit and she sucked her teeth, then laughed as well. He hugged her and shortly brought his face back. She could see he had been crying behind that closed-lip smile. They both sighed.

"Unjani?"(How are you?), she asked as they walked out of the busy yard.

"For such a smart person that's a really stupid question", he said with a smile and they laughed.

"Mciim. You know what I mean", she defended, trying to be serious. Melo let out a dramatic sigh.

"He's gone Zamo. How I feel won't change that"

"Y'all were very close ne?", she mentioned as they took a slow walk. He nodded.

"I can just tell by the pictures on Instagram. And the videos. From what I saw he looked like a fun person"
Melo laughed and sat on a rock.

"That's an understatement", he said as she settled down next to him. "You look beautiful", he stated with an expectant smile - anticipating a reaction. She laughed and slapped away the compliment. She was speechless.

"I'm serious. That doek and the dress. You look really beautiful", he insisted. She blushed and looked away, still chuckling. He continued staring at how the dress hugged her slim body, right down to her knees. He legs are never exposed.

"Stop. You've made your point"

He stood up and took her hand, making her twirl for him. She was still chuckling.

"Mm mm mm. You look like something my father would tell me to marry"

"OH MY GOD Melo!", she laughed even harder. He still continued to stare and make her shy. She looked like a girl and he just couldn't get enough. That day was horrible but her presence was like icing on a burnt bundt cake.

"Please stop staring", she begged lowly. He brought her face closer and looked her dead straight in the eye. She was about to contest what she thought he was about to do.

"Nobody wears these anymore. Throw them in the bin when you get home", he said while pointing to her black suede Carvelas.

She shot out a sharp laugh.

"You just couldn't miss a chance to be an a**hole could you?"

He was about to say something else when he saw a heartbroken Khanyi with a look of disbelief in her eyes. His smile gradually disappeared.

"Khanyi...", he lowly said - slowly letting go of Zamo's wrists. She turned and walked away - running back to the direction of his house. She did mention that she was going to arrive with her dad but he just figured she would text when she finally did. He wanted to run after her but he was caught in between.

"I'm guessing that's your girlfriend", Zamo mentioned with a look he couldn't comprehend on her face. He nodded. She scoffed.

"Why didn't you say that you had a girlfriend?"

"Why?", he said as he stared at her shooting multiple bullets at him with her eyes. Her tongue was tied.

"I'm asking. Why?"-Melo

She clucked and looked away.

"Tell me why and I'll explain myself", he insisted.

"I just thought--"-Zamo

"Do you love me Nomzamo?", he cut her sentence short. She continued looking away. He brought her face back.

"Answer me. Uyangithanda?"

"You know the answer to that"

"I don't have a prophetic gift. Answer me"

She nodded. He smiled.

"This cat and mouse business ends today, right?"-Melo

"How when you have a girlfriend? You're going through a lot right now we'll talk some other ti--"

"That's for me to stress about", he softly said and caressed her cheek.

"I'm not going to be a part of your triangle Melo. I thought you left all these messy ways in grade 11"

A naughty smirk grew on his face.

"So YOU'VE BEEN burning with feelings for me?"

She dropped her shaking face and laughed. She then raised it and looked at him in the eye.

"I loved you from the first moment I saw you in grade eight. Go talk to your girl. I don't want to be the reason she sleeps with a broken heart", she confessed and left him there, walking in the opposite direction.

"Zamo!", he called out but she kept walking.

...

Manqoba gathered his family around the dinner table. He requested that they wait on those who weren't there, yet to arrive. Betso had locked herself up in her room for the whole day. Muzi assured his brother that he called her and that she would come down. Evelyn was sweating acid.

"Ma, u right?"(Are you okay?), Muzi asked in concern. She nodded and squeezed his hand.

"I'm sorry...", her voice failed her but he got the message. He automatically thought she was plainly speaking about his loss. He sighed and squeezed her hand back. Enhle walked in, untying her apron from the back.

Manqoba enjoyed this domesticated-busy-wife sight of her. Melo followed, simply settled down on his chair, locked his phone and waited. Aunt Sizakele asked where Gugu was since she saw her in the yard. Nobody replied.

"Hamb' uyobiza umawakho wena"(Go and call your mother), she said to Melo. Manqoba was about to protest when she snapped and said if that was a family meeting then Gugu deserved to be there. She stood firmly by her stance that Gugu made a mistake and she deserved forgiveness. She was that serious aunt who was barely home but whose opinion meant a lot. Melo stood up to go do as instructed. Betso came down, with that fleece still over her shoulders. Her entire head was covered. She sat down next to Muzi and he held her hand from under the table. She allowed him to.

"Where's Melo?", she asked Muzi. Manqoba cleared his throat.

"Outside", Muzi said. She frowned and gave a confused "Okay". Lwandile was just seated there silently with his head resting against the chair. Melo walked in first and reported that she was coming, avoiding eye contact with Betso. She wanted to ask but she knew that Bayede could only take little of a woman's blabbering; He might've chewed her head off. Gugu walked in and Betso's face immediately went coal red.

"What is she doing here?", she asked Muzi- who was expecting that very reaction.

"Please calm down sthandwasami", Muzi was tired and aunt Sizakele just had to.

"Makoti. She is still very much married to this family as much as you are"- Sizakele

"Uphume nini ejele?"(When did you get out of jail?), Bayede asked and Gugu shamefully cleared her throat.

"Can everyone please settle down", Manqoba instructed and everyone went silent. He was barely firm but when

he decided to be everyone in the room felt it. However, Betso's burning chest couldn't allow her to keep quiet. She stood up.

"Baby please sit do--"

"No. This is my son's funeral and I would've appreciated burying him peacefully. You are not welcome here!", Betso angrily shot out to Gugu.

"Can we not do this? At least not now...", Gugu pleaded.

"You tried to kill me and you want to come here and tell me that--"

"SFEBE!", that was aunt Thenjiwe breaking a Black Label bottle on the chair Sizakele was seated on. Aunt Sizakele jumped out of her chair and ran to stand behind Manqoba. Thenjiwe was only arriving then.

"What the hell is going on?!", Manqoba questioned the chaos that was arising in the room.

"This is not the time to be fighting for a man. He decided to marry her and not you, years ago. The man is even dead. LET IT GO!", Bayede said and Manqoba buried his head in his hands. Betso stormed out and went back to her room, leaving the two doors that were closed for privacy sake wide open. Muzi followed her.

"Nibadala!!!!!!!!!!!!!!", Melokuhle yelled as he stood up from his chair. Everyone went quiet and looked at him.

"Nibadala for this sh!t"(You're too old for this), he reiterated and took his phone from the table.

"You can't speak to your elders like that", Aunt Sizakele reprimanded. Melo kept walking.

"Makhosonke!", Bayede tried to call him to order but he still left. Lwandile was still in the position he was in, gladly sinking in his thoughts with his hands in his pockets. Manqoba sighed and stood up to leave as well.

...

The dreadful morning of the funeral finally arrived. Enhle was fixing Melo's tie in the kitchen. He agreed to be on the programme. Lwandile refused. He clearly stated that he wouldn't be able to keep it together. Luckily for the family, he agreed to the procedure of being put in the grave without hassles. This happened the night before the funeral. He was ready and dressed up. He stepped out of the house and bumped into April, one of his schoolmates and Mxo's friends. He was wearing school uniform like the rest.

"Ey man", he greeted. Lwandile smiled and greeted back.

"I am sorry about your loss", April said. Lwandile was honestly tired of those six words. He just nodded.

"Also, why didn't yall say that yall were royalty man?", April mentioned and Lwandile laughed at how fascinated he was.

"Hawu. What were we supposed to say? Hey? Look at me. I'm royalty?", he mocked and they laughed.

"Nah man. Just... I don't know. Walk like it. Talk like it. I swear if I was royalty you bishes wouldn't have been able to breathe without medical assistance", April continued being himself. Lwandile laughed and walked away. He knew that Mxo's short friend was never going to finish talking. He walked to the room him and Mxo used to share, the room he couldn't sleep in the previous night. He closed the door and sat down, remembering all the memories that made in that room- the conversations, confessions and the petty fights. He felt like he still had something to hold on to since Mxo wasn't yet laid to rest. A peculiar feeling but it was there. He couldn't see

how his life would go on after the funeral. Seeing him in his coffin wasn't enough in terms of closure. His phone rang and he finally decided to answer it.

"Bokang"

"Finally! Thank God. Why won't you let me be there for you? Are you okay?", he rambled.

"I am fine. How are you? I sent you a text though"

Bokang sighed.

"We both know you aren't..."

Silence...

"I just... it hasn't made sense yet"-Lwandile

More silence

"Can I sing for you?", Bokang asked nicely. Lwandile huffed.

"Uhm... o-kay..."

Bokang cleared his throat.

"Dipelo... di robehile. Memoya... e dubehile empa Jehovah re tshepile... re tshepile Wena. Dipotso... di ngata empa dikarabo... tsona di nyenyane fela Jehovah retshepile... retshepile Wena. Rona Jehovah retshepile...", Lwandile couldn't hold back the tears as he listened to how beautiful Bokang's voice sounded as he sang almost the same as Neyi Zimu.

Melo got up when his name was called from under the tent and went to stand in front of the podium with the obituary rolled up in his hand. Betso had her head on her mother's shoulder, wiping her tears with several pocket tissues. It took a moment for Melo to compose himself so he doesn't fall apart. He did not want to fall apart.

"If people were allowed to attend their own funerals, I know the exact first thing Mxo would've said when he got up here", that was his opening line. Everyone looked at him with comforting smiles. Muzi nodded once - to assure him that he was already doing great.

"Mxo would've stood boldly right before you all and said:"Ngempela ngempela yimina lo nizom'ngcwaba nidabukisa kanje? Ngithi wena music dololo. Haibo musan' ukudlala ngami nina.'"(Is it truly me that you all are here to bury looking all sad like that? There's not even music in this place. Quit playing with me), he said and everyone laughed because it was the gospel truth. They knew. In every sad situation Mxo brought the spice.

Melo managed to laugh as well as he stood in front of the people.

"Mxolisi was madness on two legs. The kinda madness I believe everyone needs in their lives. I am lucky to have had the opportunity to have a brother ofana naye", he proceeded with his speech. Enhle realized his voice was beginning to break. She took a bottle of water to him and he drank up. He cleared his throat once more and loosened his tie just a bit.

"Le ngan yaze yafana noyihlo"(This child looks like his father), an old woman whispered to another amongst the crowd.

"Shh. Awuzwa ukuthi isingisi sikhishwa ngamakhala la"(Keep quiet I'm listening to his model C English), the other reprimanded as she listened attentively.

"Mxo was my best friend. He was my ride or die just as much as I was his. We found this term already in

existence but I believe we gave it true meaning"

There was nothing on his nose but still wiped it.

"Someone very special to me mentioned something I found funny. She said Mxo looked like a fun person. What she doesn't know is, fun took notes from Mxo. Fun looks like Mxo, not the other way round", the crowd laughed lightly at this.

"Njayam, you've tattooed your mark. Continue soaring high like the young eagle you were. I guess our argument ends today. Whether 2Pac died at 25 or went into hiding no longer matters. Today... today I just wanna say life goes on. Rest in peace Mntungwa...", he could feel the urge of tears straining his voice from the back of his throat.

"Rest easy Mbulazi...", he slowly raised the bottle of water in celebration of Mxo's life. The same way he raised his hand to let go of the sand in farewell to him after they had to watch him go six feet into the ground, after they had to watch him being placed carefully into his final resting place.

Chapter Sixty-Nine

The blank morning after the day of the funeral eventually arrived. Manqoba ordered the helps to remove all the dishes around the table and close the door behind them - they did just that. Betso refused to be a part of the meeting where Gugu would be present.

"Ukuphi umfazi wakho?"(Where is your wife?), Bayede asked.

"She went to see her therap... she had something important to attend to", Manqoba replied and kept it going. Bayede shook his head in disapproval.

"I would like for this to be short futhi uqonde ngqo ephuzwin"(and straightforward), he said as he pulled his chair towards the table so he sits properly. Everyone nodded.

"Kodwa before siqale, let me say this: I believe sonke siyawenza amaphutha. Ngesinye isakhathi sisuke siwenza sithi mhlampe siyalungisa kanti siyamosha. I feel like akekho umzali, in fact akekho umama ongenza izinto ngenhloso yokukulethela iynhlungu as ingane yakhe"(Before we start, let me say this: I believe we all make mistakes. Sometimes we make them thinking we're doing good while we're actually doing the opposite. I feel like there's no parent, in fact there's no longer who'd do stuff with the intention of hurting their child) Ears erected in attention as he went on. Evelyn was already in tears.

"Nathi, kahle kahle uyibhekisephi lendaba?"(Where is this going?) Bayede questioned with a curious frown on his face.

Manqoba calmly scratched the skin above his upper lip.

"I believe kukhona okuthile ofuna ukukukhipa esfubeni. Ma?"(I believe there is something you'd like to say ma?), he sent his eyes straight to Evelyn. Muzi pinched his brows.

Evelyn cleared her throat and blew out the snort that was blocking her nose onto her pocket tissue.

"Speak woman", Sizwe was getting impatient.

"There's really no easier way to say. Son, I'm really sorry", her voice was breaking.

"Sorry for what ma? What's going on?", Muzi asked in a sedated manner, sitting across her. She pulled out more plys and blew her reddened nose.

"I... I knew about your wife's affair", she mentioned and eyes widened.

"Affair?", Bayede poked right into the anus of the elephant in the room.

"I don't understand. You mean the Gugu and Bheki saga?", Muzi asked and Gugu almost choked on her apple juice. Evelyn nodded. Bayede wore a defeated look on his face and fell back on his chair.

"But that's old news. Is there really a need for us to even have an entire meeting over this? We just buried Mxo. I'd appreciate if you didn't waste my time", Muzi said from a place of irritation and stood up, wanting to walk away.

"No wait! There's more...", Evelyn tried to stop him. He turned back and looked at her with anticipation.

"Sit down bafo"- Manqoba. Muzi sighed impatiently but did as requested.

"I did not tell you because I knew how you'd react. If I did, that would've been me destroying the family"

"Are we getting any closer to the point?", Muzi asked.

"My great grandfather once had a wife. The wife was said to be the one who was going to bear him a prince,

who was later going to become king"

Everyone was still listening attentively.

"Apparently, when the wife was pregnant, she cheated on him and out of anger, he impregnated another lady of royal blood", she continued telling the story with no interruptions.

"The lady's son went on to become king instead of the first one. That lady was my grandmother and that king was my father. The ancestors went back on their word because the first queen's cheating ways". She was still narrating when everyone was trying to make sense of where exactly she was heading with this.

"Niyamkhumbula u Lilitha?"(Do you remember Lilitha?), she asked Muzikayise and Manqoba. Manqoba nodded. Muzi was confused.

"Princess Lilitha. The one whose dad bought ma's land", Manqoba tried to jog Muzi's memory. He seemed to remember.

"Well. I didn't exactly 'sell' that land. I gave it to her father in exchange for her"

"In exchange for what ma? Please make sense"-Muzi

"I was acting out of anger most of that time. I felt like uGugulethu wasn't suitable to be a chief mother so I drugged you. I drugged you the time she went to see her family and I brought Lilitha here. I wanted her to fall pregnant before uMadlamini since bab'Ngema had declared that..."

Evelyn was now falling apart.

"Gogo you hated me before you even met me?!", Melokuhle shot out.

"No baby this wasn't about you please--", she tried to explain. He had none of it. He stormed out before Gugu could stop him.

Muzi was beginning to boil. He had his eyes riveted on the table top.

"Go on...", he said.

"I made her sleep with you so she could fall pregnant...", she proceeded with her confession and jaws were dropping low.

"Evelyn...", Gugu was in utter disbelief. Evelyn was a crying wet mess. "Is that... is that why you couldn't wait to tell me that Betso was actually the first one while I was heavily pregnant? I could've easily had a miscarriage" Evelyn couldn't answer, nor lead her eyes in Muzikayise's direction. He was fuming.

"Did she fall pregnant?", Muzi asked in a tone that suggested tombstones and amagugu. Evelyn nodded.

"Where is that child?"

"EMlindangwenya", she answered.

"That near?!", Muzi exclaimed. "You've got to be kidding me"

Everyone around that table was pulling as many scattered puzzle pieces towards themselves.

"You're not done", Manqoba prodded. Evelyn blew her nose once again. Thando was just staring at her mother, eyes filled with disgust.

"There's more?", Muzi gasped.

"I received signs - warnings. You've always been a special child Muzikayise and I took that for granted. They wanted me to bring your son home but I stalled... I was afraid. I was afraid of how you'd react. Mxolisi died on the day I was ready to confess"

"Haa!!", Aunt Sizakele went berserk, along with Olwethu.

"Ma? Yaz ngizokubulala? Ngizok'bulala ma uyakwaz loko?!"(Mom do you know that I'm going to kill you? I'm going to kill you, do you know that?!) Muzi was already charging towards her.

"Muzi no!"-Thando

"Bafo ngiyak'cela!"-Manqoba

Evelyn fell off her chair before she could run. Manqoba, Thando and bab'Sizwe held him back. He was ready to slice her with his hands.

"Please calm down", Thando was in tears. Lwandile was crying uncontrollably.

"You killed him!!! You killed my son and you claim to love me?! How dare you ngempela?!"

The doors went open. Betso stepped in. Everyone went silent. Muzi yanked his arms out of the two pair of hands and left the room, after a heart piercing "NXN!"

Betso tried to speak but he walked past her like hot wind.

"What's going on Thando? Why is Muzi saying Evelyn killed Mxo?", Betso asked. Her eyes fell on Lwandile who had his face against his arms on the table. She brushed his back but kept her expectant hers on her sister-in-law. Thando's eyes lingered around.

...

After storming out of that meeting, Melo made his way to the upset girlfriend's house. She refused to take his calls ever since the day she saw him with another girl. He continued calling as he parked outside the yard, under a tree. He couldn't see what was happening inside since they had high fencing. His impatience was running thin. He even sent texts, threatening that if she doesn't come out he'll be the one to go in. She never replied to those not did she do as threatened. He waited in the car for an entire 45 minutes till another car came by. He ended up sleeping against the steering wheel. Khanyi's mother parked in front of the gate and went over to knock on his window. He got a small fright but shortly composed himself.

"Hi. Are you okay? Hawu... Melokuhle? Unjan mfan' wami? I'm so sorry about your brother my boy.

Alwehlanga lungehlanga"(My condolences), she rambled before he could even open the door. He eventually did and rubbed his eyes. She insisted on a hug. He didn't disappoint her. He accepted the condolences and there was a bit of awkward silence.

"So, why are you sleeping in a car outside of my yard?", she questioned with a smile. The house opposite theirs had no one living in it. He rubbed the back of his neck.

"Mmm. Ufunana no Khanyi angithi?"(You're looking for Khanyisile isn't it?), she laughed with her finger pointed out. He laughed shyly as well.

"Umphule inhliziyu net kanye nje, uzongazi"(Break her heart just once, you will know me), she threatened and he laughed nervously.

"I won't ma", he assured. She thinned her eyes and gave him a suspicious smile.

"I'll go call her. BUT make sure that ubab'wakhe doesn't come back and find you here because kuzonuka umsunu", she gave him a tip and she laughed at how she phrased it all. She exuded 'cool mom' vibes. She

walked away in a golfer t-shirt that looked like it belonged to her husband and denim shorts, which weren't short at all. He sat in the car with his legs out and waited. He was trying his level best not to think about what went down at that table back at his house. Khanyi later approached, looking like someone who was recently pulled out of sleep. If somebody would describe her hair as a mess, they'd be doing an injustice to the Description Board of South Africa.

"Ufunani Melokuhle?" (What do you want?), she questioned with no ounce of regret. He got out of the car and stood in front of her under the shade.

"Why ungaygqokile icyathulo? Kuyashisa laphansi" (Why are you not wearing any shoes? It's hot on the ground), he softly asked before taking both her hands into his. She was ready to fight but the calm aura around him and his voice defeated her. He insisted on looking her in the eye, remorseful.

"Now you care about me?", she interrogated as she looked away.

"I've never stopped caring about you sthandwasami", he said and tucked his lower lip slightly in between his teeth.

"Who is she?"

"Who? Zamo?"

"Arg ungangenzi isdomu the girl you were with that day!" (Don't treat me like a fool)

"Her name is Zamo and I don't understand why we're fighting over her ngokwe qiniso"

"I saw you with her!"

"And then? What exactly did you see that has you this messed up? Entlik hlala phansi sikhulume" (Sit down so we can talk), he wore a baffled look on his face and got her to sit on the driver's seat. He went down in a squat outside the car and sat in between her legs.

"Tell me why you're so mad my love because I genuinely do not understand"

She went quiet. He could see she was hurt. He hated that sight.

"Khanyi? Baby?"

"Hm?"

"I miss your smile and cute giggles. Please don't do this to me?"

She chuckled unintentionally.

"Don't make me laugh Melo I don't want to"

His hand went around her waist as he looked at her.

"What do you want to?"

"I want to break up with you", she kept a serious face.

"Cel' umkhombe lomuntu othe ngizokuvumela ukwenze loko?" (Please point at the person who lied to you and said I'm gonna allow you to do that?)

Khanyi laughed.

"Uzomenzan?" (What are you gonna do to them?)

"Ngizom'tshengisa ukuthi umekthiwa Makhosonke ksuke kkhunywa ngenja engenalo uzwelo. Yayaz ipit bull?" (I'm gonna show them that whenever the name Makhosonke is mentioned they should know that it's a merciless pitbull that's being spoken about), he stated with a twitching smile and she laughed.

"Hayi Melo I'm serious"

"Ayikho lento esihlukanisayo and futhi angithandi umuz'hlanyisa. You just saw me simply talking to a girl and now you're in your feelings. Did you see me kissing or doing anything snax to her?"(You have no reason to break up with me and I don't like it when you act crazy over nothing)

She sulked and looked away.

"No ngibheke. Did you?"(Look at me)

She shook her head.

"Manje?"(So?)

"Ngisaba mina Melokuhle"(I'm afraid), she confessed in a vulnerable tone.

"Usabani?"(What are you afraid of?), he said in almost a gentle whisper.

"That you're going to break my heart..."

"I might ngoba ngiwu muntu nami ngiyawenza amaphutha kodwa ngiyak'thanda baby syazwan? That's one thing I don't want you to doubt. Ngiyak'thanda Khanyi"(...because I am human and humans make mistakes but I love are we clear?), he pleaded for her understanding but saw how skeptical she was. He stood up and went in for a kiss. She was also doubtful about that but she eventually gave in.

"K'thanda...", he whispered when they broke the kiss and kissed her forehead. She looked down and smiled.

She was still not convinced.

"You don't trust me?", he asked. She insisted on looking away.

"Let me prove it then..."--Melo

"How?"

"I'm gonna keep it a surprise for now. Wena vuma nje ukuthi isoka lakho lize likulande namhlanje ebsuku?"(Just give your boyfriend the permission to come and fetch you tonight)

She sighed.

"Uyavuma?"(Do you agree?), he kissed her once more. He kissed her till she smiled.

"Hm?", he was insistent. She nodded in agreement.

...

After Lwandile snitched on his grandmother, Betso also wanted to have a piece of her. Gugu had to hold her back. Manqoba stood in front of Betso, begging her to calm down. She was kicking the air, ready to stomp on Evelyn's head. The throw she had around her shoulders was now off and covering Gugu's head. Her rage eventually died down when she broke down in tears.

"Evelyn how could you? How could youuuuuu???", she was crying and yelling at the same time. Evelyn kept voicing multiple 'I'm sorry's. Thando grabbed her car keys and left.

"Where are you going?", Sandile asked.

"This family is messed up. A true definition of not all that glitters is gold. Yoh royalty my foot", she answered before continuing to march up the stairs. Gugu let Betso sit on the couch when she was sure she wasn't going to hurt anybody. She wiped her tears and stood up a minute later, everyone was ready to block her from reaching

Evelyn.

"Lwandile, go pack your bag. I'll be back and geke bowa mo kego hwetse o feditse, crystal?"

"Clear"-Lwa

She instructed before heading up to go take Muzikayise's car keys - who only hell knew where he had disappeared to. She later came back down and went straight out of the house. She called Melokuhle on the way.

"Ma?", he answered. "Wait are you okay?"

"I need directions to Ndalo's house", she went straight to the point. She was waiting for the funeral to pass and the cleansing to occur before she could go to her. Melo asked where she was and she told him. He told her to make a U-turn and go back so he could direct her properly. She eventually arrived and parked outside. She had to drink some water so she calms herself down. She was calling Muzi non-top to no result. She played with her wedding ring, pulling it back and forth and turning it sideways as she floated in her thoughts. She eventually stepped out of the car and fixed herself.

"Knock knock", she alerted of her presence. The smell of gravy cooking somewhere in the house welcomed her. Ndalo approached and she was stunned.

"Hello ma", she had nothing else to say. She was in fact nervous. Betso smiled in adoration as she stood by the doorstep.

"You're glowing. Suwubona", she finally greeted. Ndalo immediately went shy and looked to the floor. She had a wooden spoon in her hand.

"Please come in", she said and Betso stepped in. She led her to the couch.

"Where is your mother?", Betso asked as she placed her phone and car keys down next to her on the couch.

"She's still out at the moment", Ndalo reported as she turned the stove off. She walked out of the kitchen and went to sit on the couch next to Betso's.

Betso studied her with a consistent smile on her face until Ndalo had no where to look.

"How are you?", Betso finally asked. Ndalo pursed her lips and shrugged. The matter was still so volatile and sensitive to her. It took almost nothing to make her cry.

"Come sit here...", Betso patted the next seat on her couch. Ndalo did not argue. She placed her on her thighs and Ndalo fell apart. Betso also wanted to cry but she felt it would help nothing. She kept brushing her head and assuring her that it was okay to cry. That moment reminded her of when she first came to the royal house and had Evelyn comforting her, in the same position by the golf course. It took almost half an hour for Ndalo's hiccups to stop and her tears to dry. She just laid there with her hands hanging as Betso brushed her back.

"I also feel helpless. Like there's something I can do to bring him back just as I brought him to this cruel earth... but I just don't know what it is and it hurts me that I'm not doing it", Betso said and wiped the falling tear on her cheek.

"I don't think it will ever stop hurting...", Ndalo said.

"You're so young to be going through all of this in all honesty. So so young"

Ndalo kept quiet.

"I'm sorry I couldn't be there for you sooner than this. I couldn't come and I also couldn't bring myself to pick up

the phone" - Betso.

"It's okay", Ndalo said.

"But, I was expecting to see your mother at the funeral...?"

Ndalo went quiet once more.

"Buhle?", Betso prodded.

"Hm?"

"Is she being supportive?"

Ndalo hesitated before saying yes.

"Yeah she is"

Betso brought her up by her shoulders.

"You're not a very good liar. What is going on?", she interrogated. Ndalo didn't know where to start. She also would've preferred not talking about it however, she felt she needed to vent.

"Buhlebendalo, what is going on?", Betso reiterated.

"She said I got what I deserved from not listening to and going against my elders' teachings"

Betso's jaw dropped as her heart cracked.

"What?"

Ndalo nodded sadly.

"She really said that?"

Ndalo nodded again.

"Nihleba ngami?"(Gossiping about me?), a voice rose from behind the couch. They both turned to see her and she placed both grocery bags she had in her hands down and exhaled from exhaustion, with no care in the world. Betso stood up and gave her a polite greeting. She just gave a nonchalant "Mmm". Betso could not understand why she was being rude. She could hear the mini her that lives in her head clapping once. She sighed and relinquished all the niceties.

"I'm actually here to ask you if Ndalo can visit me for the whole of December holidays, after she's done with her exams", she made her request.

"Akayi ndawo uNdalo"(Ndalo is not going anywhere), she snubbed Betso off. Betso let out a slight gasp of disbelief. It took her a moment to reply.

"And you call yourself a praying woman? I would suggest you guard your words and watch who you're talking to", she warned. She'd never flaunted her power as a royal wife before. It actually felt weird doing it but she felt it needed to be done. Nomcebo knew exactly what she meant. She'd find herself looking for a stand in some village elsewhere if she placed another foot wrong. The look in Betso's eyes suggested that. Nomcebo cleared her throat and picked up her plastic bags.

"Mthathe"(Take her), she said and left for the kitchen. Betso began calculating if she wouldn't abuse Ndalo once she left her there...

Chapter Seventy

An appalled Betso stood in the middle of Nomcebo's living room, where the homeowner had left her shamelessly. The embarrassment skipped the mother and went straight to the child. Ndalo's eyes had no idea which direction to take. Betso sighed and took a defeated walk back to the couch.

"Ikuphi itissue Ndalo? Ayi yekela nayi"(where is the tissue roll? Nevermind, found it), Nomcebo's disembodied voice sounded from the kitchen. Betso heard the door close, then concluded that Nomcebo made her way out.

"I am sorry to say this but I don't trust your mother to take care of someone in your condition. Pack your bags we are leaving", Betso instructed and Ndalo humbly wore a confused look over her face.

"To where?", she asked.

"The royal house"

"I can't. I'm sorry but I can't", she sternly turned her down when she thought of how inappropriate it would seem. She imagined all the judgements she would have to endure and it made no sense for her to go there. Everyone was already making her feel bad for falling pregnant at the age she did, considering how everyone viewed her as God's last born who could place no foot wrong even if it's was the left one. Betso tried to convince her but she wasn't having it. She shook her head in disapproval until Betso said:"Okay, okay. I still cannot leave you here. Is there any other relative you can live with until you're done with your exams?"

"I used to live with my grandmother after...", she wanted to mention that Nomcebo once kicked her out but decided against it.

"Are you okay with going back there now?"

Ndalo nodded.

"Alright. Go speak to your mother and tell her you're leaving. I'll wait for you right here", Betso assured. Ndalo stood up wanting to go find Nomcebo outside but she heard the kitchen door open. Nomcebo released a dramatic sigh as she walked in. She then pulled out a chair from the table and sat down.

"Mama, bengisacel' ukuya kwa gogo for ishashana?"(Can I go to granny's for a while?), she politely asked as she stood against the white deep freezer.

"Yenza okufunayo Ndalo angithi uwu mfazi manje wena. Uyamitha awulaleli--"(Do as you wish. Isn't it you're a woman now? You get pregnant you don't listen)

Ndalo frowned in sadness.

"Kodwa mama--"(But mom)

Nomcebo raised her hand to cut Ndalo's argument short. She nonchalantly pushed her head wrap back to scratch her hair. Ndalo looked to her side and Betso softly shook her head, showing her that she shouldn't argue any further. Ndalo felt caught in between the two women. She hated disappointing her mother however, she also did not want to disappoint Betso. One fact was enough for Betso to win that case; Ndalo knew she was no where near happy in that house.

"I'll go pack...", she lowly said to her mom, who did not reply. She wasn't sure if she heard her or that she was intentionally keeping mum. Ndalo walked out of that kitchen, leaving the grey atmosphere with a heavy heart. Betso picked up her phone and car keys from the couch and followed her into the room. Ndalo took down her

travelling bag from the top of the wardrobe and zipped it open, clearly emotional. Betso had no idea what to say to her. Ndalo unlocked the wardrobe and opened both doors.

"Hand me the clothes and I'll pack them into the case", Betso offered. Ndalo did just that, still silent as a dead Valentine's card. She handed Betso a couple of already folded t-shirts and Betso placed them carefully into the wide open bag. Next to follow was a green floral dress. Betso unfolded it to have a look.

"This is a really beautiful dress", she remarked. Ndalo huffed out a weak laugh.

"Thank you", she said.

"C'mon. Put it on. I want to see how you look in it", Betso said. Ndalo's silent laugh amplified in protest.

"I'm fat now. It doesn't look the same on me anymore", Ndalo argued. Betso could feel it in her tone that she felt unattractive.

"Please", Betso blinked a couple of times, trying to blackmail her emotionally. Ndalo felt lazy but Betso left her no choice. She took off her clothes and wore the desired dress. It dropped to its full length - just below her knees.

"Is it new?", Betso asked, fascinated by how beautiful she looked in it. Ndalo nodded.

"Sort of. I've only ever worn it once". She still had her hands dropped to her sides, waiting to be told that it was enough and that she could take it off.

"Don't take it off. I'll be back just now. Continue packing", Betso said and quickly dashed out, leaving no space for Ndalo to argue. She came back with her handbag moments later and told Ndalo to sit. Thirty minutes later, Ndalo caught herself with a fully beat face - eyebrows and all.

"Do you like it?", Betso asked as Ndalo stood in front of the mirror, clearly admiring herself.

"Uhm... wow. I... I don't know what to say...", she laughed in her lack for words. Betso held both her shoulders from behind and said:"You're still the beautiful girl my son fell in love with at first sight in that kitchen. Don't let this pregnancy change how you feel about yourself. It's a phase and it will pass. You don't value less just because you fell pregnant at your age. You already have people crucifying you for it. Don't become one of them. I don't know how this dress looked before this but I can confidently say that it looks even better now. Look at you", she said with a smile, one that she shortly infected Ndalo with.

"Now come on, let's finish packing. We still have to drive to gogo's", she said and gently squeezed Ndalo's shoulders.

When they finally arrived at gogo's house, Betso parked the car outside the gate and unbuckled her safety belt.

"Hee, will I even know the way back from here?", she said comedically and Ndalo laughed as Betso looked back. She pulled her handbag from the backseat and took out her wallet.

"This is all I have on me right now. You'll send me your banking details as promised right? I don't want to remind you", she said and Ndalo assured her that she will. Betso then handed her the six hundred rand notes and stepped out of the car. Gogo limped out of the house and placed her hand over her forehead to assist her eyesight.

Betso opened the boot and took out the bag for Ndalo. She wheeled it in and Ndalo followed with a smaller one over her arm.

"Sawubona gogo", they both greeted. A smile stretched gogo's lips when she saw Ndalo's face and she welcomed them in. Betso introduced herself. Gogo nodded in approval but gave a look that sent out confusion signals. Betso immediately knew what clarity to give.

"Gogo, I just feel Ndalo should stay with you until we figure out a sensible solution. I know it looks like I'm making decisions in your family but--"

"Umshayile futh?"(Did she hit her again?), gogo asked as shook her head defeatedly. Betso was confused.

"Nomcebo? She hits her?", she questioned.

"I've been telling her to stop with this thing of hers of hitting the child but she just won't listen. Violence is no way to reprimand a child. What's there to reprimand anyway? Lichithekile ubisi"

The more gogo went on, the more Betso's worry gained weight. Ndalo was in the bedroom since gogo had asked her to give them space. Gogo said:"Akusenani. Thank you for bringing her", then continued shaping the snuff granules in her hand.

...

"You look stressed", said Vanessa as she held her pen loosely to her notebook. Enhle was busy moistening her lips with some lip therapy.

"I don't know how I feel", she mentioned.

"What called for this urgent meeting if I may ask? We were only supposed to meet on Wednesday. Did something happen?", Vanessa kindly asked with softly questioning eyes. Enhle fixed the yellow cushion behind her. She found Vanessa's colorful office calming for her - she felt it to be a safe space.

"I don't know really. I feel overwhelmed. There was a funeral at the house"

"I'm sorry to hear that..." - Vanessa. The silence after each and every sentence that came out of Vanessa's mouth was like a blank page for Enhle. A space where she could let her feelings scribble just about anything and there would be no judgement whatsoever.

"It put things into perspective for me"

"What? The funeral?"

"Yeah"

"Wanna share?"

Enhle sighed before lifting both her feet to place them on the same couch she was seated on.

"Loss is a part of life. Right? At some point we all have to lose somethings and at the end of the day, we have to find ways to deal with that"

Vanessa nodded, not sure where that conversation was going.

"True", she assured.

"Mxolisi is gone and there is nothing anybody can do to bring him back. The same with my husband. I've lost him a long time ago, well emotionally that is but I've just been holding on because the only thing that was important to me was keeping him, no matter how much it hurt. Vanessa I am tired", she confessed. Vanessa sat cross-legged - attentively.

"Manqoba is very good at confusing me and I am sick of it. He makes me question my self worth--", she abruptly stopped speaking so she could breathe. Vanessa was as always, still listening.

"I know I've also done some things that contributed to how toxic our relationship is but staying in it also helps no one. I feel like I'm suffocating. I've put him through a lot but he has put me through much worse. I don't know how to say this in a way that will not suggest that I'm blameshifting but I just... I want out", she continued letting her chest rip and Vanessa pushed the box of tissues across the circular glass table towards her. She pulled out two plys and wiped her tears.

"When did you start seeing things that way?", Vanessa calmly asked.

"A few days ago. I know it sounds abrupt and all of a sudden but I know that if I stay and take my time with it he will manage to convince me otherwise and I'll end up changing my mind. I just want out. I'll heal. It'll get better with time and eventually, I will learn how to live without him", she said and Dr Vee, as Enhle calls her nodded to show understanding.

"And the other man?", Vanessa asked, making sure they were on the same page - taking parallel steps.

"Muhluri? In all honesty, I don't think I'm ready for his kind of love. Plus, I think he's taken now. I just want to be alone. I feel I need to be alone for some time. Get some consistent fresh air, find myself. That's why I've decided to go away, far far away", she smiled to herself as she remembered Muhluri's words and heard them resound in her head.

"As in a solocation?"

Enhle nodded with a smile. I don't know how long it will take but I know it's necessary. My soul yearns for detox. It yearns for a new environment"

She said enthusiastically. She was now on her feet and heading towards the open window. Vanessa remained seated.

"I'll always be available on my cellphone", the doctor assured.

Enhle looked back at her and nodded with a soft smile.

"Any good divorce lawyers you're friends with?" - Enhle.

...

Betso parked outside the royal house, still trying to call Muzi with no luck. There was battle of priority between feelings of worry and frustration. She stepped into the house and found Lwandile asleep on one of the couches, no one else in sight. Mam'Nokwanda stepped in through the glass door, seemingly busy outside.

"Hi ma. Where's everyone?", Betso asked.

"Most have already left. Ma'am is in her room sleeping", she reported. Betso nodded and ran up the stairs to go look for Muzi, desperately hoping for his presence. Evelyn approached with a face smeared with regret and Betso sighed from a place of taxed patience.

"I'm really sorr--"

"Please. I don't want to do things I will regret later", Betso closed the topic before it could fully show its head and walked past her.

"At least tell me where he is?", Evelyn pleaded, referring to Muzi. She then stopped and took a much needed breath in. She turned back. She could feel the tears burning her eyes.

"Evelyn, if anything, and I mean anything has happened to my husband, I swear... ketlogo bontsha mo diphala dinwang meetse"(You will regret it), she hissed before continuing with her journey to the bedroom. Muzi wasn't there. She took a laboured sigh and left that room. She drove around looking for him at all possible places she could find him and those she has never even thought of before. He was no where to be found. It was even getting dark. She continued driving around, assuring Lwandile that she was okay on the phone. She despised the feeling that was sprouting in her heart - a feeling of emptiness. She always gets it when he's in back-to-back meetings but it's usually not enough to cause anxiety. She was now too anxious to drive. Her mind was all over the place. The terrible 'what if' thoughts that she was trying to block out all afternoon were breaking out of jail. She called once again hoping his phone would be on; it wasn't. She tried his business phone, hoping that he went back to Joburg even though Odaliwe's nanny said it clear that he wasn't there.

"Come on Muzi turn on your phone baby man..."

At this point, she was pacing around outside of her car at the filling station with her palm over her forehead - on the brink of tears.

"Mbulazi here. If it sounds important I will certainly get back to--"

"Urghh!", she cut the call and the tears fell down.

"Are you okay sisi?", the petrol attendant asked with great concern. Betso faced the other way and quickly wiped her tears. She then flashed a fake smile and walked back to the car since the attendant was done with it.

"Yeah I'm fine thanks", with that she got in and sped off. Her helpless self took the direction of the royal house but something in her had a bright idea. She was hoping and praying that she would find him there. She accelerated the car and headed in the direction of the royal cemetery. She parked outside and got out to greet the security guard who was seated by the gate, looking alarmed and armed. He placed his gun back when he realized it was a woman approaching.

"Ngingak'siza sisi?"(Can I help you?), he rudely asked.

Betso was looking to see if she won't be able to see Muzi in that yard through its high fencing. The cemetery had lights but there was still some darkness that stood as an enemy of sight.

"Hi. I'm looking for my husband. Is he in there?", she asked, still stretching her neck muscles to see if she could spot him.

"You're from the royal house? I'm so sorry. Yes he's inside. He's been in there for a while now. I tried getting him to go home but...", he rambled on. Betso left him there and approached the gate.

"How do you open this?", she fought with it impatiently. The guard quickly came to her rescue. He didn't want to be in any more of her bad books. He let her in and pointed her in Muzi's direction. She could see the white shirt illuminating from a distance. She forgot all the creepy night stories she's ever heard about cemeteries and paced up to her husband. He was seated on top of his father's large tombstone and drinking whiskey from the bottle. Mxo's grave caught her eye and she jammed a little, then continued walking. Muzi never looked in her direction, he just continued getting wasted. Betso went to stand in front of him.

"Sthandwasami...", she softly said.

"Hm?", he replied and took another gulp down his throat. His tie was on the ground along with his shoes and his shirt was a mess.

"Please get down from there. Let's go home", she begged. The tears were falling and she was going nothing to stop them from wetting her cheeks.

"Home?", he asked in a snarky manner.

"I don't have a home mina Betso", he said and she wiped her tears. Even an ignorant fool could not possibly miss the pain in his voice.

"I mean our home. The home that we built for our kids. I'll drive. Just... get down from there", she continued pleading.

"I'm sitting here because I want him to explain to me HOW the fuck did it make sense to them to kill my boy for that woman's stupid doings"

"We don't speak ill of the dead baby. Come on let's go home. I'll run you a hot bath, give you a nice massage, anything you want lets just... areye gae Khumalo"

Muzi sniffed and raised his bottle to his mouth once more. Betso placed her hands on her waist and looked to the ground. She could hear the mosquitos buzzing on her ear.

"My mother, the high and mighty, the queen... she thought it was right to strip me of my manhood by allowing a random woman to do as she pleased with me. Her doings later killed my son, something that could've been avoided. Evelyn has ruined my life and she's going to pay a price she cannot afford for this", he went on and Betso's heart skipped a beat. He couldn't possibly kill her, could he? The question rang off the hook in her mind. She approached him and placed her hands on his knees. That's only when he looked at her.

"Give me the bottle or else you and I going to have a problem", she instructed in a tone that was soft but also suggested that she meant it. He stared down at her, for lengthy moment.

"What?", she had to ask at some point.

"They ruined my life but they did one thing right", he mentioned. She knew exactly what he was talking about. She shook her head and extended her hand so as to take the bottle. She didn't know if it was the alcohol talking or his stubborn love for her. She stepped out of the way and gestured with her hand that he should get down. He sighed and did as instructed. He landed on his knees. Betso helped him up.

"Where's your phone?", she questioned as she dusted his pants. He searched all his pockets and found nothing.

"Angazi ngiy'lahleph but if it's not here then it's there"(I don't know where I lost it), he stated and pointed at Mxo's grave. At least his head was still working, she thought to herself. She held him by hand and they went to look for it, approaching more light. She found it and picked it up.

"Ashi. Let's go now"

"Yesses baby umuhle ukunya mara wena sthandwasamiii"(You're so fng beautiful). Betso was too angry about a lot of things to even digest that compliment. Maybe it would've been better if it wasn't coming from an exhausted drunk man.

...

Melo patted the side of the bed, looking for his vibrating phone, stupefied by sleep. When he finally found it, he found the light coming from the screen to be too bright since the room was dark.

"Baby?", he answered.

"Where the hell are you? You said I must wait for you at seven and you're still not here. It's half past eight right now and you know my curfew!", an angry Khanyi went off like several gunshots. Melo's head was heavy.

"Yoh ngiyaxolisa sthandwasami yaz I meant to take a young nap but I completely passed out. I'm coming right now just stay there", he said as he got out of bed to switch on the light. Khanyi was waiting at her bestfriend's house to avoid her dad. Her mom promised to cover for her. Melo contemplated taking a quick shower before he left but figured he didn't want to anger her more. He slipped into his shoes and left the house, hoping to not bump into his grandmother.

"Ngithuke umufuna I'll understand"(Cuss me out if you want...), he said as she approached when he finally arrived. A sharp laugh escaped her throat.

"Ngempela?"(Really?)

Melo laughed.

"Well it's up to you if ufuna ukukhala or not"(... you want to cry or not), he said and she laughed. He pulled her closer and kissed her.

"Mus your permission is not genuine"

"It is. I'm giving you a choice but every choice has a consequence angith uyazi"

"Meaning, if I do swear at you then you won't UNDERSTAND", she emphasized on the last word.

"I WILL understand that you chose to disrespect me and that my baby...", he kissed her forehead. "... will not end well for you"

She laughed.

"Are you okay though?", she asked.

"Yaz I had planned for us to have a little picnic in my room but I failed to set it up because time. Forgive me?", he said, completely changing the subject. She shrugged and said it was okay.

"Awugezile namhlanje"(you never bathed today), she teased, looking at the clothes he was wearing the last time she saw him. He gave a weak laughter.

"Eish baby. I'll bath when we get home"-Melo

"I knew something had a suspicious smell but I couldn't pin my finger on it", she continued mocking him.

"Oh kunuka mina ngamanye amazwi? Ngiyanuka min Khanyi?"(In other words, I'm the smelly one?), he asked as he tickled her. She begged him to stop as her body jerked in every direction, laughing hysterically. He was laughing as well but he stopped when he felt she can't take it anymore.

"Mciim yaz uyisiqhwaga wena"(You're such a bully), she was still laughing, trying to fix her hair.

He pulled her closer.

"I can bully you in more ways than one", he mentioned as he looked right into her eyes. The tone in the voice that delivered that statement made her lose all sense. He was still looking at her with a mischievous smile on his face.

"Remember that promise you once made?"

"Yiphi yona leo? Ngitshele ngizokwazi ukuphika"(Which one is that? Tell me so I can deny everything)

She shot out a laugh

"That when I'm ready you'll show me ukuthi lidliwa kanjan itshitshi?"(...how you make love to a virgin?), she asked seductively. He felt his member get excited. He bit his lower lip and nodded.

"Well I'm ready", she said with a genuine smile and although surprised, he smiled back.

Chapter Seventy-One

After Melokuhle came out of his shower with nothing but a towel around his waist, Khanyi swallowed the crushed grape in her mouth. She couldn't stop staring, which he never saw since he wasn't focusing on her; He was busy applying lotion to his upper arms. The slight anxiety of what she was about to do had her by the nipples. When he finally took notice of her, he dropped his hands and smiled. They were both enjoying the cool air that was coming through the open window.

"Come here...", he commanded. She asked why.

"I don't like repeating myself Khanyisile"

She giggled before getting up from the bed, pulling her dress down her hips. He softly placed his hands on the sides of her waist and brought her closer. He planted a butterfly kiss on her lips then opened his eyes to look at her.

"Why do you look so nervous?", he softly asked. She just shook her head with puckered lips.

"Have I ever been rough with you?", he asked as he led his lips to her shoulders, planting wet and patient kisses there as his hands ran softly towards her bxtt.

"Please relax?", he lowly asked while continuing to appreciate her skin with his lips.

"Okay...", she voiceless agreed. Melo knew just that perfect song to set the pace of that whole setup.

"Give me a second...", he said and went over to his laptop. A minute later, Tank's dirty began playing from his speakers. He increased the volume. He went back to her and before he could kiss her, she stopped him.

"Can you please switch off the light?"

He was expecting that.

"Your wish is my command", he said before doing as asked of him. When she was expecting to welcome him back in his arms, he unexpectedly turned her around and she chuckled as he pulled her dress up. He was patient - in no rush. He took it off her and allowed it to drop to the carpet. She was still facing away from him when she felt him plant kisses on every part of her back, all down to her a** all the way to the back of her feet, simultaneously taking off her underwear. She closed her eyes to take in the feeling. She loved Melo, this made it easier for her body to crumble at his each and every touch. He stood up and placed his hand as if choking her then pulled her face towards his.

"Ngiyak'thanda Khanyisile", he roughly said. His voice wasn't the same anymore. He was feeling just as hot as she was.

"I love you too", she whispered back as she felt his hand travel into her underwear. He refused to break the eye contact even though she felt shy. He took out that finger and licked it up. He laughed at the look in her eyes, surprised at the extent of his nastiness. He picked her up and she immediately wrapped her legs around his waist. They kissed as he walked with her tangled around him. He placed her on the bed and immediately spread her legs wide open. His head dived into her and his warm tongue landed on her clit before she could stop him. She instead fell back at the instruction of the hand that was on her tummy. He flicked his tongue on it a few times. The wet muscle in his mouth pressed onto her clxt to apply pressure and she received it. His finger was teasing her dripping and slimy opening. He then led his tongue into that whole and mopped the yard first before

going inside.

"Melo....", she was fast going breathless. He was following the exact rhythm of the song. He went at it for a while till he felt she was losing it. She closed her legs with his head in them and he spread them open again - keeping them apart himself this time.

"Melo.. mm!!"

"Hm?"

She was shaking at this point.

"That's enough...", she was still moaning and trying to close her legs.

"Mh-mm. Don't put terms and conditions on my food", he was still at it. She closed her eyes with her palms as her back arched. He stopped when he felt she had enough. He stood up with a smirk on his face. He bent over to kiss her and his towel dropped. Her eyes fell to his d!ck. He just continued smiling in silence. He sat on the bed beside her, then got her to stand up in front of him. He pulled his drawers and took out a box of condoms.

"I want you to control how much pain you feel, okay?", he stated as he pull it on.

"What do you mean?"

"I want you to be on top. That way you decide how far it goes and how much you can take, alright?", he said and she nodded - unsure. He laid back and she got on the bed.

"Put it in your self", he said with a smile. She was mad shy but she still complied. She held it and sat on it as he held her in position. The tip went in and she was already flinching.

"Take your time", he assured. She tried, she really tried to take it further but it just went in a little and she couldn't anymore.

"Yoh this shii hurts", she reported as she flinched.

"Okay let's try something else", he said and she fell off. He kissed her embarrassed forehead before getting off the bed. He searched his drawers and took out a bottle of lube. He spread her legs and applied it. He positioned himself and held one of her legs up.

"Ready?", he asked with the gentlest of tones and she nodded. He went and she flinched as he stretched her opening. The song was on repeat.

"Tell me when it's unbearable okay?", he said and she nodded with her eyes closed. He kept at it - trying to break her sacred walls. She placed her hand on his stomach and he stopped thrusting but didn't say a word.

"Siyeke?", he asked a moment later and kissed her. She shook her head. Her hands were still closing her eyes.

He was in but the thrusts stung. He was patient. He gave one testing thrust and she didn't fight it. He continued thrusting in and out. It took a while she could seem to be enjoying it. He let his body lose and let go of all the tension, allowing the mood Tank was setting to take over.

"Makhosonke..."

He blessed her neck with neck kisses as he held both her hands. He enjoyed having that much access to her. One hand travelled to her bxxb as he continued 'violating all the meat on her bones'.

"Ngiyak'thanda ntombenhle", he assured as he made love to her.

"Mm!", she moaned out loud.

"Ngiyak'thanda Khanyisile uyangizwa baby?"

"Mmmm", she continued moaning as felt like Melo was vacuuming her soul of her vxgina.

...

Betso drove Muzi home in complete silence. When they got there, they parked right behind Manqoba's car.

Muzi was the first to step out. Betso was still gathering the strength by searching for nothing in her handbag.

"Bafo... I went out looking for you. Where the hell did you disappear to?!", Manqoba snapped.

"Ey Nathi. Mus' ukungi bangela umsindo"(Stop making noise), Muzi said as he dragged himself into the house.

Betso finally stepped out of the car. Manqoba looked to her and she avoided eye contact. He went inside the house and followed his brother.

"No mother behaves the way that you did!", he heard Muzi snap from inside the house. He ran in and Betso followed.

"I am sorry baby I know...", Evelyn sniffed as she kneeled and hugged his leg tightly. The tears were racing as they pleased down her cheek.

"I know that there is nothing I can say at this point that will change anything. You have every right--"

"Let go of my leg before I kick you in the face!"

Muzi went livid and immediately sober.

"Cut it out already before you wake everybody in this house up!", Manqoba snapped. Melokuhle appeared barefoot and in shorts - trying to wipe the sleep off his face.

"What is going on?", he asked Manqoba.

"Go back to your room Makhosonke", Manqoba hissed. The state he was in was terrifying for Melo since he barely saw him like that. He went back to his visitor. Muzi was trying his best not to do anything crazy in front of his son. Evelyn was still crying an ocean at Muzi's feet, so much that her doek fell off and her dress slid off her shoulder.

"Evelyn, get up from there...", Manqoba warned. Evelyn wiped her tears and stood up. She wanted to squeeze in a few words into that tension but Muzi left all of them there and went up to his room. Betso followed him. She got into the room and he went straight to Lwandile's. He opened the door and stood by it.

Lwandile was laying on his stomach but with eyes wide open.

"Boy...", Muzi gently called out. Lwa did not reply. Muzi stepped inside and closed the door. He went to sit on the bed next to him.

"Come?", he offered as he raised his arms for Lwa to fall into them. Lwandile was doubtful. Muzi assured him through eye contact that it was okay. Lwa got up and fell into his father's arms. Muzi hugged his head tight and Lwa crumbled into emotional pieces.

"It's not fair dad...", he managed to let out. Muzi's eyes were fixed on the wall as he held him tight. He never replied. He knew it wasn't fair. He knew it didn't make any sense. They sat in that comfort exchange for a while as Betso packed up their things in the other room.

"Can you promise me one thing?", Lwandile said. Muzi nodded.

"That you won't turn into an alcoholic mess", he hushly said.

Muzi's tongue was tied.

"I can smell it - the alcohol. You never drink to a point where it reeks off you", he proceeded trying to convince his father not to turn into a drunk. Muzi cleared his throat.

"I won't"

"Otherwise I'm gonna give you the same slap you gave me that day by the pool", Lwa said jokingly and Muzi huffed out a single breath of a laugh.

"That's the day you'll know why dogs actually sleep outside", he said before standing up. Lwandile laughed.

"Come on. Go to the car we're leaving", Muzi stated and left the room.

He got to Melo's door, knocked once and let himself in. He found him busy on top of Khanyi in the dark. He switched on the light and instantly looked away.

"Dammit Makhosonke man. This is no time to be having sex!", he snapped. Melo immediately got off her.

Khanyi immediately pulled the sheets all the way up and over her head.

"You'll find me in MQ's study. Hurry the fxck up!", he snapped some more and left.

"Why didn't you lock the door Melooo?!", Khanyi was flushed with embarrassment.

"Ah ngikhohliwe mina"(I forgot), Melo said as he took the condom off, moody as his father. He grabbed his shorts and pulled them up. He went to find a t-shirt.

"Is everything okay baby? You came in here moody af and now--", she asked as she sat up with the sheets covering her boobs - supported by one hand.

"Everything is fine Khanyi. Go to sleep", Melo said coldly before switching off the light and leaving the room, after sliding into his 'push-ins'. He found Muzi seated on Manqoba's chair.

"Sit your a** down", Muzi said when he felt like he was taking his time. Melo did as instructed.

"Your brother just died, the family is a mess, you have finals coming up and you're outchea fxcking Sonke?", Muzi questioned in disbelief. Melo sniffed and wiped his nose, then looked away. Muzi dropped his chest and got himself to calm down. He placed both his hands on the desk.

"Son look, this is a tough time for everyone. We don't need any more problems"

"I use protection if that's what you're talking about"

Muzi sighed.

"These girls are not going anywhere. They'll still be there after you write your exams"

"I have everything under control MK"

"Ngempela? It seems to me you're running away from your problems. I don't have cowards in my balls Makhosonke uyangizwa? You lost the mother of your child and THAT same child not so long ago. You've also just buried your bestfriend. I understand that it's too much and it may seem like the universe is plotting evil against you--", Muzi pulled some breath when he felt like he was rambling too much. Sonke wiped the lone tear that was racing down his cheek, then covered his eyes with his hand.

"We all have it bad but have you ever seen me shy away from facing anything in the eye?", Muzi learned forward before he could ask. Melo shook his head.

"Man up to your problems; Confront them. Otherwise you're going to do stuff you're gonna regret in the end. I'm not saying you shouldn't enjoy your life but be careful with these girls. Once you lose focus you'll be gone for good and I won't be able to save you", Muzi tried to advise.

"I heard you dad"

"Have you?"

Melo nodded.

Muzi extended his hand and Melo smiled before they could bump fists.

"Your mother sent me an SMS asking me of your whereabouts. Why are you ignoring her?", Muzi asked as he stood up.

"I was sleeping. She says she's still around so I'll speak to her"

"Alright then. I'm leaving. Izobonana ayt champ?"(I'll see you) , he said and took Melo under his arm, brushing his head. Melo chuckled and nodded.

"And if you dare make another baby I'm gonna greet you with a spinning kick the next time I see you boy", Muzi warned and Melo laughed as he ran back to his room.

...

Khanyi woke Melokuhle up at half past four and asked him to take her home.

"Let's miss school today", Melo said sleepily as he wrapped his warm hands around her. Khanyi laughed and got out of bed. Melo saw she meant business and sat up, then stretched while yawning. She was busy putting on her underwear.

"Let's shower together then you'll get home and just put on uniform", he suggested as he approached to hug her from behind.

"Your lotion is too strong. My dad will bust me out real quick", she said and Melo laughed.

"What exactly did your mother say to him?"

"She said I went to do a school project at Kwanele's house. She and I have been gathering the necessary materials for a week now and he knows about it so..."

"And the project?"

"It's already done. We're submitting it tomorrow", she chuckled and Melo laughed.

"You look so innocent and yet you're so sneaky", he said and she chuckled some more.

"Come on, take me home now", she said.

"I'm serious. Let's bath here and I'll find you a more feminine lotion in the house", he begged as he kissed her neck.

"You just wanna fxck me wena", she giggled.

"I promise I won't do anything you don't want me to do", he continued seducing her. She eventually agreed.

After dropping Khanyisile at her house, he came back to put on school uniform and to fetch his bag. He got to school and met up with Dylan in the class.

"My buooyyyy", Dylan greeted. Melo smiled and greeted back. Out of all his friends, he felt Dylan was the one who got him the most.

"Wassup Lanny?", he teased and Dylan laughed.

"Ey I told you to stop calling me that in public what's wrong with you?"

"Why not? Laaaannyyy"

Dylan shot out a laugh and hit him on the head with an exercise book.

"Only my grandmama calls me that man stop it", he was still laughing.

"Anyway, you should hala her for me. I miss her scones", Melo said and settled on top of a desk. The class had only a few people in it. The bell hadn't rang yet.

"Not the koeksisters?", Dylan teased.

"Yuck!"

"I love how you can't say that to her face but you eat them anyway", Dylan chuckled.

"I'm not an idiot like you. I don't want to hurt her feelings"

"Ayy she knows I don't play that game"

"Anyway, how--"

"Don't speak about the funeral", Melo's smile disappeared and he cut his statement short. Dylan raised his hands in surrender.

"I was on the UCT website and GADDAM!!", Dylan went agape as Nomzamo walked through the door. Melo's lower lip also dropped. Zamo blushed and continued walking. All five people in the class were staring.

"Girl you did your hair? ", Charmaine asked as she approached her. She had new braids that were tied and flowing from the top of her head. The gold towards the end complimented her skin tone well.

"Gotta look good for the dance", she replied and smiled. Charmaine lifted her hand towards her hair and Zamo shifted her head.

"Don't do that. You know I hate it when people touch my hair", she said with a frown. Charmaine laughed.

"And your face. I'm sorry. I just-- You look good. Is this you?", she was in awe.

"Ayy stop it", Zamo laughed and sat down.

"Don't they hurt tho?" -Charmaine.

"Not really no"

The rest of the class was pouring in as the bell rang. Melo was still taken by this new look as he walked past her to his desk. Zamo gave a cocky smile as she took a bite on her fat red apple. Melo bit his lower lip, trying to suppress a smile. Their English teacher walked in with a bunch of revision papers for paper 2 and the whole class went "Not this again!"

She laughed and said:"Settle down so you can tell me how the weekend was" then dropped the papers on top of a desk in front.

"Wow. I almost didn't recognize you wena", she said to Zamo and she closed her eyes with a single hand, turning her face towards the wall - blushing her cheeks red.

"You look beautiful. You look like a girl finally", Mrs Greenleef said and the whole class laughed.

"Haa ma'am", Zamo complained.

"She looks good beautiful right class? Right Melokuhle?", she said with a wink. Melo coughed. Everyone went "Mmmm". There were suspicions on their relationship but nobody was sure except for Dylan. Mrs Greenleef was that teacher who was loved by everyone and hence all the gossip of the school arrived to her ears.

"Ma'am says Zamo looks beautiful why are you acting deaf?", Dylan said and everyone laughed. Melokuhle and Nomzamo were both blushing like crazy.

"Yeah she does ma'am", Melo agreed with his face bowed, playfully hit his pen continually on his book. The class went crazy with whistles and celebratory moans from the girls. Mrs G laughed lightly and innocently before saying: "Alright alright settle down now. Please take out your short story books", she said as she approached the window while fanning some air to her face with her hand. Melokuhle sent Zamo a text that read: 'I'm about to sound like a broken record right now but baby girl please trust me when I say you look like something my father would tell me to marry.'

Zamo took out her vibrating phone from her pocket and read the text, then blushed as she shook her head.

'Behave. You have a girlfriend', she replied.

"There are two things in this extract that suggest that Samantha is a selfless person. What are they? Zamo please answer this one for us and remember class that these type of questions usually weigh about 2 marks so there is no need for a lot of yadda yadda here", Mrs Greenleef stated. Zamo was in the clouds.

"Nomzamó?", she called out for the second time.

"Ma'am?"

"Do you need some fresh air my darling?", Mrs G asked lovingly.

"No ma'am. What was the question?"

"Two things that suggest that Samantha--"

"... is selfless? Number one: She gave the last piece of bread to her younger sister even though they had nothing else to eat. Number two: That incident where she offered that lady a place to sleep before she had an interview in their town the next morning", she answered while feeling her heart beating violently against her chest. She hated being caught off guard.

"Very good! Somebody has been studying as always. Did we all catch that?"

"It wasn't an interview ma'am", DK argued. Ma'am looked confused.

"What was it?", Zamo asked with her brow raised.

"She was starting work the next day. It wasn't an interview"

"Are we reading the same book?", Zamo asked.

The class laughed. Mrs G shouted for them to settle down.

"Okay. Let's go back to the book. Is everyone on page 16?", the teacher said.

"I was supposed to sleep at my cousin's place but she is picking my calls and I don't know where she lives. You are so kind, said the girl.

Why are you here anyway? Let me hold that for you, said Samantha as she took the bag from the strange girl.

I have been called at this firm I had applied for a job to, the girl replied nervously.

You will surely do well. Best of luck, Samantha assured.

I would appreciate that. You are so kind, the girl said as they smiled to one another on their journey home", Mrs

Greenleaf was reading the piece out loud.

"What convinces you that it is not an interview Diketso?", ma'am asked curiously, politely.

"She said she has been called to the firm, meaning to start work", Diketso argued.

"If she already got the job then why would she be nervous? What is the luck for?", Zamo argued her case with her chest. The class was rumbling with argument.

"It could be that she's nervous to be meeting new people"

"Hayi DK. It's an interview. Let it go", Melo said as he sat back on his chair.

"But...", DK tried to argue.

"INTERVIEW!", Dylan emphasized and the class laughed. He was the class clown. The argument went on and ate up all of Mrs G's period. The remaining classes rolled till lunch time and when the bell rang, the learners went out. Melo signalled to Zamo that she shouldn't go out. When everyone left, he approached, pinned her against the wall and devoured her lips. She let him because she wanted it just as much as he did but she was uneasy about someone walking in on them. He noticed how uncomfortable she was. He stopped and gave her one last perk on the lips.

"I couldn't resist. I'm sorry", he apologized as he was trying to catch his breath. She smiled.

"You look really beautiful Zamo. I just couldn't stop thinking about you this whole time", he said lowly as her lips held his eyes captive.

"Can you be my date to the dance? As friends?", she asked. He smirked and drew his head back in surprise.

"I could...", he said.

"I smell a but?"

"There's none. Ask me nicely", he said with a naughty smile. She hit him on the chest playfully.

"You're such a bully"

"Well, this bully ain't going to no dance till you manage to convince him that he should", he said and walked away. She grabbed his wrist while laughing.

"Okay okay. Let's go on an ice cream date this afternoon. Not a date date tho" -Zamo

"We have to study", he replied with no hesitation.

"Then what?", she shrugged impatiently.

"Kiss me like you mean it and maybe, maybe I might approve your request"

"I'll understand if you're taking someone else. I mean--"

His lips smashed against hers mid-ramble. The kiss took her entire breath away and he stopped.

"You stress too much. I was about to ask you the same thing"

"Really?"

"No", he said and she sucked her teeth.

"Without the "as friends" part", he completed his statement. She laughed.

"Idiot", she said.

"Goddess...", he said and gave her his trusted charming smile. She blushed to the floor and he brought her chin back with his index finger.

"Ngiyak'thanda san", he said and she blushed even harder.

Chapter Seventy-Two

Betso carefully removed a fast asleep Muzi from her chest so she could get out of bed to go pee. After she was done, she left the room to go check on Lwandile. He wasn't in his room. He checked in the room that used to belong to Mxo and he wasn't there either. She looked around for a bit, trying to maybe feel the presence of the deceased twin but it felt so empty, so lonely. She closed the door before her emotions could take over. She went down to the living room and heard cartoons playing. Lwa was there, watching with disinterest smeared on his face. She heaved a sigh before walking further to go sit with him on the couch.

"What are you watching?", she asked with a smile. He turned his face briefly to look at her.

"Naruto", he replied.

"Is it nice? Can I watch with?"

"Sure", he agreed flatly. Her eyes kept bouncing around the room, not knowing where to start.

"Kanyo..."

"I'm fine ma. I'll be fine", he knew what wagon she was about to climb on.

"Are you really--"

"I met someone", he changed the subject and faked a smile. She could see right through him. She deflated her chest defeatedly but chose to entertain him, maybe a happy topic was exactly what he needed, she thought to herself silently.

"Okay. Who?"

"His name is Bokang"

"Hm, rhyming names. I can just see them on the wedding invitation", she said jokingly and he laughed.

"Wedding? Let's not", he said and continued to laugh.

"Should I bring ice cream for this?", she asked, already on her feet. He felt the zero judgment in her voice and that filled his heart with some necessary warmth. He wasn't feeling like ice cream at that hour but he nodded lovingly.

"Cool", she said and clapped her hands in celebration. She brought a tub and lifted the throw off him so she could get in too. Lwa took his spoon and she opened it.

"So, tell me about this new flame", she said with anticipation and Lwa huffed out a laugh before taking in half a spoonful into his mouth.

"I met him at some cafe in town. He ticks all the right boxes so far", he mentioned after he swallowed.

"How old is he?"

"He's 19", he lied. He wasn't planning to but something in his head told him to lie. That deceitful voice wasn't convinced that she was going to be happy with his real age.

"Not too bad. I'm guessing he's done with school?"

"Yeah. He's studying I.T", he sprinkled some tiny bit of truth, laced with lies.

"Can I meet him?", she said with her one eye closed. She knew she was reaching. He laughed and almost choked on the ice cream.

"No WTF mom? It's too soon. Way too soon", he said. She laughed too.

"Arg, a mom has got to try", she was still laughing lightly as they ate from the same tub. Momentary silence inserted a break into their conversation.

"Mom?"

"Hm?"

"I'm sorry. That day with the bucket hat and how I spoke to--"

"Don't be. I'm the one who handled that whole situation wrongly. I should've done better", she comforted and brushed his hair.

"Still. Going through shxt doesn't mean I should be an a**hole"

He placed the spoon in his mouth and kept it in there.

"Let's put it behind us. Now I want to know and be as truthful as you can about this. How are you coping?", she now wore a serious look on her face. He sighed and sat back.

"I don't know. I don't think I am. My life has taken a sharp curve and as much as I'm trying, I don't know how to deal with it. I saw him for atleast 85% of every single day and now I can't be with him even for a minute. It's weird. It hurts. I've never felt so much pain in my life mama and I'm certain that it'll never go away. If it miraculously does, then I'm afraid I won't be able to feel anything ever again. The damage is just too much", he laid himself bare in front of her; stripping his emotions naked. Her eyes were glassy from the suspended tears.

"Do I ever freak you out?", he quickly asked inquisitively. She let out a breathy laughter. She knew what he meant.

"Yeah you do. I mean I could clearly tell you apart but if you appear out of nowhere then yeah. My brain freezes for a second"

He laughed in a brief pained manner.

"How are YOU coping?", it was his turn to ask. She pursed her lips and faced the ceiling.

"I miss him. So so much", she stated lowly, painfully. He placed the ice cream tub on the table and sat a little closer so he could hug his mourning mother. She was still trying to push the tears back, pressing her index finger tips onto the inner corners of eyes.

...

Melokuhle walked into his room and threw his school bag on the bed before dumping himself there. He was tired but also fighting that twitching thing at the back of his head that kept forcing him to think about Mxolisi. He grabbed the remote and turned on the radio for some distractive noise. He wasn't interested in the conversation that was taking place on air, he just wanted to hear anything that could cut into his thoughts. He took off his shoes and laid on the bed. A message from Londiwe appeared on the screen.

Her: Back from school?

Melo: Yea. You?

Londiwe: Nope. Still in an afternoon class.

Melo: Why are you on your phone then?

Londiwe: But I miss you 😞

The radio honoured a song request and Lewis Capaldi's 'Someone you loved' began playing. His fingers froze

when he digested the lyrics of this unfamiliar song. They sank their alphabetic claws deeper into his heart as Busi's smile grew to her ears in his head. He sat up on the bed and immediately switched the radio off.

Melokuhle: Focus baby. I'll call you when you're done ayt?

He replied to Londiwe and logged off. He called Zamo and asked if she was still up for that ice cream date. She said only if he's picking her up. He changed into casual clothes before leaving the house.

"What changed your mind?", she asked after climbing into the car.

"I just missed you", he said before trying to get a kiss from her. She placed her hand on his chest and pulled back with a smile.

"Friends, remember?"

"I don't remember agreeing to that crap", he replied with a frown. She laughed and his phone rang. He took it out and saw that Khanyi was calling. He was doubtful about answering. Zamo looked out the window.

"Baby?", he answered.

"Hi baby. I'm passing by your house"

"I'm not at home", he continued to speak through the phone.

"Ah kwa kubi ke. Can you come see me later on?"

"I can't come today. Maybe some other time during the week?"

"Alright. I love you?"

"I love you too", he replied and cut the call.

Zamo laughed and shook her head.

"See why being just friends makes sense?", she said and stepped out. He couldn't read her heart from her face. He stepped out as well and went round the front to stop her from leaving. He grabbed her by the waist from the back and she calmly stopped walking, then pushed the hanging braid behind her ear.

"Zamo bheka..."

"I am not going to be your sidechick Melokuhle. I am not that kinda girl"

"I don't want you to be my sidechick. I want you to be my girlfriend. There's no such thing as a side or a main"

"What do you mean?"

"I want you in my life. It's as simple as that"

"And her?"

"What about her? Is it her you're going to be in a relationship with or yimina?"(or me?)

Zamo laughed.

"You're unbelievable"

"Ngiyafana nothando engizimisele ukukunika lona. It's going to be so unbelievable so much that you'll eventually scream for omakhelwane ukuthi bangikhuze"(I'm no different to the love I'm willing to give you... for the neighbors to stop me), he said with a smile and she shot out a laugh.

...

All the problems that were circling the royal household felt like mountain rocks on top of Manqoba's shoulders. He stood against the shower wall as he felt the hot water hit his back, starting from his bent neck. Enhle walked into the room and immediately heard the water consistently pouring onto the shower floor from their bedroom. She heaved a sigh as she stood against the door, before gently pushing it into the frame and closing it. She walked towards the closet and took down her large travel suitcase, then dragged it to the bed. Manqoba was still in the shower as she took down her clothes. When the case was half-full, she heard the water go off. She let out a heavy breath, trying to expel the anxiety that was filling up her lungs. He walked out with a towel around his waist, using another to wipe his head. He stopped walking the moment he realized the open suitcase that was placed on his bed.

"And then?", he asked as a frown of confusion shrunk his face. Enhle just stood and stared - muted.

"I asked you a question Mbalenhle. What is going on?", he rephrased.

"I uh-- I'm leaving. I'm leaving you... for good", although in chops and pieces, she finally replied. She could feel the tears threatening her eyes. Before her stood a man she loved wholeheartedly but at the same time, stood a man she knew very well wasn't good for her soul; for her mental health. He took a few slow steps closer.

"I don't think I still understand English. Leaving uyaphi?"

She sniffed and fruitlessly opened her mouth to speak. She gave up on that conversation and went back into the closet to go fetch her shoes. Manqoba pulled the suitcase closed.

"Are you gonna answer me anytime this year or sizohlala la uze unqume ukukhuluma?"(... we'll be stuck in this room until you speak?), he questioned with a raised brow. She had a pair of heels and sneakers held to her chest.

"Ngishilo nje"(I told you)

"Wathini?"(What did you say?)

"Ngithe ngiyahamba Zikode"(I said I'm leaving)

"Uhamba uyaphi? Kwa-KhandaLiyashisa?"(And where exactly do you think you're going?)

She closed her mouth and looked away.

He wrapped his hand behind her head, making their foreheads meet. He swallowed before he could speak. She could see his Adam's apple move since she was avoiding eye contact.

"Tell your husband what he did wrong so he can fix it", he said in a soft spoken tone. She slowly shook her head and closed her eyes.

"Ngenzen mama?"(What have I done?), his hand were on both her cheeks. She dropped the shoes and raised her hands to sit over his. She kindly removed them off her face and they held hands.

"You have done absolutely nothing. It's just--", she took a second to structure her words.

"I'm doing something I should've done a long time ago. Something I should've done the first time I slept on this bed alone. The first time you made me question my worth"

"Baby I--"

"Please let me finish. I am not innocent in our downfall. Hell not even close. But one thing I know for sure is that you were the only one I wanted all those years. That's why I only cheated once and just recently. I never needed to substitute you with another man like you did with those many women"

He shut his eyes and dropped his face. Enhle's tears and breaking voice felt like barbwire squeezing around his heart - especially because he felt they were final this time.

"A lot could've gone awfully wrong but I'm gratefully it didn't. You made babies outside of our union Manqoba there's AIDS!", she continued to let her chest rip as she wiped her cheeks. Each time she had to take her hand out of his to do this, she took it right back after she was done.

"I could've killed you, you know?", she said and an alarmed sparkle swiped across his eyes.

"There were times were I looked at you in your sleep... I was mad, I was angry! I wanted to hurt you as much as you did me but I never did it. I never did it because I love you and when you love someone you don't consciously inflict pain on them. The same knife you wanted me to use in my wifely duties while preparing hot meals for you is the same weapon that could've easily crossed you out as cold and six feet under"

"Please don't do this..."

"I don't want to be a Melinda. This love between us is as dangerous as acrimony is. I slapped you once, I might do worse next time", she stated and left to go fetch her toiletries in the bathroom.

"There won't be any next time. I'm a changed man!", he insisted as he followed her in there. She grabbed her toiletry bag from the cupboard below the sink and filled it up, clearing the top shelf.

"There's nothing we haven't been through. I promise--"

She shook her head vigorously as she mumbled inaudibly and he zipped it. He turned her around and she dropped her hands impatiently.

"Listen... Ngiyak'thanda and ngiyohlezi ngik'thanda. I will not sit and watch you leave me because of my past mistakes - mistakes I've learnt from?"

She left that spot and went into the shower to go fetch her loofah and shower gel. He followed her and closely stood behind her. She took the items and he blocked her from going out.

"Can we not do this?", her voice was tired. He stepped forward and she stepped back, until she was against the shower taps. She tried raising her hand to stop him from coming onto her but her elbow raised the faucet and cold water came falling down. She gasped and he couldn't care less. He took both her hands and brought her closer to him.

"If you love me, you'll let me go"

"Thembalami, nhliziyo yami, angeke ngikwazi. Angeke ngikwazi Enhle uzongixolela. In fact I'm gonna kill that foo--"(I won't be able to)

"I'm not leaving you for him. I just want to be alone. I'm going to Guatemala for some me time"

"Ngizohamba nawe kuleyo me time yakho"(I will join you on that me time of yours)

A slight laugh left her lips, but she still wasn't changing her mind.

"Please move out of my way I'm getting wet"

He tried to kiss her and she pulled her face back with a straight face. He bit his lower lip and sighed in frustration.

"Waziban e Melikha baby? Let's give it one more shot. Just one more and I promise you--"(Who is in America that you know?)

She shook her head in disapproval.

"I have exhausted all my shots. I need to heal. I can't heal in the same environment that broke and poisoned me. I was not like this when you met me. I wasn't this possessive, mirror-breaking, cat fighting psycho I've evolved into. I was a simple girl who happened to put a foot wrong and fall in love. I had dreams of becoming a doctor. I was on my way there. I managed to become a nurse. I was ambitious. I want her back. I miss her. I need to find her and even if she doesn't want to stay, I still need to apologize for losing her in the whirlwind. I need to apologize for choosing you over her, more than once", she confessed as she stood there getting wetter, fully clothed. Her orange dress was sticking to her skin. He was still silent. It took a moment for him to nod and pull her by the neck so he could kiss her forehead. She closed her eyes and didn't fight him.

"If that's what's going to make you happier, then there's nothing I can say. I'll be here waiting for you", he said. She understood that he wasn't getting it, he wasn't getting that that wasn't a tantrum. It was the big scissor cut on the red ribbon.

"I want a divorce, Manqoba", she let out carefully. He still had his lips against her forehead. He stood calmly in that position.

"Unganginyeli Mbalenhle"(don't shxt on my head), he said and continued holding her like she was his, certain and secure that nothing about that was going to change.

Chapter Seventy-Three

"Please let me go", she softly said with her hands hanging down her wet body. He didn't. He just kept his lips pasted on her forehead with his eyes shut.

"Do you really want me to do that?", he eventually asked as he raised her face while stroking and massaging the inner strands of her dripping wet hair. She exhaled, deeply.

One thing about break ups is that they come in the same box as uncertainty. They're an inseparable package. No matter the amount of hurt, anger and toxicity, when it's time to officially let go there's always going to be two different voices singing opposing melodies in each ear.

"I love you, Enhle. Ngiyak'thanda sthandwasami. Xola thembalami. I am really sorry for taking you for granted and putting your life at risk. I was reckless, I know. I was stupid, I sure as hell know. Kodwa into engiyaziyo ukuthi kuwo wonke lo msangano angikazi ngingabaze uthando lwami for wena. "You belong with me baby. I am your man and you're my woman. End of story"(in all this madness I've never been unsure of my love for you)

She bowed her head as she felt the water from the shower head sweeping down her face along with her tears. She raised her hands to caress his cheeks. His were still behind her head.

"I am tired. My soul feels weak, detached and lost. I want you to find your happiness and allow me to find mine. Don't have anybody follow me. Just-- I am begging you to let me go"

"You're my happiness kodwa nje?", he defended.

"I am not. I am not your happiness. I am the surface of your attachment. You've been with me for so long that you're afraid of change", she calmly stated.

"Are we in psychology class yin? Why are you thinking on my behalf?"

"I'm not--"

"You can travel around the whole world if you feel that's what you need but into engizok'tshela yona ukuthi ngeke uzuy'nuke idivorce la k'mina"(There's no divorce you're getting from me), he declared with absolute certainty. She sighed and dropped her face. He cupped her chin and brought it back up.

"Ungilalele mama?"(Are you listening?), he questioned with an intimidating yet gentle look only he can pull off. She looked away. His face followed the direction of hers as his hands travelled down to her bxxbs.

"Manqo...", he didn't allow her to finish that sentence. His lips were already on hers and by the time her brain received this stimulus it was already confused. The sensation of him rubbing his hands on her soft bxxbs under and over water had her lose all sense. That's the thing about wanting to break up with a man you still love wholeheartedly and yet give an opportunity to change your mind - he will milk you dry of all your intelligence. The kiss got heated and had them both panting. He pulled her dress off and it splattered against the floor. The towel around his waist followed suit. His hands dug into the cellulite of her a** the moment he pulled and picked her up.

"Mbulazi... baby... wait...", the little sense in her that kept dropping in and out of a coma tried to jump in front of this fast moving train. His finger was already inside her as he balanced her against the cold tiles of the wall. She swallowed as he kissed her wet chest.

"Mm!", that was her reacting to the finger that was busy provoking her g-spot.

"Fxxxxxxxxck!!!!", she exclaimed.

"Cxm for me", he encouraged as he watched the sexual demon in her lose control.

"Fxxxck I'm bout to cxm I'm bout to cxm!!"

"I said cxm for me baby. Cxm for daddy", he proceeded to pour diesel onto the fire.

"Shxxxxxxxxxt!!", she was crying out loud as she felt her core explode. He placed his hands under her thighs and slid her up the wall, making her sit on his face as she hung in the air. He ate her out and ate her out good. He was moaning while busy digging into her with his tongue. Her hands were both on his head as she yelled for mercy. Her juices poured into his mouth and he drank and lapped them up like a thirsty tiger by a distant stream. When he finally brought her down, her battery was almost flat, yet he wasn't done. He lifted both legs up and shoved himself in. She gasped as she held on to him. By that single first thrust she just knew he wasn't going to be gentle. He gave her another gut-churning stroke and she gasped louder this time.

"Do you know how beautiful you are? How RARE you actually are? Hm?", he groaned as he slowly slid out though not entirely.

She quickly nodded.

"Do you see yourself as someone worth letting go off? Musa ukungi sanganela ngiyathemba uyagcina namhlanje?" (I hope this is the last day you're going crazy on me), he warned. She never replied. He scoffed and rammed himself into her.

"Ahh!!", she screamed. She was feeling it and feeling all of it. Every inch, every muscle and all the meat to his manhood, bxxls deep.

"Ngikhuluma ngedwa yin?" (Am I speaking to myself?), he questioned before taking one of her bxxbs into his mouth. He head fell back at the pleasure. He continued suckling on it as he massaged it.

"Hm?", he said. She shook her head.

"Angikuzwa mina mama" (I can't hear you)

"Awukhulumi wedwa Zikode" (You're not speaking to yourself)

"Ngikhuluma nobani?" (Who am I speaking to?)

"Nomfazi wakho" (You're speaking to your wife)

"Uyazi lomfazi ukuthi ngimthanda kangakanani?" (Does this wife know how much I love her?)

She shook her head softly.

He French kissed her for some minutes before gently pulling on her lower lip then letting it go. He continued serving his strokes till he came into her, shooting his hot stuff into her; a feeling he knew very well she enjoyed.

"Ngimthanda ukufa. Umtshele umumbona" (I love her to death. Tell her when you see her)

She dropped her head on his naked shoulder. She loved him so much it hurt.

"But baby this is so toxic...", she said. He pulled out and put her down.

"I have no idea what the hell that is", he said before giving her a brief kiss. After that, he grabbed a dry towel then walked out the shower.

...

"Ouch!", Ndalo snapped when the bottle of Mayonnaise slipped from her hands and dropped to the floor in the supermarket.

"I am really really sorry. Please don't touch that before it cuts you ", said the boy that bumped into her with a trolley, regretfully. She was fuming.

"Don't tell me what to do! You almost hurt me!", she shot out.

"I was distracted angenzanga ngamabom"(it wasn't on purpose), he defended but still remorseful. His father came into that aisle and said "Found them!", referring to the pack of tissues in his hand. He continued to mumble how the aisles in that shop are poorly organized.

Ndalo grabbed her basket from the floor and left that aisle.

"I'm really sorry", he felt he needed to say it even though she was walking away. She was crossed out livid.

"Wenzen manje? See why I said you should stay at home with your foul mood?"(What have you done now?), Sfiso said and laughed. Mtho was still stuck in the two minutes that just passed.

"Yewena basmati... ngikhuluma nawe"(I'm talking to you), Sfiso emphasized.

"Huh?"

"What did you do to that poor girl?"

"I bumped her with a trolley. I was on my phone and..."

"When normal people see a beautiful girl they ask for numbers. Wena umshayisa ngetrolley? Aii mfan. Let's get your aunt's groceries before she calls. You know how annoying she can get"(You bump her with a trolley?), he said as he pushed the trolley forward.

"Yewena boyz of the road end of the men, asambe!!", Sfiso emphasized when he felt Mtho was walking at tortoise speed.

...

During the afternoon nap, Betso sleepily patted Muzi's side of the bed as she laid on her stomach. It was cold and unoccupied. She lazily sat up and yawned widely as she stretched.

"Baby?!", she called out. He never replied. She slid into her slippers and went out looking for him. Her knee length summer dress was creased from the turning and cuddling she'd doing with her husband in between the sheets. Lwandile wasn't in the house. He asked to go see a "friend" and she allowed it, on condition that he's driven there. She knew very well where he was going. She was actually glad he was opening up to the outside again. She checked Odaliwe in her nursery and found both her and her nanny asleep. She closed the door and walked on.

She continued walking as she looked for Muzi. She found him in his study; seated on the carpet against the wall with a bottle in his hand. He was still wearing the shorts he slept in - topless. He poured himself another glass and asked:"You're awake?", as he kept his eyes on the bottle and its companion. She had her hands on her waist.

"For exactly how long do you plan on keeping this up?", she asked as she stood over him.

"Uqalile. Ukhuluma ngan manje?"(You've started. What are you talking about?)

He took a sip. She pinched her nose bridge and sighed.

"You know what? If you're gonna drink then I'm gonna drink with you", she threatened and walked towards the cupboard where he keeps his bottles in that room. He just stared as he took another slow sip with his knees raised. She was hoping he was going to stop her. He did absolutely nothing about her tantrum. She opened the cupboard and found nothing that said yes to her alcoholic spirit. She knew that if she dared to be brave and dance on top of any of those bottles in there, her liver would resign with immediate effect. He laughed.

"Wenzan?"(what are you doing?), he asked and placed the back of his head against the wall. She gave him a thin death stare before walking out to the kitchen. She grabbed a corkscrew first before fetching her bottle of red wine. She paced up, back to the study. She found him in the same position - very much unbothered. She walked in and went to sit next to him. She was in between him and his desk. He sluggishly turned in her direction and watched her struggle with the corkscrew since she was angry and trying to prove a point. She also had no idea what she was doing. He took the bottle and opened it on her behalf. After he was done:

"Mi" (take), he said. She took it out of vengeance and drank up. He also continued drinking, taking sips that suggested he was rushing no where.

"We have to talk about this at some point", he said as she sat with her knees up, just like him.

"About what?", he deliberately acted clueless. The wine was meant to tick him off but she began enjoying it.

"This child you have that's in the wilderness. I've been thinking. Mxo is gone because of him but he's still out there. What if something terrible happens again?", Betso said as she took more gulps down her throat.

"I don't have a son in the wilderness", Muzi coldly stated before taking another sip. Betso sighed.

"Even though we don't understand why, we're the ones getting the blows here. I don't want to lose any more of my children", she let out, then drank some more. Muzi kept quiet.

"Are you gonna accept him?", he asked as he looked forward. She swallowed her wine and studied the bottle.

"I never said you should bring him here", she finally replied.

"You're not answering my question", Muzi jabbed back. That conversation was taking place in the slowest of all motions, with long breaks of thought processing and doubtful utterances. No eye contact whatsoever. She dropped her chest. She was halfway through the bottle.

"He's your son. Just go fetch him", she said and raised the bottle again.

"And here I was thinking we were one...", he threw in.

"What exactly do you want? You're confusing me Mbulazi"

She turned in his direction and looked at him. He did not answer. He continued sipping on his cognac. She was getting impatient. She eventually gave up on the unreciprocated death stare and sat against the wall again, proceeding to finish off her bottle.

"You walked in here wangithola ngizihlalele ngiziphuzela and now you're the one asking me what I want?"

She took offence from the tone he used. She shot up from the floor wanting to leave but she immediately felt lightheaded. He noticed this and pulled her by the wrist so she sits on top of him - astride. He placed both his hands on either side of her face and pecked her lips.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't be taking out my frustrations on you", he sincerely whispered his apology. Her eyes

weren't hers anymore; they belonged to the alcohol. She nodded as he brushed her hair. She was sitting directly on his ****. For a person in her drunken state due to red wine, this wasn't so much of a good idea. His head wasn't where hers was. He just wanted her to fully accept his apology so they could move on. She wanted way more than that. She started giggling lightly while running her cold finger tips on his exposed chest. He laughed too but in a manner that sought clarity on what was actually the laughing matter; confused.

"Kagorata Muzi waitse?"(I love you Muzi do you know that?)

He blushed and dropped his face. That was rather unexpected of her. She was mad just a few moments prior to that sudden declaration. He raised his face a second later and replied:

"Le nna ngiyak'thanda", he said as his hands sat on the sides of her waist. She laughed harder.

"Mm-mh. Ithi 'Le nna kagorata'. Isho. Uyekel uk'mixer"(say it and stop mixing language), she bullied him into saying what she wanted as she played with all parts of his face, mainly his ears and his lips with her thumbs. He was laughing and trying to shift his head from this harassment.

"Kodwa nawe uyamixer nje?"(But you're also mixing)

She was making it difficult from him to speak as she drew invisible lines on his lower lip, consecutively.

"Awume tuu"(please stop), he was failing to contain his laughter.

"Mm-mh. Ngimelen? Ngiphe tuu"(why should I? Please give me), she begged as she pouted her lips for him to kiss her.

"Ngikuphan kanti?"(What exactly is it that I should be giving?)

Her hxnry self continued pouting. He gave her a single butterfly kiss and left her at that.

"Wenzan kant? Woza baby man"(what are you doing? Come), she was on a mission. He removed her hands from his face and she mumbled - displeased.

"Bheka. Angithi uyazbona ukuthi unjan? Usudakiwe. Masambe siyolala"(Can you see that you're drunk? Let's go sleep), he said as he stood up with her. She tangled her legs around him. She was kissing on all the surface of his face; his cheeks, lips, nose and down to his neck.

"Sthandwasami yima uzongiwisa phela manje and uwena ozolimala"(My love please wait because you're gonna make me fall and you're the one who's gonna get hurt), he tried to put her on a leash. She wasn't having it. The nanny opened the door and quickly closed it when she saw the devil at work. Muzi pursed his lips and laughed, but continued walking. He got to the bedroom and closed the door with his foot. Betso was still trying to get her claws into what's hers. He gently placed her down on the bed and she refused to let go of him. He had no choice but to kiss her back. She was laughing sneakily throughout the kiss. He shook his head and smiled.

"Want me to show you a trick?", she said as she wrapped her arms around Muzi's neck. He sighed before nodding. She got up from the bed and he stood on his feet. She almost fell but he managed to catch her.

"Let's just sleep before you hurt yourself", he said as he tried to get her back to the bed. She regained her balance and told him to let go of her. She slightly raised both her hands to show that she wasn't falling.

"Nkase we man. Bona, I can even stand on one leg"(I won't fall), she said and tried to flex her drunken balance but failed dismally. She fell before he could catch her. He tried to get her to get up but she began laughing as she held on to his leg. He couldn't contain himself too.

"Wena notshwala niyavalelisana namhlanje"(You're never drinking again), he said as he took out his vibrating

phone from his pocket.

One hand was holding on to her arm as the other led the phone to his ear.

"Lewis hi", he answered the business call.

"Ish that's going to be a little difficult since I'm not at the office at the moment and won't be coming in for the whole week. Speak to Lizwe he will surely SHXXT...", he lost focus and Betso caught him right where she wanted him. She had his cxck in her mouth and he lost it the moment she swirled her tongue around. She laughed and smiled silently as she kneeled in front of him.

"Listen Lew... Lewis listen I'll have to call you back ayt?", he immediately cut the call and threw the phone on the bed. She was licking and laughing, sucking and smiling.

Chapter Seventy-Four

The end of every chapter is always the start of a new one, unless if you've reached the end of the book. Enhle laid awake in bed in Manqoba's embrace. He was sleeping. There was no blink in sight from her side of the bed. The clock was moving towards five by a few minutes and she heard him yawn from behind her. She knew what was coming. A kiss on the shoulder and a rub on her waist over the silky and light material that sat on her skin. The routine was the same.

"Good morning", his voice was very much asleep. She turned her head and he planted a kiss on her lips. His lips were dry, a thought she couldn't help. She faked a smile and greeted him back. That feeling was still there. That feeling of wanting to breathe air that's different from the one he respire. The feeling of wanting to shed the layer of skin that he kept touching nonstop. Putting her through an exam to explain how she felt would result in a dismal flunk. She knew she loved that man but at the same time, she felt suffocated by him. Her thoughts were having their way with her as she felt him drifting back to sleep. She felt this by the change in his breathing pattern. His phone vibrated from the rift that separated their pillows and almost gave her a mini attack.

He woke up before she could ask it of him. She continued hugging onto the pillow she was laying her head on.

"Khumalo here. Khuluma"

He never even checked to see who was calling.

"What do you mean she's at the hospital? Did the flu get worse?", he asked as lazily dropped his palm onto his forehead. Whatever the reply he got was enough to sit him up.

"Dumi angisakuzwa ke manje..."(I don't think I understand)

Enhle turned her shoulder curiously to aid her hearing.

"Okay I'm on my way", he mentioned as he lifted both his legs off the bed in a haste.

"What is going on? Are you okay?", she asked as he rushed to the bathroom to go wash his face.

"USihle usesbhedlela"(Sihle has been admitted at a hospital)

Enhle's brows pulled towards one another.

"What is wrong with her?"

Manqoba came out and fetched his tracksuits.

"I don't know. Her little brother is telling me stories uyatazela. I don't know what happened"

He was busy getting dressed. She had no idea what to say. He grabbed his phone and keys, then kissed her on the forehead before telling her he would be back soon. She just nodded in understanding. The moment she felt he was too gone to be back for anything, she marched to the closet to go take down the bag he had put back up. She had no time to be packing like she was going for a suitcase evaluation. She took the stuff she felt were immediate necessities and told herself she'd buy the rest when she got there. She had it all figured out in her head.

...

"Hey sleepy head", Bokang greeted Lwa with a tray of fresh English breakfast and freshly squeezed orange juice. Lwa pulled the duvet further up his head. Bokang laughed and placed the tray in the pedestal.

"Come on. You've been sleeping since yesterday afternoon. Wake up"

"That's a lie", Lwa laughed.

"The only time you woke up was for food and piss breaks", Bokang defended. Lwa sat up.

"Thank you for allowing me to sleep here. I haven't slept like this in ages", he confessed. Bokang slapped it off in the air and assured it wasn't a problem.

"Do you perhaps have a new toothbrush?", Lwa asked. Bokang laughed.

"You brought nothing but yourself", he joked. Lwa chuckled as he got out of bed.

"I came bearing gifts tho", he said as stretched.

"What gifts?"

"Me. And my multiple personalities", he said it like a blonde and Bokang shot out a laugh.

"You're crazy. Top shelf in the mirror cupboard", he said and Lwa made his way to the bathroom. Bokang followed him.

"So, you just came to my place to come sleep in my bed?", he asked with a genuine smile. Lwa turned back with his mouth full of toothpaste and a brush.

"Mm-huh", he agreed. Bokang shook his head with a smile and left him in there. Lwa came back in to the bedroom. He was still wearing BK's maroon pyjamas with checkered pants. They ate together as they watched a movie in bed.

"Can I ask you a question?", Bokang poked. Lwa nodded as he took a sip.

"How are you feeling?" -BK

Lwa sighed.

"It would make sense for you to ask me that after some time", he replied and huffed out an innocent laugh. "I still feel like shxt. I just can't stay cooped up in the house forever. I should be at school but I'm here. I withdrew out of a swimming competition I was really looking forward to. I'm just--... I'm rambling", he stopped himself.

"You can ramble as far and wide as you wish", Bokang assured.

"Let's talk about something else", Lwandile said.

"Something like what? You using my helper to accomplish your deceit?", Bkang said and Lwa laughed out loud. BK stole a kiss from his lips. Lwa blushed and pretended not to mind it. Things weren't yet stamped and stable in their relationship. None of them knew where they stood with the other. Bokang wanted to take it further but Lwa got uncomfortable and coughed. His stiffness was standing in the way. Not only that, but also the tray. Bokang drew back awkwardly and tossed the piece of bacon on the plate into his mouth.

"I'm just--", Lwandile tried to dilute the atmosphere

"Yea no. I totally understand",

"It's just that--"

"Don't stress bout. It's really okay", Bokang assured as he got out of bed with the rectangular disturbance that had their plate and short glasses on top of its stomach.

...

Manqoba arrived at the hospital and he was directed to Sihle's room. He thought she was sleeping when he walked in since she was facing the other way but she turned and quickly wiped her tears.

"Heyy", he softly greeted as he brushed her forehead, extending the caress into her hair. She just smiled weakly and heaved a sigh. He pulled a chair.

"Where's Dumi?", she asked.

"He's outside with your mother. Why didn't you tell me you were pregnant?", he was trying too hard not to sound interrogative. She just shrugged sadly.

"You were dealing with a lot. I didn't want--"

"But that's nonsense and you know it. When you told me you were sick and couldn't come to the funeral I thought it was just a mere flu"

She just kept quiet. He dropped his chest and took her hand.

"What happened?"

"Everything was fine. I was planning to tell you properly and not over the phone but the cramps I was feeling this morning were just not right", she said with a tone dipped in sadness. He didn't know what to say.

"You can still pull out of this if you want. Maybe I am barren. Maybe--", he stood up and pulled her into a hug.

"Shh. You're not barren. It's just---, you're not barren baby. I'm sorry about all this"

"It's not your fault", she assured as he hugged her crying head.

He preferred to keep quiet. However, he did feel responsible for the loss of that baby.

...

Meanwhile in Johannesburg, Muzi was awake and thinking about the alcoholic demon in his wife. He smiled to himself and called Lwandile. He sent an SMS the previous night letting them know that he was sleeping over at a friend's, including a picture of him and the friend's mother as proof. They both laughed at this but revelled in the smile they saw in that photo - something they hadn't seen in a long time.

"What time are you coming home? You've done enough friendshipping"

He wore his strict dad voice and decided that to be the first thing he says. Lwandile laughed weakly in his sleepy voice and assured that he'd be home by nine. Muzi tried keeping himself serious but failed. He smiled and told Lwa it was okay. Betso was still knocked out and naked on the bed. He brushed her hair adoringly before standing up to go have his morning dose of caffeine, taking his phone with. He assembled all he needed to do and placed one coffee pod in the coffee maker. As he was about to press the lid down he felt his phone calling for his attention. It was an unknown number so he picked up. He established that it was one of the guards from the royal and he apparently had a parcel he had to deliver. Muzi opened the gate for him in absent mind but immediately after he did, he started adding stuff up and certain components of the equation were missing. He dismissed it and went back to making his coffee. He heard the car park outside and waited. The anticipated knock emanated from the door. He opened and there she was looking like a mess boiled at maximum

temperature.

"I should've known yaz..."

He was not pleased to see his mother, which she highly expected. She was looking like everything else besides herself in a velvet set and sneakers. She looked like she sprung out of bed and hit the road.

"Can I please come in? Just for two minutes please baby", she begged. He could feel the anger stirring up his chest. The driver was left in the car. He stepped away from the door and she walked in.

"You better speak faster than a racing Ferrari before my wife finds you here"

"You don't have to be like that", she continued to beg with evident sorrow in her heart. It was spilling onto her eye bags. He felt like she had too much of a nerve.

"Like what? Hm? Like what? I don't have to treat you like ukhohlakele whereas you are?"(...you're evil...)

"I wasn't thinking straight. I don't know what came over me but it just made sense at the time"

He was shaking his furious head as she spoke.

"We cannot undo the past. We can only fix the future. Please forgive me son?", she was insistent. He bowed as he stood against the cupboard and brushed the top of his head in frustration.

"You've said enough. Please leave", he finally said something. She approached him, hoping to pacify him with her mother's touch, a touch he was too familiar with.

"Don't touch me", he sharply said but she was stubborn. She sniffed before she spoke. He was trying his best not to explode as he felt her hands explore his cheeks like a pair of lost lizards. He was looking at her dead in the eye with locked jaws.

"I know what I did was wrong. I know but please look at it differently. At least you're not a woman and--", that unhooked all the sane wires in his brain. He pushed her so hard she hit the opposite end and the empty pots came tumbling down on her head including all six of their lids, making the loudest of all noises.

"Muzikayise!", she was appalled as she sat bxttflat on the floor. She could feel the pain from crashing to the floor with her old bones burning her whole torso.

"You don't know me ma. When I come back here I want to find you gone or else you'll be good for good!", he threatened and marched up to his study. It took him less than two minutes to get his gun from the safe and come back down with it. He knew it was just the right thing to get her to leave.

When he got there, he found the driver slash guard helping Evelyn up from the floor.

"I heard the noise all the way from outside and I just knew something was wrong", he softly said to her as he proceeded to help her up.

"I thought I said I should find this kitchen empty?", he threatened as he scratched his nose with the cold and heavy metal.

"Ah mfowethu. Akuyona indlela yok'phatha umawakho lena. Noma sekuthiwa unemali engakanani kufanele--"

"(Bro, this is no way to treat your mother. No matter how much money you have--), the guard tried to beg. Muzi gave a sharp frown. It was the first time seeing this face and it came with disrespect?

"Ubiza mina ngo mfowenu? Uyamaz umawami? Uyambona wena in this kitchen? Zange ubikwe wena when

you born ne? Ngizokwenzela ifavour ke mina. Ngizokuphambanisa ne mvula so you can go introduce yourself to your ancestors"(You're calling me bro? Do you know this mother you speak of? Do you see her in this kitchen? An ancestral ceremony wasn't done for you when you were born I see. I'll do you a favour and blow your brains out so you...)

He cocked the gun and Evelyn screamed:"Mbulazi! Mntungwa ngiyak'cela fana. Please calm down. We're leaving. Lizwe, let's go...", she had her hands penetrating the air in surrender as she walked in front of the guard. Lizwe slightly shook his head in disapproval and this did not sit comfortably on Muzi's nerves. He sent the bullet flying to the back of his head and Lizwe dropped dead.

"KHUMALO!", both Betso and Evelyn exclaimed in absolute shock. Muzi was heaving with fury. He dropped the hand with the gun but never allowed it to fall. Betso was already in tears. This was the second time she was seeing him slaughter a living body like he had a full-time job at a butchery. He was about to walk past her when he stopped; one foot up the next step and another left behind. He wanted to say something. She was tightly holding on to her closed lips with both hands. She shut her eyes and she heard the gunshot go off multiple times in her head. The sound just wasn't vanishing. He proceeded with his walk. Evelyn was kneeling on the floor with Lizwe's head in her hands; her bloody hands. He was gone and that was for sure. Betso's traumatized self took slow steps closer to the core of the scene. She even forgot she wasn't on speaking terms with Evelyn for a moment there. Her entire brain wasn't functioning. There was just too much blood. There was too much blood, too many secrets, a lot of anger and hidden skeletons. She placed her shivering hands over her head as she stood over the weeping Evelyn on the floor. She wasn't weeping for Lizwe. Of course she was sad he was dead but she was wailing because she couldn't believe the rage in Muzi's royal eyes. He was definitely spiralling out of control just as Manqoba warned. She managed to touch the infinite limit of his anger. He came back with a couple of black refuse black and grey duct tape.

"Muzi what the hell are you doing?", Betso asked, still dumbstruck by him and his actions. Muzi handed the items to Evelyn.

"Wrap your friend and take him with you", he stated without shame.

"Bathong!", Betso shot out. Evelyn was about to meekly receive them when Betso snatched them from Muzi's hands. She thought of Lwandile and had no idea when exactly he would be back. She just knew it was going to be in the morning and Evelyn's pace wasn't going to cut it. She felt her child had seen enough; he was troubled enough.

"Wenzan manje?"(What are you doing now?) - Muzi.

She dropped to her knees and got to work.

"I am cleaning your mess! Kanyo is going to be here I don't know when but I know that this--!", she pointed at the dead body. "This is the kinda crap I'm not going to subject my baby to!!", she continued pulling the first bag over the top half of Lizwe's body.

"Makoti--", Evelyn tried to speak.

"Shut up!!! SHUT UP EVELYN JUST SHUT THE FXCK UP!!!", Betso exploded - clenching her bloodied hands. Her white night robe was already stained. Muzi's head was on fire. He felt he needed a stiff drink. He left

the three of them there, right in the middle of the kitchen. Betso continued wrapping the body. Muzi got to his office and dropped on his chair, pulling his bottle closer. He could feel the friction as his teeth gritted and grinded against one another.

Betso continued to furiously wrap the body. She wiped the tears from her cheeks and left blood stains there but continued working tirelessly. Evelyn was now helping her. Muzi was showing no sign of coming back. He created the mess and left them to deal with it. Betso didn't know the man who was standing by her side minutes ago. She couldn't recognize him. The look in his eyes was too cold and unfamiliar.

After they were done she stood up from the flood and held the sides of her waist.

"Now what?", she asked Evelyn. She felt she should know. She was the mother-in-law who carried a gun in her handbag after all. She was the low key matriarch of that dysfunctional royal house. Evelyn shook her head as she thought hard. She was also on her feet. Betso grabbed the mug of coffee Muzi had made and downed it. She was thirsty and luckily for her, it had went cold. She swallowed anxiously and squeezed the back of her neck with both hands - so hard it left a sting of pain.

"Let's put him in the boot? Through the garage", Evelyn suggested.

"And then what Evelyn? And then what?!"

"I'll call someone. I'll think of something. Let's just put him in the boot", Evelyn emphasized. They shared an anxious fear-filled stare before Betso starting pacing around, chewing her upper lip. She then said "Fxxk it" and went to open the connecting door. She found keys to one of the cars in the living room and prepared the boot, taking out her shoes and things. When she came back, she unplugged her phone from the charger and called Lwandile. He was still very much asleep. This made her heart leap for joy amidst all the dark smoke it was surrounded by. She assured him that it was okay for him to come back in the afternoon.

"Why?", Lwa asked curiously. Betso tried to shape her voice into normalcy as far as she could stretch it.

"I want to spoil your father and you know..."

"Yoh stop before you go all TMI on me", Lwa laughed. She made sure the call was as short as possible. She and Evelyn then positioned themselves on both ends of his body. The duct tape was containing everything nicely.

"On the count to three. 1... 2... 3...", they both clenched their teeth in order to be able to carry that load. Lizwe wasn't the size of a lizard.

Chapter Seventy-Five

Nothing eats at the heart like infant guilt.

After placing Lizwe in the boot of Muzi's car, they closed it and went back to the open floor of kitchen – accompanied by dreadful silence that screamed nothing else but jitters and agitation. Muzi was still in his study, downing his alcoholic bitteries. Betso proceeded to attack the floor, scrubbing relentlessly as a means to 'remove' the blood.

"Forensics can detect blood no matter how hard you try. You've done enough scrubbi—", Evelyn suggested from a place of exhaustion and Betso shot at her within one bat of a poked eye.

"What would the forensics be doing in this house?! Are you gonna call them?", she spat out – frustrated. Her mother-in-law raised her hands in surrender.

"I am just saying. The blood is gone. Lwa will not see anything. You can stop", she tried to sound as calm and consoling as she possibly could.

"I don't need your permission to do shxt! You have done more than enough damage. I don't need anything from you", Betso breathed out fire before she could turn and walk back to the spot where she was scrubbing. She then turned back in Evelyn's direction.

"Actually no...", she said as she took off the yellow household gloves and Evelyn heard them spatter violently on the matte tiles.

"You know what I need? I need you to get the hell out of here. That's the only thing I need!", she shot out before leaving her and running up the stairs. Muzi, who had been standing there hard-faced and silent, caught her before she could smash into him. Betso broke down. He held her neck and kissed her forehead.

"Ngiyaxolisa..." (I am sorry...), he whispered and blinked only once, looking ahead. Hearing his voice was like pressing play on the whole traumatic incidence in 3D. She yanked herself out of his hold and proceeded to run up.

Evelyn just stood there as her palms began to sweat, expecting almost anything including the impossible to occur. Muzi also stood there as he unflinchingly participated in the stare contest – making his mother reach the peak of all known discomfort. She only knew a pint of redemption when his phone rang. He informed whoever was calling that he would open the gate for them.

A short moment later, two neat guys walked in. One of them was Tebogo.

"Skhulu...", they both greeted.

"Sho", Muzi greeted back.

"Usibizile maye siyasabela" (You called. We're here now), Mbhejane said, expecting an elaborate briefing. Only then did Muzi come down from the rest of the stairs, hands in the pockets of the grey sweatpants he had changed into.

"Where is he?", he asked his mother, who looked like she was on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

"In the boot. He's the boot!", she replied as promptly as her tongue possibly could.

"WHICH ONE?!", Muzi snapped.

Muzi's phone rang once more. He looked at it once and answered. His contact from the police station was calling.

"Maseko yini manje?" (What is it?), he questioned – irritated.

"We received a tip-off about some funny business going on at your house I tried to stall and distract him but Detective Ndlovu won't let it go and you know they've been wanting to place your head on the chopping board for years now so now we're on the way there and..." , he rambled and never stopped to breathe.

"Whoa. What do you mean you're on your way here?", he frowned even harder. Maseko kept quiet. Muzi cut the call and scratched his forehead, trying to squeeze out an intelligent idea from there.

"Did you call the cops?", he questioned Evelyn. She was too startled to speak; she stuttered instead. If looks were literally deadly, she would've been assassinated that very instant.

"The cops?", his skivvies asked. "We had better get going then"

"Nah. I can't risk that. If they're already on the way here then chances are, they don't have a warrant", Muzi said, trying hard to think of another sensible plan should things go as unintended. It took him a minute.

"Mbhej, take out beers from the fridge for the three of us. Tebza, go set up the Monopoly board on the table. It's on the stand in the living room. You, prepare breakfast and make sure they find you still busy at it. Wear an

apron and act normal. One foot wrong and you're dead. Crystal?", he dished out instructions and made threats in the same statement.

"Clear", she agreed with her eyes bobbed out. He went to remove the gloves and the bucket carrying bloodied water from the floor. Evelyn wiped the floor dry with a dishcloth and threw it deep into one of the cupboards. She made an attempt at fixing her hair and face, before taking out a large pan.

Muzi went to brief Betso but as he walked the corridor, he remembered that there was extra-familial person in the house. He stopped walking and quickly put two and two together. He decided to pay no mind to her for that time being and continued walking.

He got to his bedroom and found Betso chin-deep in a bubble bath, staring at the bathroom glass ahead with her jaws locked. She never bothered to raise her face in his direction. She was beyond traumatized and she wasn't doing any good at hiding it; not that she was making any effort to keep her chaotic state of mind concealed. He stood for about a minute by the door before actually disturbing the leftovers of her peace.

"The police are gonna be here at any minute now...", he gingerly informed.

"Mm-mm", she noted and expressed zero emotion.

"Can you stay in here till I've made sure that they leave?"

"Mm-mm", she repeated and he sighed.

"Wakwami, ngiyaxolisa sthan—" (My wife, I'm sorry my lov --)

"Phuma", she stated once and calmly but it rang loud and clear in his head. Her eyes were still glued to the glass that was sweating steam in slow streaks. The order was direct and dart-precise. He indeed stood up and made sure he wasn't told twice to get out.

He went to Odaliwe's room and found the nanny curled up on her bed. Liwe was asleep. He closed the door and she sat up, terrified like a witch when she mistakenly falls into a church, right in front of the pulpit. He approached her and she gasped slowly. He went to squat in front of her and inspected her feet.

"I hate liars, ne? So promise me you're not gonna lie?", he said. Her breathing rate was medically unlawful. He raised his face and rolled his upper lip towards his nostrils.

"Were you the one who called the cops?", he kept his eyes riveted in hers. She quickly shook her head. He kept the lethal stare. She reversed her stance and nodded in agreement. He sighed heavily.

"How much did you see?"

She swallowed a rock.

"Everything. I saw everything from up here. I swear I wasn't snooping I just wanted to go wash Liwe's bottles please don't kill me I freaked out!"

"I won't", he assured but didn't give a stare a break.

"I just don't like cops. I just happened to forget to let you know but from today onwards, please try your best to remember that I don't like cops, even when you're in the loo or washing Liwe's bottles. Good?"

She quickly nodded.

"Good"

He also nodded calmly, then got up and left. Tears raced down her cheeks the moment he closed the door. Not only that, she also failed to keep her bladder under control.

...

Manqoba went back home in hopes of getting a hug from Enhle – a simple, plain but lengthy hug. His troubles did not only grow feet, they also began knowing how to walk.

"Baby...", he called out as he took off his top and stretched his arms. He thought maybe she was in the bathroom. She never heeded the call. He searched his pockets for his phone and found it.

Voicemail...

He pinched his brows in surprise. He tried again and still, voicemail. Enhle's phone is never off – ever. He got up to go check for her suitcase and it wasn't there.

"Dammit!", he shot out as he dialled on his phone.

"Macazette", Sandile answered. MQ detected that his cousin was still very much asleep and possibly hungover, but he had no time to pay attention to that.

"Mechanic, Enhle is gone and her phone is off. I need you to go to the airport and stop her while I try to locate her phone", he said. He felt it was a better idea because Sandile was much closer to the airport than he was.

"Didn't you say her phone was off?"

"I'll still be able to track her last location"

"What time is her flight?"

"Ey angazi Sandile angazi. Just go there and do something. Even if you claim that she's a criminal trying to escape or something. Just cause a delay of some sort alright?" (I don't know)

"Got you bafo", he assured and Manqoba heard Sandile's car alerting him to put on the seatbelt. He also went out of the house as he tried to get Enhle's location. He found that she was still at the airport, or at least hoped so. His heart leaped in temporary relief. He got in the car and drove as fast as he could. He got there and found Sandile still searching.

"And?", he asked with both his hands raised in a questioning manner. Sandile shrugged. MQ checked his phone and the loc was still the same. Only then did it click that it probably wasn't interrupted because her phone was on flight mode. They stood in one spot and as both pairs of eyes roamed all over.

"Go that way. I'll go this way", Sandile said and immediately dashed off. MQ did the same. They still felt the need to search. It wasn't sinking that she really might have left. He finally found her suitcase, but the owner was nowhere in near sight. One of the employees there passed by and he quickly stopped her, almost making her drop her lunchbox bag.

"Sorry sisi. Can I – What time was the last flight out?"

"Uhm, about an hour ago", she politely answered. He felt his heart jump into an instant freezer. He placed his hands on his head and sat down on the bench.

"Are you okay?", she questioned as she sat down next to him. He was still in disbelief. He sat back and hung one hand over his head. He wasn't prepared to speak. She placed her hand on his shoulder and he didn't fight it. All she saw was a gorgeous dark-skinned man who needed a shoulder, or a shoulder rub. Sandile approached and immediately said: "And then? Ngiyafona awuphenduli?" (I am busy calling and you're not answering?)

Manqoba took a silent minute before abruptly getting up and leaving the both of them there.

"Hawu...", Sandile went slightly agape. The lady was still quiet. He noticed her when he was just about to leave and damn...

"Forgive me, I'm Sandile. UZikode", he said as he extended his hand for a proper introduction. She dropped her face innocently and giggled lightly. The glow that was illuminating from all that flawless light skin was blinding to his heart.

"Nosbusiso Gwebu", she said as she shook his hand.

"You mean Nosi Khumalo?", he said and smiled. She laughed and said: "Hayii wena"

He laughed as well.

"Ngicela ungiboleke iynombolo zakho. Ezam ngaz'khohlwa ekhaya" (Please lend me your numbers. I forgot mine at home), he stated and tried to keep a fatally serious face. She couldn't control her laughter. Her hand was still in his.

"Uzozenzan?" (What are you gonna do with them?)

"Ah for uku dodger ama fine laph endlelen. Ayahlupha ama trafficops and wena ngeke nje uz' understande" (To evade traffic cops on the road. Traffic cops can be annoying. You wouldn't understand)

"How?", she was still laughing as she asked.

"Yizinto zama drunk driver lezi ngeke uyizwe ukuthi iyaphi noma ngath ngiyakuchazela. Faka phela sthandwasami ngigaze ngiboshwe" (It's all related to being a drunk driver. Dial that number before I get arrested), he said as he unlocked his phone and she just couldn't stop it with her soothing laughter and baby-ish laughter.

...

Gugu chose one of the tables outside Joe's and waited for Melokuhle to arrive. A waiter approached and she received him with closed-lip smile.

"Good morning and welcome to Joe's. Can I get you the menu, a glass of water...?"

"Just lemon water please. I'm still waiting for my son", she informed, and the waiter left her table courteously. She continued looking around hoping to see him approach but there was nothing worth any excitement to see. She reserved space for disappointment because despite the short period of time she'd known him for, she felt Melo was a duplicate of his father – very unpredictable. She started fiddling around with the sweeteners and paper straws, rearranging them for absolutely no reason. One thing about prison for her was the anxiety that managed to successfully cement itself in her chest, every single day she spent in that grey area. It took almost nothing to put her nerves in ice water. He arrived in his good uniform and closed her eyes from behind. She instantly smiled and warmly placed her hands over his. He then gently removed them as she got up to hug him. The hug took longer than he'd expected but he allowed it for a few more minutes. The people around them were starring, but she never gave a toss about the few pairs of eyes that belonged to strangers that probably wouldn't be a match even if she happened to be in dire need of a kidney. She wasn't expecting that kind of reception from him and she planned to laminate it if ever possible.

"Okay... I still need to go back to school and lunch will be over soon", he said jokingly and she laughed. She drew back and scanned him with eyes full of nothing but adoration.

" You're really mine?", she asked as her eyes glittered with motherly love. He chuckled.

"What do you mean?"

"Like... I really made this? You?", she continued making him shy, deliberately.

"Ay stop it ma", he chuckled as they held hands. He waved for the waiter to get himself out of that awkward situation. Gugu laughed as her heart marinated in that happy moment. The waiter arrived with the menus and greeted once again and Melo greeted him back. Melo turned his down as he was pressed for time.

"Can I please have your large famous ribs? I want my mom to taste the best ribs in the whole of this entire province", he said with a smile and Gugu was still processing the "My mom" part of his order. She was really enjoying this side of him although she wondered why he was suddenly hyper and happy. However, she had no plans of ruining it for him by asking stupid questions.

He took out his phone and immediately smiled at the text he had received from a special someone. Gugu went "Hmmm", in delighted suspicion. Melo laughed and put the phone away.

"It's really not what you think", he said and she exploded in a fit of laughter.

"Kant ngithen mina boy? You're so used to lying to these girls that you're always in defence mode"

He laughed as well.

"But it really is not what you think"

She was still laughing.

"You remind me so much of your father. You even look like him in his teen years", she said and shook her head in nonchalant disapproval.

"He told me that y'all met in high school", he said with a smile.

"Yup", she agreed as she reminisced passively.

"How did you know that he's the one?"

Gugu laughed and bit her upper lip thoughtfully.

"I mean, from a teenager's perspective. How did you know? Did you even know?" – Melo.

She nodded.

"I always wanted to see his face. If he was out of sight then I'd always be on the lookout for a certain face that looked exactly like the one you see in your selfies", she replied and he bowed his head and blushed.

"Do you still believe he's the one? That he's your soulmate?"

She sat back and processed her thoughts, packing them in a way that a teenager would understand.

"Not everyone gets to be with their soulmate", Gugu replied and they locked eyes, both searching for something. Him clarity and she understanding. The rib combo arrived and Melo relinquished that topic before digging in.

...

Mbhej made sure to empty out a few bottles of beer in the sink and placed them carelessly around their play area in the living room. They placed property markers on the board so it looked like they genuinely playing. Muzi's gun was beside him and he made sure to leave a bullet in the ceiling. Detective Ndlovu and Detective Maseko eventually arrived. Evelyn let them in with flour on her cheek. She was making flapjacks.

"Hi officers. How can we help you?", she asked cheerfully, trying to suspend her rapid heartbeat from making her larynx vibrate. Ndlovu looked at her suspiciously before he walked in slowly, trying to intimidate her into cracking if there was anything to crack about.

"Sawubona. Singam' thola uMuzikayise?" (Is Muzi around?), Ndlovu asked even though he heard the laughs and noise the gents were making from the living room.

"Sure. Right that way...", Evelyn said and Ndlovu kept his eye on her for a brief second. He walked on and his snitch of a colleague followed closely behind him. Lizwe was still in the boot.

"Board games so early in the morning...", he remarked and Muzi turned around to see his face. "Having fun?", he proceeded to troll.

"Ta Jameson", Muzi said and Tebogo unintentionally laughed. He knew it was coming from a place of stage 10 disrespect.

"We received a tip of misconduct in this house"

"I don't think I think I understand...", Muzi acted confused. Detective "Jameson" was scanning the room. Nothing looked suspicious, everything looked in place, except for the board game they were pseudo-playing.

"My house is not for sale", Muzi said as he rolled the dice on the board. It made him take six steps and he landed in the jail block.

"Why do you say that?" – Maseko.

"You're look like you came for viewing", Muzi answered.

"Tronk toe. Go to jail", Mbhej said as if focused on the game and Muzi laughed. It was the sarcasm.

"We received a tip off from someone who apparently works here, saying a gun went off and she thinks somebody might have died", Maseko said, trying to seem professional as ever – which was all an act.

"Oh that? That was an innocent mistake. An oopsie daisy really. I was just admiring his gun and it happened to go off. I'm not that experienced with it", Mbhej said and stood up. "Come, let me show you", he said and went to show them the hole in the ceiling. Ndlovu was still not convinced.

"Did anybody get hurt?", Ndlovu asked with his notoriously suspiciously eye. Everyone said no.

"Where is the lady that called us then?"

"I gave her the rest of the day off. She was too traumatized. She's still new and obviously not used to gunshots", Muzi confidently stated. Ndlovu nodded, his eye was still roaming. He walked around and Evelyn saw that he is getting closer to the garage door. She communicated to Muzi with her eyes to do something.

"If there's no warrant or anything else, can we please be excused? You're both delaying breakfast", he said and Ndlovu thinned his eyes. However, they shortly left. Evelyn couldn't wait to breathe normally again.

Immediately when the police scrambled from the premises, Muzi said: "Ayt. Everyone please fuseg outta my house. Take the body with you, I don't run a mortuary".

Chapter Seventy-Six

Strangers never stop being strangers, no matter how familiar one gets with them. Every woman gives birth to one, some are just lucky to even die unbeknownst of the real McCoy of children's true spectrum of character. Evelyn knew Muzi could get dangerous when aggravated but, she never knew the true reddened extent of it. She watched as Tebogo and Mbhej went into the garage through the connecting door. Muzi walked over to the fridge in a very complacent manner, apathetic to the fragile and stress-inviting atmosphere in that kitchen, if not the whole house. His unsummoned mother hesitantly followed behind him like a browbeaten mouse.

"I know you want nothing to do with— ", she tried to plead her case.

"You're still here?", Muzi questioned as he opened the fridge.

"I AM SORRY!!!", she yelled in deep lament. He took out a single beer and opened it with his teeth then plainly looked at her. She secretly questioned why there was not even a shade of regret in his empty, cold and barbwired expression.

"I admit that I've been a bad mother. Instead of protecting you like a good parent should, I—"

"Here's what you're going to do. I am going to need you to disappear because you obviously can't go back to KZN. There'll be way too many questions asked and that's that kinda crap I don't want"

"No, please. I will...I'll make up a story about where he might've gone. I'll think of something. Just don't force me otherwise I am begging you!"

She fell on her knees and hugged his legs, completely ignoring the pain due to impact. He took one sip of his beer and helped her up.

"Get up from there. I've no idea how to make prayers come true"

Her attempt at an apology was obviously not sinking in to sight. His heart wasn't absorbing it otherwise his eyes would've reported it; eyes snitch. She slowly got up from the floor – contritely.

"Phakamani, I am old. I need to be with my family for Pete's sake"

"I thought you said you'll always be 26"

The Muzi she knew would've punctuated that old joke with a pure and angelic laugh, he didn't.

"The more I speak to you, the greater the urge to put you in a body bag", he mentioned and took another sip. Evelyn's face was a hot, wet mess. She kept sniffing and wiping her cheeks with her hands.

"Don't make me do this, don't be that heartless..."

A breathy laughter left Muzi's lips.

"You think this is me being heartless, dear mother? You haven't met the devil yet; you're still speaking to his doorman"

Evelyn sighed.

"It's either that or I will make sure you're locked away for his disappearance. We both know you won't survive a lousy minute in jail so pick a new name and a damn country already. I'll have a passport made for you but you can't stay here. I'll book you into a hotel until it's ready and I am gonna need you to limit your movements, you haven't come sightseeing here"

"Okay... but before that, I need to get something off my chest", she roughly cleared her throat. Muzi just stared, clearly waiting.

"I...", she had no clue where to start.

"Yoh!", he grew impatient and left that spot. She swallowed a stubborn lump.

"Bayede and I were the ones who killed Mashandu!", she let it slip, loudly.

"He bought the poison and I put a few drops of it in her tea when she wasn't looking", she came clean but hid the shame in her eyes by nailing them to the floor. Muzi choked on his alcohol. He coughed so hard he had to place the bottle on the kitchen counter. Evelyn was still draped in dishonour. When Muzi finally got his breathing under control ,

"Come again?", he frowned and cocked his head to the side. She only raised her eyes once and couldn't bear the burning look in his eyes. She instead continued twiddling her thumbs.

"WHO ARE YOU?!", he shot out. She couldn't face the music; it was too loud.

"Why would you even be in cahoots with—, wait. Please don't tell me you had an affair with him..."

"It was not an affair. It was a once off thing and we both had a lot to lose"

"And here you are judging uGugu for the same thing you did!

"It's not the same thing"

"How? Dad was also someone's son. He also had a mother who would've defended him against a wife like you. How is it not the same thing?!", he yelled and threw the bottle to the floor. She tried to advocate for herself but he raised his hand and stopped her from spewing more fraudulent nonsense.

"This whole family is messed up. Everything about it deserves hellfire. You've always said that we should be grateful for the privileges that came with being of royal blood but truth be told, there is nothing prestigious about this sewage dump you call a family", he stated and continued scanning her with disgust.

"Every family has its own skeletons. I may have done some questionable things, but I did my best to give you a fine life. Give me my flowers while I can still smell them", she defended cautiously. Muzi huffed out a ridiculous laugh. He couldn't believe the spiky nerve possessed the woman they called his mother.

"Manqoba is going to flip and once he does, I honestly do not care what he does to you if he finds you. You are an evil woman Evelyn. You deserve a stalling, lonely and painful natural death in complete isolation. Please go wait for your transport outside...", he said defeatedly and walked away, leaving her as an inconsolable mess to pick up the pieces to herself and leave.

...

Realization began sinking in as Manqoba sat on the bed digesting Enhle's escape. He hated thinking of it that way – as an escape. If he allowed that thought to perpetuate then it would mean that she meant it; that their relationship was toxic and poisonous to her soul. Was he that bad? He wondered. Was he that terrible of a husband that she had to run away in order to "find herself"? He had always thought cheating was every man's second nature and the woman in his life had to suck it up and deal with it. That's what was instilled in him ever since he was a boy; that he couldn't possibly eat the same meal every single for the rest of his life. His actions were already justified by society way before he could even think of acting on such thoughts and subtle recommendations. This what he was taught and the more he did it and Enhle being accepting of it, the stronger this idea cemented itself in his brain. Fights that led to passive break ups were common and a norm in their relationship. Never even once, did he believe that she would one day pack up and leave like she promised she would on multiple occasions. She made these threats on a plethora of occasions that he ended up not considering them as significant anymore, till she dropped a silent explosive on him that severed him so much he felt his

heart implode in slow motion. He kept changing sitting positions from the couch, the floor, the bed right to standing with one foot against the wall.

Sandile let himself in. MQ ran his hands down his face. He felt there're were extra layers of cells making his facial skin feel heavy. There was no extra skin – just stress. Sandile just stood by the door.

"Macazette", he finally pricked a hole into that bubble of uncomfortable silence.

"Ufunani Mechanic?" (What do you want Mechanic?), MQ pronounced with irritation.

"Ngeke ushawe yistress somfazi kangaka ngibhekile mina bafo. I don't like seeing you like this" (No woman is going to stress you out like this on my watch)

"That's the love of my life you're talking about, ukhumbule" (You must remember that)

Sandile took the distance and walked over to go sit next to him on the bed.

"When last did you go out? Let's go out tonight or else your head will definitely explode", Sandile suggested and Manqoba stood up from the bed and went to look out the window.

"Come on, you know you need this, and you know very well that I won't beg you. Asambe" (Let's go), he insisted.

"Ish fine! Just as long as you get the fxck outta here this minute"

"Ay. Let me leave you to bask in your depression. You seem to be enjoying it", Sandile surrendered and shook his face as he balanced a cigarette with both his lips, trying to get the lighter to work with both hands; It wasn't budging. Manqoba's head was cloud-travelling. He took no notice of what was happening behind him.

"Uphi umatches lapho bafo?" (Where do you keep your matchbox?), Sandile asked and only then did MQ turn to pay attention to him.

"Uyangidakelwa Sandile you want to smoke in my room?", he said while grabbing a cushion from the couch next to him and throwing it at his cousin. Sandile laughed and got up.

"Okay! Okay! But we're still on for tonight angithi? There will entertainment", he informed then winked.

"Do I even have a choice? Get your nicotine addict a** outta here!"

Sandile continued laughing as he tried to negotiate with and appeal to his lighter to give him a second chance.

Moments after Sandile left and Manqoba had had time to gather and process his thoughts, he grabbed his car keys in an all-of-a-sudden moment and dashed out. For his life to get back on track, he knew well and hard that he had issues to fix. He also knew that these repairs would be perceived as betrayal to more than one but in the same breath, he knew it had to be done. After Evelyn's confession with regard to this mystery child, she also confessed about his whereabouts. He just needed to find the piece of paper with the address on it in his glovebox. He found it and hit the road.

"Knock knock", he prompted as he stood by the open door. The door was wide open, but nobody was in sight. His knuckles had to endure till somebody paid attention to him. A woman appeared from somewhere in the house and greeted him with a smile.

"I thought I heard something. Hello", she said as she wiped her wet hands with a dry dishcloth. He greeted back and she offered that he should come in.

"By the look in your eyes I am certain that you do not know me, correct?"

She nodded as she sat on the couch opposite his.

"My name Manqoba, Manqoba Khumalo...", he stated and saw the gentleness of her face evaporate like a water under a scorching sun.

"No. Please leave", she stood up without doubt nor favour.

"I'm afraid I am not going anywhere. Where is our son?"

"I am not going to sit here and watch you take away the only thing that means the world to me", she sneered.

"Pho ulwelan? Nakhona ulwa noban ngoba ngikhuluma nawe kahle ngomoya ophansi?" (Why are you shouting whereas I'm not?)

She released a dramatic breath out and dropped her chest, before dumping her weight back on the coach.

"I am not even going to lie to you. I am indeed here to take him home. His ancestors are furious that they never see him there and they're destroying everything they think means anything to our family", he explained and could fully sense the disapproval on her face.

"I really do not care yaz bhuti. I don't. All I know is that Mthokozisi is going no where with you. Over my dead body", she swore.

"That can be arranged...", he threatened. It took her a couple of seconds to grasp what he meant by that.

"That old woman promised me lies and threatened to kill me and now you're here doing the same?", she was getting emotional.

"Evelyn threatened to kill you?"

She nodded.

"She promised that Mtho's father would marry me after I gave birth and then she switched on me six months after I fell pregnant, telling me senseless stories about regret and hogwash about he had a wife he was destined to marry in future. She used me and now all she does is throw money at my child like he doesn't deserve a family. He asks me almost every single day about his father. What do I now tell the child?", her spirits were messy and high.

"Simple. Tell him you raped a man and fell pregnant", he stated and shrugged. She popped her eyes.

"I didn't rape him!"

"What did you do?"

Cat caught her tongue with pliers.

"I simply slept with him. Men can't be raped because they can never say no to sex", she defended.

"If that is truly the case, then there wouldn't have been any need for him to be drugged now would there?", he asked, and she looked away.

"Oksalayo, men cannot be raped.

"You emasculated my little brother and that had him fxcked up!"

She held on to her silence.

"I also used to think like you before I read up on this. Please allow me to ask you this, do you understand what the word consent means?"

She actively thought about it. He felt she was wasting his time.

"Consent is synonymous to permission. ANY kind of sexual intercourse without consent from any of the parties involved is rape to that particular party that did not consent to that crap. MK never gave you permission to be touching up on him and his privates like that", he stated with slight vehemence.

She dropped her face.

"Do you now understand what I mean when I say you raped him?", he was calmer now.

"I don't think he would've said no even if he wasn't drugged. Men never say no to free and easy sex"

MQ sighed impatiently. She was taxing the mileage of his nerves.

"THEN YOU SHOULDN'T HAVE DRUGGED HIM! Why did you not seduce him like a normal woman and take it from there?"

"The drugs were not my idea. I was just there to fall pregnant"

"Well then you broke into the Khumalo household and took what's ours. Now we're here to claim it back. Our seeds don't scatter"

"You're not taking my child away from me"

"The only reason I don't want this to get messy is for your sake. Otherwise I can gladly take it there, trust me on that"

She was about to threaten him back when they heard Mtho's voice.

"What the hell?", he questioned in utter disbelief. She quickly stood up to salvage the situation.

"How long have you been standing there?", she asked nervously as she approached him. Manqoba stood up as well.

"I asked you a question ma", he said, he was still feeling like he got kicked in the teeth.

"What did you ask?", she tried fixing his collar, except his t-shirt was a round neck and did not have be fixed. She was a nervous wreck.

"I said, What. The. Hell?"

...

Nomzamo went over to Melo's desk when the siren rang for school out.

"Hey you!", she greeted cheerfully. He greeted back and tried to kiss her. She pulled back bashfully and Melokuhle laughed.

"Don't do these things in front of people", she warned, and Melo shot out a breathy but quick laugh.

"What things?", he deliberately wanted to annoy her.

"Have you found a suit yet?", she questioned and blatantly ignored his intentionally stupid question.

"My aunt said she has that covered. She wanted my date's measurements but I knew you wouldn't agree so that's why I never said shxt", he mentioned.

"This means you were planning on going to the dance all along...", she mentioned suspiciously.

"Nah. I really wasn't. I was gonna drop her at the last minute", he mentioned. She laughed.

"And waste all that money put into the suit? Hamba rich boy"

"Nah it's nothing like that. I asked for something very simple that will go with almost anything so, I would've probably gotten to wear it for a different occasion. And stop calling me rich boy uzokhala", he warned with a staged serious face.

"Oh loosen up. The last time I called you this was in grade 9 and I used to enjoy how much you hated it", she laughed. He kept the gravely lethal face. She composed herself when she felt he was truly offended, immediately shoving her laughter into an airtight jar. The class was getting emptier by the minute.

"Okay I'm sorry. I'm sorry for calling you rich boy I know how much you don't like it", she apologized. He wanted to laugh because Zamo never apologizes to him – especially in the case where she feels she offended him.

"Say something nawe", she pleaded but with pride.

"What do you want me to say Zamo? Uyangidelela muqeda uthi I must say something? What do you want me to say? "(You disrespect then after that you say...)

"Haa you really are mad. I'm sorry dude"

"Dude? I'm not a member of your community of guy friends. Musa ukungidelela Nomzamo uzokhala?" (Stop disrespecting me because you'll cry)

"I'll stop but nawe don't speak to me like you're speaking to your uneducated wife. I have apologized. What more do you want me to say?", she fought back. He really, really wanted to laugh.

"You WILL be my wife but there is no way you won't be educated. I don't see that happening under this sun, not with your highly curious, stubborn and intelligent a**", he failed to suppress a smile.

"I am NOT going to be your wife", she said and fastened her backpack over her shoulders.

"Mind giving me a sensible reason why you think it's wise for you to say that?"

"You're a h0e", she said it plain, simple and straight to the point. He laughed. He felt like he had no comeback to that, but he bounced.

"I am not a h0e, I was exploring. It's unnatural in my family to be committed to one woman. And even if it is the case, by the time I'd wanna pay lobola for you I would've quit playing"

She thought about what he said while staring at him, unfazed. Muzi's son stared back, unintimidated.

"I am legit confused", she mentioned and they both laughed.

He took two steps forward and brought her closer. The class was completely empty at this point.

"Melo stop...", she was already getting defeated. Something about feeling his fresh breath on her face, approaching her lips drove her ladybits into extreme heat that sent a tingly feeling that sensitized almost all her nerves.

"Why?", he whispered and proceeded to silently bring her to her knees. He wanted her to cave, to give into him. He wanted all that beauty to himself.

"I don't know... just...", she ran breathless when she felt the moist skin of his lips approaching and softly sitting on hers, patiently.

"I want you in my life Zamo and I will never stop trying to convince you that you belong in it. Ngiyazifela ngawe ntombazana. Uma kuvela wena kuvele kukhanye yonke indawo nangaphansi ko mhlaba. Ngiyak'thanda and ngizokunika sonke iskhathi os'dingayo ukuthi inhliziyi yakho iyamukele leli qiniso. But if you take too long then I'm coming to physically get you myself. Uyakwazi ukuthwala?" (I'm mad over you. Whenever you appear everything brightens up, even under the soil. I love you and I'm going to give your heart all the time it needs to accept this fact. Do you that procedure where they abduct a girl for marriage?), he said as their foreheads met. Zamo shot out a sharp laughter.

"You'd force me to marry you?", she was still cracking her ribs in his gentle embrace.

"Nqo!", he said without doubt.

Chapter Seventy-Seven

Betso kept massaging lotion onto her legs as she sat absentmindedly on the bed. She never saw Muzi enter and stand by the door. In the room, there was chilly, cold air circulating and buzzing into her skin. The goosebumps and frisson of her hands was more than enough evidence.

"Can we please talk about this?", he said in a gently pleading voice. She never raised her face, neither did she stop what she was unnecessarily doing. He stepped closer. She got up and went past him, straight to the closet. He followed her and watched as she pulled down her fresh fleecy pyjamas and her warmest night gown. A stack of her t-shirts came tumbling down on her head and as she tried to stop them from unfolding, the white towel around her naked, moisturized body fell down.

" Arg dammit!", she bellowed in complete annoyance.

"Let me help you", he hastened to reach her. He bent to the floor to pick up the scattered pile off the floor.

She dropped her hands and heaved a sigh.

"There was no need for you to kill him. No need at all", she mentioned. He stopped for a moment before patiently getting up. She looked away.

"I am sorry you had to witness all of that. I am sorry for putting you through such a mess when I made a clear promise to myself that I'd never", he apologized as he tried to take both her warm hands into his. She wasn't comfortable. He let go.

"Khumalo, let me get this right. You are only sorry for subjecting me to you killing a whole man in cold blood, but you're not sorry for the actual murder in itself?", she was appalled, and her face was proof. He sniffed and scratched his nose.

"You killed a man in our children's home and you're unapologetic about it. I hate this side of you. I hate it so much!", her eyeballs were wet and glossy.

"Betso..."

"No. You need help. If I didn't love you this badly, I would've been you in jail. That's where people of your calibre belong but—", she took a moment to breathe. Not only did she need some clean air in her lungs, but she also needed as much of it around her. All that bad energy felt like carbon monoxide. The more breaths she took, she more she felt she couldn't. She was standing in front of him, naked and bare.

"I am booking you into therapy", he informed him of her decision in its final form and he raised his face to argue. She cut him very short.

"No. You are going to do this and you're gonna do this for me, for our family. YOU ARE ANGRY MUZIKAYISE AND ONLY HELL KNOWS WHAT YOU WILL DO NEXT!", she exploded – emotionally.

"You want me to go tell an entire stranger about the details of my life?", he wasn't having it.

"You need it. You need to! You have a lot of things bottled up and once there's a trigger everyone's life is suddenly in danger. Killing is natural problem-solving skill in your eyes and you see nothing wrong with it. How is that normal?", she stood there and waited for an answer. Her question wasn't rhetorical. She genuinely felt he owed her answers.

"Ma?!", Lwandile yelled as he peeped through the door after knocking close to a million times. She locked her jaws and loosened her chest.

"This conversation is over, and you are going to therapy", she stated with absolute certainty, with no grain of doubt in her voice. He walked over to the ottoman and took a seat. She picked up the towel and wrapped herself with it, then walked out with the widest, fake smile ever known to be mastered.

"Hey baby", she greeted Lwa as she approached him for a hug.

"Sawubona Mrs K. I've been knocking on this door since yesterday", he playfully exaggerated. She laughed.

"I was trying to get something to put on. How's your friend?", she asked and gave him a wink. He laughed shyly before giving an answer.

"He's fine, ma"

"Just fine?", she angled her chin sideways in suspicion.

"Yes. Just fine. Where's dad? I was expecting to see rose petals on the floor, empty champagne bottles and the works?", he teased and stopped smiling when he realized that her mind was on a train.

"Ma?", he shook her once. She gasped and almost jumped.

"Are you okay? You look stressed, he noted. She let out a pretentious giggle.

"Stressed? I have no idea what you're talking about"

"If I didn't know better, I'd say you killed someone the way you're going on", he said jokingly and laughed. She felt a thin drop of cold sweat travel roll down the side of her face. Her tongue was taut and tangled.

"Cheer up ma I'm just joking. Now I'm really worried about you. Are you okay?"

"I'm... I'm really fine. I'm just worried about Liwe. She seemed to be coming down with a fever earlier", she mentioned.

"Kids get sick all the time. She'll be fine. Please stop stressing", he tried to quieten her nerves with a hug. She received it and sighed heavily.

"Let me go take a shower yeah?", he said, and she nodded with a subtle smile.

She went back to the closet after he left and found Muzi still thoughtfully seated with his hands over his head. She took a conscious decision to ignore his presence and got dressed in her PJs, including sheepy socks. She tied the belt to her gown and left that room.

When she got to Liwe's, she found the Thandiwe, the nanny, piggybacking Odaliwe's tiny self with a towel.

"How are we doing today?", she asked with a polite smile. Thandiwe could see the emptiness in her eyes. She felt sorry for her.

"We were cranky just minutes ago, but we managed to sleep", she replied turned her neck, trying to see the small person on her back. Betso nodded and massaged her neck with one hand. The other was in the pocket of her gown. Thandiwe undid the front of the towel and asked Betso to help her with the baby. Betso seemed unsure and undecided for a moment. Her sense came back when she realized Liwe might fall if she didn't act as fast as she was asked. She quickly extended her hands to take her and she showed signs of wanting to wake up. Thandiwe stretched her body and Betso waited for her to take Liwe back.

"Don't you want to put her to sleep?", asked Thandiwe.

"Please just... just take her", Betso insisted. She remembered all the blood that was on her hands earlier and there was a stubborn thought in her head that was adamant that she was somehow making the baby's spirit dirty. Thandiwe quickly understood and took her. She placed her down and hushed her for a minute, then Liwe drifted off to her happy rainbow place.

Betso was about to leave when Thandiwe straightened her spine from the cot and called her.

"MakaLiwe?", she said in tone that aroused curiosity. Betso turned back and fixed the large hood over her head. Thandiwe asked that they take a seat on her single bed. Betso obliged. The nanny had to gather her thoughts into one basket before she could begin talking.

"See, before I came here... I was jobless for about six months. I've seen things at my previous workplaces that left me emotional and in deep trauma for days"

Betso frowned. Thandiwe was careful with her words. She walked on eggshells as she tried to convey this point.

"Do you know the Dingilizwe's?", she asked and never moved her eyes from Betso, who was trying to figure out where she had heard this Dingilizwe name. She was certain she had. Her brain was sure that this name once touched on its surface. It tried to remember while simultaneously trying to suppress the trigger that came with the tail of that name.

"They were all over the news last year. The politician husband that killed his wife?", Thandiwe was determined to jog Betso's memory.

"Oh ja. I remember them", Betso recalled. "But where is this going?"

Thandiwe sighed as her buttocks fidgeted around to get comfortable.

"I am worried about you, ma'am. I warned Mrs Dingilizwe so many times I'm hurt she didn't listen. I'm hurt I didn't try hard enough to get her to listen. She was so friendly, accommodating and so motherly. You remind me of her, and it stings my heart. I attract employers who are either in abusive relationships or who somewhat need some kind of deliverance. This man is going to kill you. I can feel it in my bones and I'm not going to ignore it", she blabbered anxiously without pause. Betso couldn't help but cry.

"Please don't say that Thandiwe. Muzi wouldn't hurt me"

"They all say that until they're dead. What the two of you share is beautiful when the sun is out but seeing him kill a man like that? Like he's squashing a pest? There is nothing he's incapable of", Thandiwe said and placed her comforting hand on Betso's shoulder. Both their eyes were captured by Odaliwe's innocent image as she slept her growth away in her cot.

...

Melokuhle abruptly woke up from his afternoon nap in his mother's hotel room, drenched in his own sweat and trying hard to catch his breath. Gugu was seated by the desk, setting up her website for her new clothing line. She turned back and noticed how freaked out he was. She then quickly stood up and poured him a glass of water. He took it and drank up. His mother was patient and waiting to hear what had been chasing him in his dreams. When he was done drinking, he gave a flat "Thanks" and lifted his legs off the bed. She lovingly placed her hand behind his wet and sweaty neck.

"Are you gonna tell me what's going on?"

He sighed and took a quick glance at her.

"I had a recurring bad dream", he enlightened.

"Recurring as in one moment repeating many times in a single dream?", she asked for clarity.

He nodded. Even a blind man would've been able to sense that he was troubled.

"Talking helps. I'm all ears"

He swallowed.

"I was dreaming of Busi falling into a very dark, bottomless pit and I was always late to save her", he morosely said. Worry dressed her face and she sat closer, taking him into her hands.

"Oh baby... I am so sorry", she had no idea what else to say. There was nothing more to say.

She wiped her sweat with her palms as he just sat there blinking incalculable times. This lasted for about seven minutes.

"Have you ever been to her grave?", she broke the silence.

He silently shook his head.

"You should go. Maybe it will bring you the closure that you need", she mentioned. He thought about it. He was considering it.

"I don't know where it is and her family is definitely not going to tell me", he said.

"You don't need them. You only need her full name and the date she died. The people who work at the cemetery will help you find it", she suggested.

"And what do I do when I get there? Talk to her?"

Gugu nodded. "You could also buy her flowers"

He huffed out a laugh.

"And a Lunchbar", he added. His mother smiled and asked if it was her favourite thing. He just nodded, lazy to explain that she left him a suicide note in the form of a video.

They both sighed and looked at one another.

"Can you accompany me there? I'm not sure if I can do this alone"

"You don't have to ask me twice my boy", she assured.

"Today?"

"Sure", she agreed and got up to change into clothes that were considered respectable to the dead – a headwrap and a skirt.

They took a detour to a convenience store first to go get the chocolate bar. A tiny thought in Melo's head felt this was silly but he did it anyway. From there they went to go buy a huge bouquet of white lilies. His mother took the wheel and drove to the community cemetery. They were both silent in the car, but it wasn't at all uncomfortable. They got there and she as the adult, spoke to the man who was gatekeeping the cemetery. He asked for the month when Busi was buried and R200 for his effort. They paid it without grief, and he went to look for her as they followed closely behind him in his washed-out blue work suit.

"Here...", he finally pointed at Busisiwe's resting place. They thanked him and he left. Melo turned to his mother for approval. She nodded and he then kneeled next to the dark grey tombstone. The soil there was brittle and 'sinky'.

"I'll be over there if you need me", she mentioned and left, heading to an old porcelain bench under a tree close-by.

He cleared his throat before placing the bunch of flowers on top of her. He felt himself getting emotional so he laughed instead, to compose himself. Needless to say, that was a complete fail.

"Sthandwasami. Ma wengane yami. Ngiyaxolisa for taking this long to actually come here and visit you. I was afraid. I was afraid that my being here would confirm my worst fear; that I had genuinely lost you and that I hadn't accepted it nor will I ever" (My love. The mother of my child. I am sorry...)

A single drop raced down his cheek as he passively weeded out the grass on the sides of her grave to keep his hands occupied. Gugu watched all of this from a distance, with a breaking heart.

"Akekho ofana nawe Busi I have tried!", he confessed with as his chest heated up. "Baby I have tried searching for you in different places and I failed. You left and you left with your whole being and I will never forgive you for that. Ngiyakuthanda kodwa angiziboni ngikuxolela for what you did to my heart. I was prepared to take care of you. I was prepared to step up but the fact that you actually planned to kill yourself even after the million times I tried assuring you that I was gonna be there every step of the way is just—"

He got himself to calm down. Gugu could see that he was shouting. She wanted to get up but also, she felt he needed to let his emotions rip and spill onto those grounds.

"I waited for you. I waited for you to visit me in my dreams like people promised you would but you never did. Are you getting back at me for everything I put you through? If that's the case, then we're not even. You have won because the pain I'm feeling right now is immeasurable"

He was being honest. He had managed to suspend it all those times he chose distraction over confrontation. At that moment he sat there, next to her grave, he felt helpless. It was spilling over and he couldn't contain it the same way he couldn't contain his tears. He hugged his knees and cried it the fxck out. Gugu couldn't take it anymore. She wiped her own tears with the tail of her doek as she walked towards him. She got there and knelt by his side, tightly hugging him. He kept his head bowed onto his knees. In his head, it was embarrassing for a boy child to cry like that. After all, indoda ayikhali.

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"Is this why dad moved out? He was also in on this? He knew? Ma, I'm a product of rape?", Mthokozi asked in complete shock and devastation.

"No no no. You are not a product of rape my child please don't—"

"SHUT UP!", he yelled from the very top of his lungs. His mother shrieked and stepped back.

"You had countless opportunities to come out with the truth, but you always, always chose deceit"

"These people don't care about you son. If they did, they wouldn't have bewitched and cursed you with life-threatening seizures"

"Nobody bewitched him. He inherited that from his father"

"I hate you...", Mtho sneered in his mother's direction.

"See what you've done?!", his mother shot out at Manqoba before storming out of the house.

"You are not running away from this. Ma??!!", he called her back, but she proceeded to strut out.

Mtho was obviously vexed and frustrated. Manqoba just looked at him for another reaction. He just watched him trying to calm himself down.

"So...", Mtho said. MQ kept his silence, waiting for him to finish his sentence and also admiring how he didn't need a DNA test to confirm that that was indeed uMntungwa.

"You're my uncle?", Mtho asked. Manqoba nodded and extended his hand for a handshake. Mtho shook it without question.

"Yes I am, Mbulazi", he confirmed and tried to suss out how he felt about that.

"I'm a Khumalo?", the shock was expanding by the second.

Manqoba nodded. "You're royalty mfan'wam"

"Khumalo as in Melokuhle Makhosonke Khumalo?", he questioned, trying to wrap his head around everything. Manqoba raised his brow.

"Yes. He is your brother. You know your him?"

"We were friends in grade one. Then turned enemies since then"

Manqoba laughed.

"You cannot be serious..."

"I am telling you erh..." , Manqoba realized Mtho had no idea what to call him.

"Call me MQ", he mentioned and Mtho gave a slight smile. Manqoba was chilled and it was pretty obvious.

"What the big deal? Nibangan?"

"A lot of things. Including the fact that he went after my crush and toyed with her heart, then she friendzoned me. I have never been okay ever since", he relayed and Manqoba couldn't stop laughing at his tone of delivery. Mtho was one of those people who'd tell a side-splitting joke and not laugh one bit.

"Aish hadee boy. Which crush is this?", MQ asked.

"Busisiwe", he mentioned with light sadness.

"Oh. For what it's worth and from what I've gathered, he really did love that girl. I don't know if this makes you feel any better or worse", Manqoba stated and shrugged.

Mthokozisi laughed.

"How am I even related to him?", he asked.

"You share a father. He is your blood brother. Straight straight"

"My life can't get any worse than this"

Manqoba laughed. They shortly sat down.

"So tell me son, are you accepting of us as your family?"

Mtho pursed his lips thoughtfully.

"I guess. I don't really have much of a choice. Speaking of which, now that everything is unfolding... my grandfather said something to me before he died"

Manqoba leaned in curiously

"And what is that?"

"He said, a man's identity lies with his true ancestors. He proceeded to say that I should always remember these words when the right time comes because he won't be there to advise me"

Manqoba sat back, digesting this information.

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The whole family was in that house but Betso felt inexplicably alone. Her soul was sad and isolated. Muzi had locked himself in his study. She sat on the floor of her bedroom wanting to call someone. She and Tumi had somewhat grown apart. Their lives were becoming more distinct and separate as the years went by. They never exactly fought; there was no need – no reason. However, she knew he was there whenever he needed him to be. She wanted to dial his number and confess all the horror that had been happening in that house. She knew he wouldn't judge; he never did. He would be shocked yes but he wouldn't pass any judgement in her direction.

She took her phone and dialled, then cut the call before it could go through. She opted for calling her mother instead.

"My beautiful baby", Violet answered, sounding as if she was busy vacuuming the house. She had to be loud for Betso to hear her since she attended the call before actually switching off the machine. This gave Betso enough time to pull herself together and actually get a grip.

"Hi mama", she greeted back and heard the annoying vacuum sound in the background slowly die down.

"How are you? Yey fuseg!", she yelled and sounded as if she was running out of the house. The subtle echo of her voice inside did not sound the same as when she was outside. Betso heard dogs barking and her mother hyperventilating.

"What is going on?", she asked in concern.

"Ase dimpsa tse tsakamo next door? They think my yard is a pet zoo. Bloody donor" (Is it not my neighbour's dogs?) she announced with irritation.

"O Polokwane?", Betso enquired. Her mother confirmed it affirmative. She refused to sell her house when she got married to Robert. She claimed it's a man's second nature to be annoying and she had to have a refuge when her husband's demons got drunk. Betso already knew they had a fight when she went there.

"Anyway, you don't sound okay. Are you pregnant?", Violet questioned as she sat down. Betso could hear it from her fluctuating breathing pattern.

"Mara mama..."

"A mother has to ask. Is he cheating? I'd deep fry his—"

"Yoh whoa...", Betso stopped that bus before it was ahead. She knew her mother well; she was about to go on a swearing spree.

"I'm just... I don't know mama. Have you ever felt like your soul is getting lost? Somehow lonely so?"

Violet took a lengthy second to worry about her child.

"Did something happen? Why do you feel like that?"

"Nothing happened. I just woke up like this. I also feel very tired emotionally"

"When last did you pray?", Violet asked.

"I don't even remember. I was never really a firm believer mama you know this"

"Well, I don't know what could be happening ngwanaka but it sounds serious. I can even feel that you're highly disturbed. Go see someone"

"As in, a shrink?"

"A shrink, a pastor, a prophet or even a sangoma. Whatever works for you"

"You? Suggesting an entire traditional healer?"

Violet laughed.

"You will grow and get to understand things better like I have", she simply said. Betso processed her advice, then fell asleep right on the floor.

Hours went by and she finally woke up, then she got up and walked to the kitchen to go make something to eat. When she passed by Lwa's door, it was wide open and she saw him sleeping on his stomach. Lwa never leaves his door open. She walked in and he got up.

"Hawu. Kere o robetse" (I thought you were asleep), she mentioned and he heaved an exhausted sigh.

"Since when do you leave the door open?"

"I couldn't sleep. I still can't. There's something in here", he informed and rubbed his upper arms, evidently feeling cold.

"Something... like what?", Betso asked as her heart began racing in fear. It was bad enough that a man was killed in that house but for Lwa to be feeling 'things' at that hour?

"Yeah, when I was asleep, I felt like someone was standing over me, a man"

Fast drums began playing in Betso's heart.

"Could you see his face?"

"No. When I try to open my eyes it feels like my eyelids are glued together"

"Ke segateledi. Don't worry about it okay?" (It's called sleep paralysis), she assured and hugged him. She tucked him in and sat there till he fell asleep. She then quickly walked out and went to her bedroom to change. She didn't bother letting Muzi know where she was headed. She drove out so fast even a madman was going to applaud her for her speed. When she got to the place, she parked outside and disregarded all the fear she had of the dark. Bridgette used to speak a lot about her sangoma and how he helped her get rid of ischito that she got from Mandla and his cheating ways. She remembered the route because she once had to fetch her from there. When she got to his doorstep, she knocked so frantically that he came running to see who was at the door at that time of the night.

"Excuse me. I am so sorry for arriving this late, but I really need your help. I am desperate please!", she begged and he wore a puzzled face.

"You will have to come back tomorrow..."

"Please help me. I am begging you"

He then scanned her face for a moment and stepped outside.

"Something dark is following you...", he mentioned. She stood and waited for him to spill all the beans. He continued scanning her, in the dark.

"Uke wadliswa?" (Have you ever been fed a love portion before?)

She quickly shook her head in disapproval. He stopped talking and waited for her to remember. It clicked. She then told the story of the handkerchief and the transferred spell in missing puzzle pieces. Her brain was too fuzzed up to construct a coherent sentence. He squeezed the sides of his head with the bottom of both his palms, in distress.

"You will honestly have to come back tomorrow. I can't see these things properly"

"Just tell me what you see...", she was too desperate to just leave emptyhanded.

"Idliso leli... the lady who was supposed to take your husband... I see her baby... your husband's baby", he said as he tried to pull all the puzzle pieces together.

"Bongiwe?", Betso was completely mystified. What was this man talking about?

Chapter Seventy-Eight

The brain has a disreputable tendency of malfunctioning whenever the imperil of stability in one's life shows its venomous head, when it slithers into the tender parts of the frontal cortex, twisting around the ability to think objectively and suffocating the life out of all reason.

Betso stood in front of the healer, dumbfounded and obviously defeated. She was too tired for new skeletons, too tired for any new hidden closets. She felt the crap had to stop at some point, it needed to resign

"What do you mean Bongiwe is pregnant with my husband's baby?", she questioned with a sharp eye. The sangoma still had his answers scattered and was trying to produce a clear picture in his head so he could respond. Her patience bars went flat. Something in her spiked and realization hit, then fury took hike. She marched off with shut ears as the man tried calling her back. There were only two people she felt she should've been talking to at that moment.

"Sisi?!", he was still trying to call her back. She recklessly drove off. When she got home, she made sure her fast legs delivered her in front of Muzi. He was still in his study with his head laid back on his chair, having his third glass of whiskey for that night. He stuporously raised his head and slightly wheeled his office chair back when she walked in.

"Ugijimiswa uba?" (Who's chasing you?), he asked with interested anticipation, the glass still in hand.

"Please just tell me the truth. That's all I want from you", she uttered apprehensively as she stood in front of his desk that shone responsively to the lamp on top off it. He stood up and unhurriedly placed the glass down – confused.

"What's going on? Where are you even coming from?", he enquired, noticing the change of clothes.

She got herself to take a deep breath while her hands rested on her waist. She didn't want it to be true. She couldn't imagine it being true. He went around the desk and stood in front of her, then placed his hands on both her shoulders.

"What is on that beautiful mind of yours? Let me in", he prodded. She wasn't even sure how to structure her question. She was more unsure of wanting to know the answer to these scrambled pieces of the query. She eventually decided to cut the pumpkin in half. She looked him in the eye and brought her clasped hands to her mouth.

"Are you having an affair?"

Muzi drew his head back for a second before he chortled.

"Angizwa?" (Pardon?), he asked with that entertained yet confused scowl on his face.

"Are you cheating on me Khumalo? Are you having an affair noBongiwe?", she reiterated for emphasis.

"Where is all of this coming from? That's the first thing I want to know", he mentioned and folded his arms.

"Is she having your baby?", she proceeded with the interrogation. She couldn't quite read his face to gauge for the truth.

"Now that's absurd. Uwuthathaphi wonke lombhedo mamaLiwe?" (Where are you getting all this nonsense from?). He was beginning to feel the seriousness of whatever was going on in that room.

"Call her", she instructed with a straight face.

"Yes. Call her right now", she could a little fire igniting in her chest. The more he spoke was the more she felt like he was ducking and diving.

"I am doing no such thing. You need to sleep. Let's go", he said and tried to take her hand. She yanked it off and gave him an icy stare. He heaved an impatient sigh.

"I am not cheating on you. I've never had an affair. There is nothing going on between me and Bongiwe. If she is pregnant, then it is not my baby she's carrying. Let's go to sleep. I understand that you have had a pretty stressful day my love"

She continued standing there as she processed everything. That healer didn't know anything about her life before she took an impromptu trip to his house. Everything he said sounded spot on till he got to the uncertainties. He also had zero reason to lie.

"I'm now starting to wonder what motivated her aunt to try and bewitch you", she mentioned.

"We're going back there?", he jabbed back rhetorically.

"Muzi if you're cheating on me, I swear—"

"I AM NOT CHEATING ON YOU!", he snapped, then regretted it. He took a deep breath as he pinched his nose bridge.

"I am not cheating on you, okay?", he tried to assure in an audible whisper, calmly this time.

"Can you sleep in the guest bedroom tonight?", she politely kicked him out.

"What happened to my bed?", he questioned sarcastically.

"Never mind. I will", she said and turned to walk away. He was quick to grab her wrist.

"None of us is sleeping anywhere else tonight. You can't drop bombs and run. Hell, you just accused me of cheating!", he said as she repeatedly tapped her foot on the floor as a calming mechanism.

"I'm the one dropping bombs? I went to see a sangoma today"

"Well that sangoma of yours is on drugs. I know I'm not the best husband in the world but please just trust me on this one"

He said and immediately saw that Betso wasn't having it.

"Okay, okay. if it will take me asking her to calm you down then I'll do it", he said as he took out his phone, leading the way to the couch. "I'm starting to think you're the one that's pregnant the way you're acting...", he mentioned and never looked in her direction to receive the death stare, even though he knew it was there. He sat down and dialled Bongiwe's number. He put her on speaker as Betso waited on her feet with her arms folded, waiting to be proven right so she can pack up even her torn socks and leave. She genuinely felt like Muzi was hiding something in that dark vault he called his chest. The phone rang for some time before she could pick up.

"Hello?", she got the phone.

"Unjan?" (How are you?), Muzi asked with a bored voice and ran his palm down his squiffy and exhausted face.

"I'm okay how are you holding up?", she said with care. Muzi raised his head to Betso, who was still not backing out of that stunt.

"I'm okay. Are you pregnant?", Muzi being the man that he is, bluntly asked even though felt all of that was unnecessary. Bongiwe went quiet for a moment, trying to digest the moment. She was also confused.

"Are you discussing me with your wife?", Bongiwe took offense and said, referring to Gugu. She's had enough judgement from her family about her unconventional ways of conceiving. She felt she didn't need one from Muzi, who had no other business with her apart from being her colleague. Betso's ears were raised, wondering

why Bongiwe would speak about her if she indeed had no thing going on with her husband. The thing about expecting to see or hear certain things is that, your brain is going to find them in places where they don't exist for its own satisfaction.

"Okay this was a bad idea—", Muzi tried to extinguish that conversation before it went up in moral-engulfing flames.

'Look, I know your marriage is rocky and unstable but don't use me as masking tape. I don't appreciate you discussing my business with her. Our relationship is strictly—', Betso immediately saw red before her brain could process the "professional" tail of that conversation. She was already at the door. Muzi cut the call and followed her out. All Betso heard was the expected behaviour of a mistress in an arrangement with no strings attached.

"Baby?!", he yelled before catching her by the waist from behind.

"How could you?", she asked before wiping both drops of tears off her cheeks.

"Ngempela ngiyadideka mina manje. Le sangoma sakho--" (I'm getting confused)

"Really?! You're gonna pull out that card where you act confused and cry foul because of your own cheating ways?!"

"He lied to you baby. I don't know why but you ran into a scam. This is the exact reason why we don't consult with random people"

"I need to sleep", she mentioned before leaving him in the middle of the passage. Muzi saw it fit to just let her go in his defeat.

...

Everyone was enjoying their time there, except for Manqoba. He eventually agreed to tag along to what Sandile referred to as 'A grown-up chillas'. The vibes were pleasantly low and refreshing. The music was jazzy and calming amidst a soft cold breeze. It was held at one of Sandile's friends' house, one of those friends who refused to commit and hosted something every second week. Before Manqoba picked him up, Sandile was already getting sloshed at his place. He had the party started way before arriving at the official destination. Manqoba held the company of another guy by the name of Loyiso at the event, who was also bored and distant as he was. They were busy discussing livestock imports and rare breeds in the cousin's disappearance. Two hours into the event, MQ felt a soft tap of zero violence on his shoulder. He swallowed the drink in his mouth

before turning to see who it was that was requesting his attention. An almost familiar, gently smiling face met his sight.

"Hi", he greeted as he stood up like the gentleman he is. Nosi greeted the other guy she found MQ seated with before greeting Manqoba. She was holding on to the handles of her small bag with both her hands.

"Hi there", she greeted Manqoba. He bent a little to place the drink on the small round table on the ground.

"Not to be rude, but... do I know you from somewhere? Your face looks a bit familiar", he mentioned cautiously. She dropped her face and gave a breathy laughter.

"You saw me in the afternoon and you've already forgotten? I'm not as unforgettable as I thought", she mentioned jokingly, and he laughed.

"Usisi from the airport, right?", he said before smiling as well. She nodded. "Really is a tiny world", he added.

"Actually, your brother invited me here but now he's not picking up my calls", she mentioned with a bit of vex in her tone. Manqoba was afraid to mention that Sandile might be busy having sex wherever he was. It was a bad habit of his. Whenever he would disappear from the gents, they knew that chances are, he's probably smashing a stranger.

"Uzobuya just now. Please take a seat ngimzame", (He'll be back... let me try him), he said as he offered her his seat. He pulled the crate nearby and sat on it as the other guy made the lady comfortable with snacks and drinks. She mentioned that she doesn't drink alcohol and the guy suggested that she drinks the plain dash with ice. Manqoba placed the phone on his ear and waited. Sandile was still not answering his phone. He assured her that he'll be back, and the three carried on with insignificant banter – about the weather, laughs about amadoda being sneaky and all. Manqoba was multitasking between the conversation and chatting to Sphehile via text. The fiancé alerted on her resignation from the chat and went to bed, that's only when he put his phone back into his pocket. However, amidst all these welcome distractions, Enhle was still occupying his mind. Nosi was still unsuccessful with each trial of trying Sandile on his phone. Manqoba stood up, obviously wanting to leave and he noticed she began feeling uncomfortable. It was easier making conversation with him than the other guy, who was more of an accessory in that setup.

"It looks like your boyfriend stood you up. Asambe, lemme take you home", Manqoba stated and she mentioned that she'll call someone to fetch her.

"And he's not my boyfriend. We're just friends, she emphasized.

"Asambe" (Let's go), Manqoba insisted with a tone that suggested he wasn't going to ask her thrice. She stood up and pulled her white tightfitting dress down. They said their goodbyes and walked to the car.

"So... where am I taking you?", he asked as he provoked the ignition.

"Westlane", she informed.

"Uhlala ema suburbsini?" (You reside in the suburbs?), he asked and took a quick glance of her. In that short second, he noticed how gorgeous she actually was. She nodded responsively.

"Where do you stay?", she asked curiously.

"Around...", he said and gave a smirk. He wasn't in the mood to be speaking about himself. She laughed.

"What do you do?", she continued picking at this book that was insisting to keeping itself closed, the handsome book that was busy driving with patience next to her, the book with a fresh cut and clear dark skin.

"Things"

She chuckled.

"I'm realizing now that I don't even know your name. I could be in the car of a serial killer for all I know", she said and continued laughing.

"Well, that would be recklessness on your part", he said and pressed the window fully open. She sucked her teeth nonchalantly and looked away with a smile.

"Call me Manqoba, or Nathi", he gave her options.

"I'll go with Nathi", she said in a soft tone he couldn't quite grasp. He looked to her and saw a seductive smile.

"May I ask why?", he questioned and took his eyes back to the road ahead.

"I don't know. It's more 'moanable' ", she flirted audaciously, and he scoffed – somewhat impressed.

"I sense there's a lot of discoveries to be made behind this baby face", he teased and continued driving.

"I don't have a baby face", she chuckled.

"You do. Even your voice is childish", he mocked, and she shot out a laugh before telling him to turn left. She continued giving directions till they got to her place. He stepped out of the car and admired the neighbourhood. The moon was taking its shift for night duty.

"This is a beautiful house. It's small and nicely intimate. You stay alone?", he complimented as he walked her in.

"Thanks, my dad bought it for me. I live with my big little sister, who's not here at the moment. Who do you stay with?", she questioned. Her tone suggested she was fishing for something. He laughed.

"Isn't it obvious?", he asked as he flashed his ring finger in the air. She laughed as well.

"A girl has to make sure. Happily married men are in bed at this time", she said while opening the door.

Manqoba took note on the emphasis on 'happily'. He made a conscious decision to pay no mind to her. He stopped walking and said, "You're home", alerting that he was about to leave. She learned in for a hug to thank him and he obliged with one hand on the small of her back.

"Are you okay?", she empathically asked.

"Why do you ask?", he casually said.

"You've been, I don't know... looking kinda stressed the whole night though you almost did well in hiding it"

He scoffed.

"I'm fine", he lied. She gave him a suspicious look. He laughed. Her cologne was feminine and intoxicating. It wasn't a night scent – it gave him auras of autumn.

"I don't want to talk about it" – Manqoba.

"What do you wanna do?", her voice delivered this question in a tone he felt was inappropriate, but he also didn't mind it. A part of him that was growing hxnry didn't mind it. Her lips graced his with their supple and soothing presence. He felt a whiff of strawberry, which he concluded to be the balm he saw her using in the car. The kiss was a bit awkward the fist few seconds but it got easy as they went.

"Are you sure you wanna do this?", he asked mid kiss.

"I don't know. I've never done this before...", she answered, and they continued kissing in front of the slightly open door.

"What?"

"Sleeping with a stranger"

They were kissing and conversing at the same time.

"I just, I am finding it hard to resist you right now", she whispered as her hand travelled his chest and side. He picked her up and walked in, then closed the door with his foot. He navigated his way in the dark and saw the kitchen table. He placed her there as the kiss got heated, heating up sensitive parts of both their bodies. Her skin was soft, hydrated and moisturized. This reminded him of Enhle in a peculiar way.

"Wow, I've never...", she was running out of breath. He gave her a chance to inhale.

"You've never...?", he asked as he brushed her lower lip with his thumb.

"I've never done it like this before"

"I don't understand?"

"It's always on the bed"

He smiled and went back to devouring her thick lips as his hands travelled into her dress.

"Sounds like you've had your fair share of boring sex. We need to do something about that...", he dared and sucked on her lip. He made sure she laid back on the table and shifted her thong to the side. He pulled her legs apart and pulled her closer towards him. He began exploring her with precision, his finger soaked in her slippery juices. He worked her sacred chambers until she couldn't keep still anymore.

"Mm this feels so good", she moaned out loud. She had her first orgasm and somewhere along that, his senses came back. He pays attention to a woman's body when he's serious about giving her an experience she could write to her bestie about. In that moment, he somehow got distracted and knew. His head was suddenly not in it. She noticed this and sat up.

"What's wrong?", she asked with concern. He looked at her once and gently pulled her head towards him, kissing her goodbye.

"I have a lot on my bed right now and this is not going to fix it. I need to go but do me a small favour?", he said. She grew more concerned.

"Sure...", she said, doubtfully.

"Don't be sitting in this house thinking you've turned me off or some shxt like that", he said and kissed her big, round and exposed forehead. Something about what he said made him fall in love with her even harder. It was at first sight, but it was fast taking a hike.

"Am I gonna see you again?", she asked, and he sighed.

"I'll call you", he said and lifted her off the table. "Come lock the door", he instructed as he led the way.

...

The next day, Melokuhle's phone rang in the morning after his bath. He realized it was his father and answered cheerfully.

"Dad?"

"Bafana, ugrand?", Muzi asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine I guess. How are you?"

"I'm good boy. Exams are starting on Monday. Are you ready?"

"Not quite but I'm ready for the one I'm writing on Monday", he assured.

"That's what I want to hear. Do the same with the rest ayt? Should I get you a tutor?"

"Nah, I'm good. I've just been slacking with studying. I've been feeling a bit demotivated lately"

"Ugcine nini ukuykipha inyongo?" (When last did you clean out your bowels?)

"Yoh the last time you made me do it. That shxt is painful", Melo complained and Muzi laughed.

"Kuyashisa phela manje boy. You're bound to feel all types of lethargic and lazy if you don't do your part in order to be productive. Do it and get it over and done with, before you collapse in the exam room. Inyongo is just not good for your productivity nje" (Excess bile...)

Melo sat down on the bed.

"I hear you dad. I do"

"Ikuphi intomb'yakho?" (Where's your girl)

"Which one?", Melo teased and laughed. Muzi followed.

"Angeke ngisho lutho yazi mina, yazi ngeke ngikhulume?" (I'm not gonna say shxt), Muzi expressed defeat and Melo exploded in laughter.

"Ngiyadlala, uyaphila" (I'm kidding, she's fine)

"Remember what I said bout girls right? Focus"

"Yeah yeah, but can I ask you a question tyma?"

"Shoot"

"Is it possible to love two people at the same time?", Melo enquired and Muzi took a moment to process his question.

"I'm no expert my boy but with my experience, yes. You can love two different people at once but it's never equally or the same. They're different, meaning they have different things to offer. In conclusion, ungas'shayi isthembu emjolwen ngoba ngizokubulala" (Don't date multiple people cause I'm gonna kill you)

Melokuhle laughed and asked why not.

"It will complicate your life. You already have a lot to deal with, ngapha you want to do medicine, a very demanding course. It just won't work my boy. Give girls minimal attention. Entlik choose one who makes you really happy and take it from there"

Melo smiled.

"How do I know?"

"Your heart decides for you my boy"

There was silence as Melo thought about what his father said.

"Now go study and stop asking me about women. Women are not going to pay your bills. If they do, I will disown you", Muzi said and Melo shot out a laughter. He could sense the loving smile that accompanied his dad's voice.

Manqoba knocked once and walked in. Melo said bye to his dad and they cut the call. He could just see that MQ had something to discuss with him by the look on his face.

"Ntwana", he greeted with a fist bump before sitting beside Melokuhle.

"You good?", Melo asked. MQ sighed.

"There's something I need to tell you"

Melokuhle listened attentively.

"There's no simpler way to say this so I'm just going to blurt it out. I've gathered that you know Mthokozisi and that the two of you used to be friends. I am going to need you two to solve this stupid bad blood you have going on because you're about to live in the same house. I am not going to be breaking out boy fights, ngimdala kabi for lowo mdlalo" (I'm too old for that)

"You lost me at us living in the same house. Why would Mtho come and live here? Did his house burn down or are you adopting him?"

Manqoba heaved a sigh.

"He's coming to live here because he's your brother – blood brother. Mthokozisi is your father's eldest son"

Melo felt his brain getting a bit frothy from the confusion.

"Hol' up. Mtho is what now?"

Chapter Seventy-Nine

It is not every day that childhood enemies turn out to be blood brothers. It is definitely not every day where you lose one brother and shortly gain another. Melokuhle sat on the bed hoping Manqoba would come back with a chirpy scream saying it's a prank and that there's a hidden camera somewhere in that room, instead he was left dishevelled and confused. He led his hands to the back to secure some balance, then brought them back up and scoffed to himself. It was a way for his mind to expel some of that crisp shock. It wasn't the kind of laughter that suggested that there was a comedian in the room, but rather it was an expression of failed brain processing. He was failing to understand the why and how. He decided to get up and carry on with his day. If anything was to materialize out of all this labyrinth, he would wait to see what it would be instead of overthinking himself into a headache. He packed up his books and left for the community library, where he was going to prepare for the exams that would most likely determine his fate. When he took a moment that was supposed to be short to check the time, he noticed a text from his mother, asking him how studying is going. A little tingle floated in his heart, travelling through all the right neurotic channels to the muscles responsible for his smile. He enjoyed this, this thing of having his biological mother actively around, in his life. There was definitely something about this fact that reassured that things do collapse but they have the potential of being put back together again; that pawpaws do hit the fan but when the orange mess splatters on your face, your mother will lovingly clean it up; that even though it won't be every time where things turn out okay, your mother's hugs will always envelope your broken heart with all the right and required warmth. A short moment took to briefly reply to a mother's love turned to unintentional nap. He was swept off to an all too familiar place like sea litter getting washed onto land. He felt himself walk onto the spot him and the late Busi had marked as their love site, as their own personal spot. It was normal day just like those in their lived past. The routinely hug was exchanged followed by a lengthy kiss that stirred abhorrence in the passer-by adults.

"You cut your hair? You look gorgeous"

His compliment was met by a shy giggle. He cupped her chin and raised his face up towards his.

"I'm serious. You look breathtakingly beautiful", he went on. She stole a kiss from his lips and said, "Ngiyabonga". He enjoyed those, the quick stolen kisses from her. If he didn't receive one, he already knew something was emotionally wrong with her. They were such a common tradition in their relationship that she even did them in public. He never minded any of them; he in fact, enjoyed them. Even when they dipped him into trouble with the other girls he'd be messing around with. When he met Busi, it was at a period where it was as if he'd recently discovered that he had a penis and wanted to test it on everything that would consent to see what it is for. Being the handsome prince who happened to be one of the rich boys did not help this stage of his life with shxt. It was as if he was on dating steroids. He caught a disease and infected Mxolisi with it by a single sneeze.

The short moment he shared with Busi felt all too realistic to only be just a dream. When he opened his eyes back into the real world, he hated himself for it. He felt he shouldn't have allowed her to get away. According to him, that was a dream meant to last for a couple of hours since forever wasn't an option. A heavy feeling of plain sadness replaced all the fulfilment he was experiencing a couple of minutes ago as he sat and processed what had just happened – when his conscious mind had to accept that it was only just a dream. He'd longed to see her again; he was happy about that part. However, what maddened him was how much of a tease it felt like. It was at that moment where he realized that he still found her demise unacceptable, that his healing journey was not even on the on-your-marks phase. He ran his hands down his face in minimum frustration and stood up to get something to do down all the resurrected hurt he felt abrasive against his throat.

In one of the other rooms, Manqoba sat on his bed and dialled his brother's number. It rang for some time before Muzi got it.

"Bafo", he answered.

"Mfa' ka baba. Zithini?"

"So so. Uright wena?", Muzi said and sounded as if he was settling down somewhere. His hastened breathing gave away the fact that he was exercising prior to that call.

"Where is Evelyn?", Manqoba shot straight to the point. It had been lingering in his head and he finally decided to bring it down. Muzi choked on the water he was drinking. Manqoba caught him off guard.

"Ngazile. What have you done Mbulazi?", Manqoba questioned with an exhausted and spent voice, almost sounding inaudible.

"I really have no idea what you're talking about", Muzi kept his composure and denied everything with an unruffled voice.

"She asked one of the drivers to take her to your place. Why is she not yet back if you really don't know where she is?"

"I don't know what you're trying to accuse me of, but nobody arrived here with a driver. Maybe she changed her mind mid-way"

Manqoba could feel the exhaustion rising like suppressed bile. That whole interrogation threw him back to the time they were young and Muzi kept denying that he was the one who had killed the cat Evelyn had newly adopted. His mother took his word because it was religion for her to believe that Muzi was a darling, but

Manqoba never bought any of his pretentious oath. With the right amount of pressure from the big bro, he finally got fed up and confessed. Your enemy's enemy is your friend, right? Not with Muzi. He hated cats the same way he did snakes. He couldn't stand them and living with one in the same house everyday did not seem like a romantic nor appetizing idea to him, so he killed it. His mother adored Ziggles the cat but Muzi still drowned him with zero repentance.

"Muzikayise, I hope for all our sakes that you've done nothing to anger abaphansi. Bafo I am personally tired of putting out fires" (...the ancestors)

Muzi sighed before taking in greedy gulps of his water. Manqoba realized he was wasting his time.

"I asked Mthokozisi to come live with us la endlin. Manje ke, simenzela nini umsebenzi?" (When are we performing the ancestral ceremony for him?), Manqoba poked at the issue that's been kept behind a dark corner, avoided with obvious intention. Muzi did not reply.

"Phakamani, are you listening to me?"

"Uthini?" (What are you saying?), Muzi asked with deliberate detachment. Manqoba sighed, loudly. He was getting tired of his brother's bullshxt.

"I said, I arranged for your son to come live with us"

"That's your house isn't it?"

"He's your son! You know good and well that asililahli igazi lethu" (We don't abandon our blood)

"Bafo, I really have to go", Muzi dismissed and immediately cut the call. He sat on the gym chair in frustration, slowly running his hands over the top of his head right to the back of his neck. Betso walked in, wearing skimpy silky pyjamas she had slept in the previous night, the night when she kicked him out of their bedroom. He raised his head and watched her approach. He didn't know what to expect between an apology and an accusation. He grabbed the black towel that he'd carelessly placed on the lengthy leather chair he uses when he lifts his weights. He wiped his sweaty neck and bare chest. The closer she got, the clearer he could see that she'd been crying. Her eyes were all reddened and swollen.

"Why are you doing this to yourself?", he asked before consuming another mouthful from his transparent water bottle.

"It wouldn't make so much sense if it wasn't true", she stated. They shared a brief mutual stare before he said, "Woza la sthandwasam" (come here), he pleaded as he placed the half empty bottle on the floor.

"No", she firmly said.

"No?", he prodded with an elevated brow. She shook her head to confirm her answer.

"That man didn't know I was coming to him. He had no reason to lie. He also couldn't have been that accurate if he wasn't right"

Muzi stood up

"I have no feelings for Bongiwe and I have never slept with her. Angisazi is'Sepedi nom isTswana sthandwasam otherwise I'd explain this to you in a language you will clearly understand"

Betso sighed before dragging her feet in the manner that an African grandmother would despise. Muzi just watched her as she went to sit behind him, back-to-back.

"Why do you sound so believable?", she lowly asked, her voice reeking of exhaustion. Muzi turned in her direction so he could hug her from behind, while seated. Her pushed the chunk of hair out of the way and kissed the back of her neck.

"Because I am telling the truth. Stuff like this barely remains hidden, at least not forever. Let's go consult, together ke"

Betso took a few seconds to think about it.

"Where?"

"At the same man you went to the first time. I wanna ask him what brand of drugs he smokes and if his dealer is South African", he said and Betso laughed.

"Okay, but don't get there and start being yourself", she said. He laughed lightly.

"What do you mean by me being myself? Nginjan kant mina?" (How am I?)

Betso chuckled.

"Uyazazi ukuthi unjan. Ungafiki umhlukumeze loya baba" (You know yourself. Don't get there and start harassing that man), she spoke with her hands over his, which were around her stomach.

"Mm I love it when you speak Zulu to me Mrs Khumalo", he lustfully said as he created a trail of kisses from her neck down to her shoulders, the last kiss connected to the next by his warm breath. She felt it. She felt each and every one of them. Every touch on her soft skin by his warm lips activated things in her – it stirred up sleeping emotions and this was evident in her change in breathing. She let go of herself under his control and he caught her. His hands were busy massaging her breasts over the silky material that covered her loosely – breasts that were longing for his touch. He enveloped them with his masculine yet very gentle hands and massaged as his lips continued embracing the contours of her upper back and shoulders. His growing erection prompted him to speed up, but he made a conscious decision to do the exact opposite. He wanted to take his time with her, to be artful in distressing her. Slowly, he pulled off her top off her body. He raised her hand and extended his trail as he stood up so he could be in front of her. He made her stand and placed both his hands on the small of her bare back. She had a persistent scent of cocoa butter. She led her lips to his and ignited a burning kiss between the pairs. She got on her knees and pulled down his gym shorts, then followed with his underwear. She lightly licked the tip with a naughty smile on her face.

"Freak", he remarked and smiled as well. She laughed before getting down to real business. Her hand became a delegate in attending to the dxck as she took the ballz in her warm mouth. She later switched and took the rod her mouth. She could taste him and she enjoyed it, so much that she wasn't sure if she did this for her own pleasure or his. She knew she was doing everything right when he threw his head back and started groaning.

"Fxxck I'm bout to come", he deeply groaned as she fucked her own throat with his cxck while she held on to both his bxtt cheeks, gagging on the rock-hard rod. She depthroated when he felt he was on the brink of exploding and he shot it all down her throat, hyperventilating in between pleasure-filled moans and groans.

"Yesses. You brought you're A-game today huh?", he commented as he tried to catch his breath, picking her up. She wrapped her legs around his waist as he took off the clothing that was resting at his feet. They continued kissing as he walked to the bar he uses for pullups.

"Can you hold on to that for me?", he whispered with a naughty smile pasted on his face. She laughed.

"I'm tired, I'm gonna fall", she said.

"I'll support you", he assured. She knew he wasn't going to take any no for an answer. She held on with both hands and he placed her thighs on his shoulders.

"Are you okay?", he asked, and she nodded.

"Can I dig in now?"

She nodded again before giving a breathy laughter. The bean in her privates was pulsating for attention. He led his head into the cave, and she sighed of pleasure the moment he started exploring her with his tongue. He lapped up all her anticipatory juices before sucking on her clxt. Her kept applying pressure with his tongue as his fingers helped to part her lady lips for more surface area. When his tongue went deep into her, his thumb was left to do all the work on the clxt.

"Mmmm...Muzi...That feels so good baby", she moaned out loud. She wanted to surrender; she felt she was close, but the ultimate pleasure was writing its own script and prolonging itself. He never gave up, he kept the same pace and technique until she reached her orgasm, which was intensely explosive. He held her with one hand and adjusted the bar, bringing it down with difficulty but he eventually managed. He then separated her legs and penetrated her moist opening hands-free as she held on to the bar. He went fully in and she felt him stretch her wet passageway. He then just stood there while his dxck fully occupied her vxgina and she released a moan in disapproval. She felt hot and bothered by this. She was ready to be drilled by him and he was taking his sweet time. He smiled provocatively as she tried to fxck him back. When she propelled her body forward, he pulled away but never pulled out.

"Wenzan?" (What are you doing?), he asked.

"You're frustrating me"

"Kdala ngik'bona ukuthi you're sexually frustrated sthandwasami", he teased.

"Now please just fxck me"

"How much?"

"Hard"

"No mercy?"

"Just a little", she said and they both laughed. He then separated her legs wider and said her wish was his command. He gave a powerful first thrust and she gasped. More of those followed and she began screaming with pleasure. After an orgasms-filled while, he emptied all his hot seeds into her. He sealed that session with a passionate kiss.

"Ngiyakuthanda makaLiwe and I would never do stupid shxt to break your heart. Please trust me?"

"I'm gonna leave you if I find out you're lying to me. You know that, right?"

"I would honestly love to see you try. It will be cute even although it's gonna be very unsuccessful"

They both laughed and he brought her down. She was unable to stand.

"Yin manje?", he mocked as he continued laughed. She was laughing as well.

"My legs are wobbly", she said as he continued trying to find her balance while holding on to his sweaty arm.

"But you're the one who said no mercy?"

"I said just a little. You had none"

They were laughing like two teenagers high on space cookies. He grabbed one of the clean towels and wiped the semen that was flowing down her jelly legs as she held on to his head.

...

Melo was standing in the kitchen during his study break, having cereal straight out the box while responding to his WhatsApp texts when Khanyi called his phone, asking to see him outside. He placed the box back into cupboard and left the house with a handful which kept him busy along the way. When he finally got to the corner of his yard,

"Hey you", he greeted before leaning in to hug her. She smiled back.

"Are you okay?", she asked with a troubled tone. Melo shrunk his face in confusion.

"Why do you ask? I'm fine. Weren't we texting just a few hours ago?"

"We were but... I don't know. You feel distant", she said.

"Maybe it's cause I'm preparing for exams...?", he stated in a manner that suggested that this is something she should be already having the knowledge of. She sighed.

"I don't know man. I just feel like it's more than that and I feel like I have the right to know. Is it because of that girl I once found you with?"

"Uqalile. I'm just very busy at the moment and I can't afford to divide my attention like I used to"

"Still, is there something going on between the two of you?"

Melo sighed, rubbing his face in exhaustion.

"Can't we talk about this when we're both done with exams?"

"And you expect me to be able to focus after saying something like that?", gloom befell her as she anticipated the worst. He took both her hands.

"No. All I'm saying is, I have no time for this right now. I'm in matric, you're in grade 10. You won't understand"

"My thing is, why can't you just say that there's nothing to worry about"

"Fine. There is something but it means nothing in terms of you and me"

She thought she heard wrong.

"You cheat on me and you come here speaking about in terms of? In terms of amasimba?!", she went berserk. Melo kept a straight face and never replied. She was waiting for an answer.

"Awusakwazi ukukhuluma manje?" (Now you can't speak?)

"Khanyisile?", he lowly called out. She kept quiet.

"Angiyona intanga yakho uyezwa?" (We're not age-mates)

She was breathing fire.

"That's besides the point. Makhosonke you are cheating on me!"

"Ukuthathaphi loko?" (Where do you get that?)

She gasped in disbelief.

"Lalela...", he said and massaged the back of her hands with his thumbs, trying to sweeten and pacify her. She looked away and expelled the angry steam in her breath.

"What I have with her has nothing to do with us. I love you and I'll always do. I kinda need you both in my life and I'm hoping none of you forces me to choose", he pleaded. She scoffed, then sent a flaming slap to his cheek.

"What the fxck Khanyi?!!", he was beyond horror-struck. That was the very first slap from a girl he'd managed to earn himself ever since he was declared born and healthy. She immediately regretted it.

"Oh my God Melo I'm so sorry...", she apologized with tears welled up in her eyes. He was still left agape with his hand on his burning cheek.

"Uphinde ungisize ungitshele ukuthi ukhalelani?" (You should help me by telling me why you're crying), he questioned. She continued to apologize profusely.

"If I was the one who did that you would've been crying, saying hee hee uzongibophisa angith?" (... you will have me arrested right?)

"Ngithe ngiyaxolisa nje baby" (But I said I'm sorry)

"This was happening for the first and the very last time syezwan? Otherwise, you'll leave this relationship as a quadriplegic"

She wiped her tears with no response. Melo shook his head unflappably and decided to forget about it.

"I know this is hurtful to hear but there was no easier way to say it. It doesn't change anything, ngiyak'thembisa. I meant it when I said I'm currently unavailable because of exams; it's not because of anybody else. When I'm done, we'll go on our usual dates and chill. Okay?"

"I don't want to share you mina Melokuhle"

"I wasn't exactly asking you either"

"How do you honestly expect this to work?"

"Leave all that worrying to me. Is it the first time you're hearing of a man dating two women?"

She calmly shook her head.

"Manje?", he questioned before gently grabbing her by the back of her confused head and kissing the upper front of it.

...

Lwandile wore a baffled face when he found a man dressed exactly like the guards do back at the royal house, seated in the TV room, watching TV with the most unbothered energy. He never even moved to see what new presence had graced the area. Lwandile took off his headsets and they hung around his neck. There was something strange about the guard just sitting there.

"Uhm... Hi?", Lwandile greeted. Only then did Lizwe turn in his direction with a bright smile.

"Hi"

Then, they just stared at one another.

"Have... have my parents seen you?", that was Lwa's polite way of asking him what he was doing there.

Lizwe nodded in prompt approval.

"O-kay. Can I offer you anything to drink?"

"Just juice please", Lizwe replied. When Lwa was about to move, Betso appeared from the staircase.

"Oh, mom's back. Let me go get that juice", Lwa said. Betso stopped typing on her phone.

"Baby, who are you talking to?", she asked as she looked around in the room to distinguish Lwandile's company.

"Hawu, he said—", Lwa was about to explain when he realized that his mother couldn't see Lizwe, who was sitting right in front him, still composed with a smile.

"Who said what? You're confusing me"

"Uhm, I was speaking on the phone mom I'm sorry", he said and pointed to the headsets on his neck.

"But Lwa, those have been on your neck the whole time I've been standing here", Betso stated, sure of her facts but still concerned.

"They're loud enough for me to hear him", he lied, also freaked out himself.

"O-kay baby. You should get enough sleep alright?", Betso suggested. She was sure he was hallucinating. Lwa nodded and left her there. Muzi walked in through the connecting door and threw his keys on the counter. He got to the stunned Betso and greeted her with a kiss.

"Why do you look like someone who has just seen a dinosaur?"

"I might as well. I think Lwa needs to see someone", Betso began filling him in.

"Someone as in, a therapist?"

Betso nodded. Muzi shrunk his face, communicating to her that she should stretch this view.

"I think I caught him speaking to someone I couldn't see"

"Wait. He was hallucinating?"

Betso nodded once more.

"I think, I think his brain is under the impression that Mxolisi is still alive", Betso sadly said. Muzi sighed, before taking a few steps that made sure to lead him to the couch. Muzi had to think of how to tackle this one.

"But maybe...", Betso had a lightbulb moment. She quickly went to sit beside him. "Maybe it isn't such a bad idea after all", Betso said and Muzi turned to her like she was at her most ridiculous.

"No, just think about it. Once in a while you hear of a kid having an imaginary friend. If Mxo can't live amongst us then it's something if he lives in Lwa's head", Betso continued trying to convince Muzi, and to some extent, herself too. Muzi still had that look on his face, waiting for her to snap back to her senses.

"I am just so tired of watching my child hurting over this. He is lonely", Betso continued.

"We all are hurting over Mxo's passing but you don't see me talking to furniture. He needs help before he starts going crazy, that's if he hasn't already"

Betso knew he had a point; she knew she was just reaching with this.

...

Manqoba was alerted of someone wanting to see him downstairs and he made his way there. When he finally got to the living room, he found a woman seated by herself on the couch. She was already offered tea. She greeted him before he sat down, and he assured that she could remain seated.

"How can I help sis wam?", he curiously questioned. She sighed heavily before she could start talking.

"I'm looking for my husband, uLizwe. He last left home days ago and his phone is off. I keep hoping that he will in walk through the door any day but nothing"

Manqoba felt a thick lump rapidly multiplying in mitotic phases, blocking his throat. He cleared it up and acted confused, which wasn't entirely an act because he was also genuinely confused but he couldn't exactly share his speculations with this woman.

"Which is Lizwe konje?", he asked.

"UBab' Gatsheni", she provided the clarity he sought.

"Oh I see. Hayi, I will definitely look into his disappearance. Please leave your number and I will keep in touch. When you get outside, tell one of the drivers I said to take you home. It's too late for you to be walking by yourself", he guaranteed his feedback and she was grateful. She left the house and he sat back on the couch, trying to piece everything together. He knew going to consult with Skhumbuzo would be a complete waste of his time. As he was sitting in there, Evelyn walked in, in the same set of clothing she left that house in. Manqoba stood up and walked towards her, alarmed.

"Ma, where have you been?", he questioned as he approached her.

"I couldn't do it. I couldn't run. Your father is on my neck. He wants me to confess everything before I die and I am running out of time", she spoke without pause.

"Wait. Haven't you done that already?"

She carried her hands on her head. What stood before Manqoba was a blurred image of Evelyn. She was nothing like what he knew her as. She lost a considerable amount of weight, her hair was dry and messy and the dark eyebags below her eyes could carry a couple of coins.

"Please sit down, so I can tell you everything"

Manqoba did as told. She began imparting the story of how she and Bayede killed Manqoba's mother, the same way she did with Muzikayise. She no longer cared about consequence. She knew her time was near: she couldn't bear the thought of dying with all that baggage. Manqoba felt a persistent ringing sound in his head that alerted that screws were coming loose. He could feel himself going crazy. He got up from his couch and strangled her. He wanted to make sure that she died on her confession spot. She was busy choking when Melokuhle walked and screamed for MQ to stop. That's the only thing it took for Manqoba to postpone Evelyn's date of death. He pulled away from her and she coughed out heartbreakingly.

"What the hell is going on in this house ngempela? All of you are changing so much it's crazy!", Melo screamed from fury and MQ spat on the floor before leaving the two of them there. He went to his room for a brief second before coming back down again.

"Please stop him...", Evelyn begged Melokuhle as she massaged her painful neck, almost inaudible.

"MQ! Baba!", Melo yelled, and it all fell on deaf ears. He then drove out the yard like he was rushing to save someone's life, while in fact, he was actually going to take it. He parked a bit far from Bayede's house and put on his gloves. He grabbed the walking stick his father had made a habit of using just for ambiance and left the car. He walked until he got to Bayede's yard and the dog began barking.

"Yey fuseg awume wena!", he snapped at it while pointing at it with the stick and it moaned sadly before retreating from threatening him. He continued to walk on, unfazed. Bayede opened the door to see what the noise was all about. Manqoba knew Bayede lived alone. All his kids had grown to have their own homes and they'd recently buried his second wife.

"Hawu, ndodana?", Bayede said, he was confused. Manqoba pushed him back in and closed the door. A young thing appeared from one of the rooms wearing Bayede's oversized t-shirt. Manqoba wanted to ask what a 20-something year old was doing with such an old bone but he kept it to himself.

"Please go get dressed and excuse us. Make sure you don't leave anything of yours behind. You're too young to rot in jail for stuff you know nothing about", MQ said and Bayede swallowed. Manqoba was obviously on a warpath. Even a donkey in the dark would've seen that he was ready to raise hell.

"What is going on?", Bayede asked. Manqoba just gave him a cold stare, waiting for the girl to leave.

The frightened petite girl shortly came back fully but incorrectly dressed. Her skirt was worn back-to-front and her shirt had its buttons in the wrong holes whereas she missed some. Her weave and heels? In hand. When she turned the doorknob,

"Hey?", Manqoba calmly called for her attention. She looked back with fear in her eyes.

"You saw nothing today. If you decide to act smart, I am gonna hunt you down and when I find you, funerals are going to become a common culture in your family. Are we clear?", he said, and she nodded before she could scurry off in the dark. Bayede took one step back as Manqoba took one step towards him.

"I considered you as family, as people who have my back, ngibusy ngihleka nani kanti nibulal uma wam?" (I laugh with you all whereas you killed my mother?", Manqoba hissed. Bayede stuttered incoherently as he tried to explain. Manqoba raised the walking rod and hit him on the jaw with its knob. Bayede's set of false teeth came out flying and fell into the full jug of water, causing the water to splatter all over the table cloth. He was still trying to explain when Manqoba attacked him with full force till he was on the floor. Bayede kept screaming for forgiveness as MQ beat him to a messy pulp, till he grew slightly unconscious. He then knelt behind him, held him by the neck and twisted his head, breaking a couple of bones. The sound that came from that confirmed it. He dropped Bayede to the floor and stood up. He stood over his dead body with contempt in his heart and disgust on his face, with his hands in his pockets...

Chapter Eighty

As Bayede laid dead and lifeless at Manqoba's feet, so was the meaning of family. He thought about it; him bludgeoning a man to death. He thought about how it stood insolently against all his father's teachings. He'd killed family in cold blood, but in the same manner that the word lost all meaning after Evelyn's confession, so did some of the teachings, especially those concerning the importance of family. Manqoba lacked faith in the justice system, hence his ill ways of bypassing it, and hence he always took the law into his own hands. The house had a fresh stench of its owner's blood, coupled with the famous smell of KFC takeout's, which Manqoba had to unimportantly realize were placed on the table. He left the house and walked back to his car. He got there and took off the blood-stained gloves and dropped them in a plastic bag he'd put in the car solely for that purpose. He wiped the stagnant drops of sweat from his forehead and reclined the driver's seat so he could rest. He closed his eyes for a couple of minutes before driving back home for a shower.

Melokuhle was sitting outside on the veranda next to his grandmother's abandoned bed of flowers. He never raised his eyes to his uncle, instead he continued typing on his phone as the cool night air surrounded him. Manqoba thought about walking right past him so he didn't have to verbally relive that incident, but the love he had for the boy guilt-tripped him into settling down beside him.

"Ntwana...", he greeted harmoniously. Melo turned his head towards him.

"What's going on?", he questioned, weapons down. Manqoba sighed and sat back against the wall.

"You're too young to understand my boy. What you saw—", he took a moment to gather a fathomable string of words. "You weren't supposed to see that". This somehow sounded strange coming from him. Muzikayise and Manqoba have always treated the boys like their peers. There was space for that reverent father-son relationship but they were never been made to feel like children.

"Am I officially part of a broken family? Is that what we've become", Melo probed and stared, anticipating an answer. Manqoba just continued shooting his sight into the dark sky.

"You can say that I guess", an answer followed by a big sigh.

"Do you still have my back", Melokuhle popped, out of the blue. Manqoba sat up.

"I will ALWAYS have your back ntwana yam",

"A boy had to ask", Melo added with a slight smile. Manqoba brushed his fade.

"A boy has to go study now", Manqoba advised.

"I did something stupid today", the boy confessed.

"Who's pregnant?"

Melokuhle laughed, igniting a chuckle in Manqoba's taut and stressed face.

"No one. I kinda broke my girl's heart"

"Did you do it intentionally?"

"I was just being honest, in an attempt to make things easier"

Manqoba laughed. "Let me guess, you made a careless comment about her weight?"

"I would never do that", he laughed.

"What did you do then?"

"I kinda told her that there's somebody else in my life"

"Well, better that than string her along whereas you don't want her anymore. Don't you think?"

"Yy-yea, that's the thing. I want them both", Melokuhle proceed with his confession.

"Hee!", Manqoba laughed out loud. Melo followed.

"What?" – Melokuhle

"You really are a Mbulazi you piece of shxt", Manqoba continued to laugh.

"It runs in the blood I guess"

"No. It doesn't. This some patriarchal shxt our forefathers imprinted into our culture because of greed and intentional commitment issues. We followed suit and some of us lost the love of their lives because of this recklessness"

"We're no longer talking about me here, right?", Melo gingerly said. MQ just huffed out a contrite laughter.

"She loves you. She'll come back"

"I lose hope as each day passes my boy. But back to you, as I've said before, you're still young. Some stuff will look cool to you but there's actually nothing impressive about them. Don't complicate your life like that"

"Can I ask you a very personal question?"

"Any time"

"Does this mean you love aunt Mbali more than you do aunt Sihle"

It took Manqoba a moment.

"Now that I'm forced to confront my demons, yea. I'd say so. I love Sphesihle but I am IN LOVE with uMbalenhle. Sphesihle is the kind of wife everyone expects me to have but Enhle is MY wife material. All of herself, her non-slaving-in-kitchen, manicure-rocking, cleavage-and-thigh exposing self. That's the love of my life and I feel stupid that it took her leaving for me to realise that", he said and Melokuhle couldn't help but smile at this sight.

"Let's find her then"

"How?"

"You're getting old. Airports use computer systems, don't they? Systems monitored by people. Everyone has a price. Find the specific place she went to, then deal with the trouble of checking every hotel there is to find there. Start with the five stars. You know her and class"

Manqoba laughed.

"It's worth a shot", Melo added.

"Trust me, I have thought about that but, what if she meant it by not wanting to be found?"

"You and dad taught me to never to be a coward. Practice what you preach", Melo said and picked up his phone, before walking back into the house.

...

Lwa spent the whole afternoon watching his back apprehensively. At the same time, he was worried that he was going crazy. How on earth could he see a person then people around him couldn't see? The anxiety was building up. He decided to fall on his knees and pray. He tried but he couldn't close his eyes for too long. He felt like something was standing over him as he bowed and shut his eyes. The darkness behind his lids grew darker and he shot his eyes open. There was nothing but him and his furniture in the room. He still felt then need to pray but he couldn't do it with his eyes closed; it was just too much to handle. He decided to do it silently in his heart. If God was indeed omnipresent and couldn't be barred by anything, He should be able to hear his silent prayers from then heart, right? He also wanted to tell his parents, but he wasn't sure what they would say. He continued with his prayer – asking for protection and guidance. Asking God to keep him sane if he was indeed going crazy. He was sure of what he saw. However, he wasn't sure of the reality of it. He prayed till he felt the anxiety and fear wearing off. Till he felt like God heard his cry and descended to keep him accompany. The coldness and apprehension he felt in his chest began to dissipate. God has proven to pay attention to him, that's why he ran in His direction whenever in times of distress, confusion and fear, to his redeemer, his keeper. He wondered why though. A lot of Christians had openly rebuked people of the LGBTQ community on the socials. He'd read hundreds of statuses that threatened him with hell for being the way he was; that insisted that there was no place for him in the house of Lord for as long as he doesn't "repent" and change his ways; change himself. He felt a shadow of bravery adorning him. He had locked himself up in the room since that incident and had his worried mother bring him food and water. A persistent voice in his head began compelling him to go check if that person was still there.

He got up from the bed and walked barefoot to the TV room. Slowly, carefully. Occasionally looking back and over his shoulder to see if he was behind him. To his surprising somewhat expectation, he found him in the same spot. His heart thudded against his rib cage, but he couldn't turn back now. Luckily, all the lights were still on. He could feel the hairs on the back of his neck stand, sweeping back and forth and calling upon goose bumps and all the chills that came with them.

"Hi", he greeted once again.

"Thank you for coming back", Lizwe said.

"Why though? Who are you and what are you doing here?"

"You're the only one I can speak to. You're the only one who can help me", Lizwe replied.

"Help you with what?"

"Freeing me. I need you to get my family to come collect my spirit here. I cannot live here forever. I am not at peace"

The goosebumps spread to the rest of Lwa's body.

...

The next morning, after realizing that Evelyn had made a run for it when he wanted to ask more questions; seek some more closure, Manqoba decided to call Muzikayise.

"Bafo?"

"Did you know?", he questioned in a calm tone. Muzi immediately knew what he was talking about. "I'm not mad. I just wanna know, did you know?"

"It wasn't my place to tell you bafo, the same way you couldn't tell me about my— ", something clamped his tongue. "My own flesh and blood", Muzi responded.

Manqoba scoffed.

"Are we even now?"

"Wasn't a competition"

Silence, then equal sighs.

"I have to go, can we talk about this later?", Muzi politely said. He couldn't gauge Manqoba's mood. He was borderline cool and cold.

"Sure"

"Are you okay?", questioned Betso, seated curiously on the passenger seat.

"When will it stop?", Muzi asked with eyes yearning for peace. Betso wasn't sure she wanted to know. By the looks of things, nobody died so she could afford to just comfort him from a place of complete darkness. She brushed his hand and he kissed the back of hers

"Let's go in", he said as he opened the door. They both stepped out the car. Betso had to stop her dress from hiking up her thighs due to the violence of the wind. They held hands and Muzi led the way. After they've exchanged pleasantries with the sangoma and were barefoot and seated in his hut,

"I was waiting for you to come back", he mentioned to Betso with a smile. She laughed anxiously, not knowing what to expect.

"I've apparently made a woman pregnant?", Muzi asked, diving into core of the matter that was keeping his wife awake at night. He was ready to tell him that he ran into the wrong one if he was a con artist.

"Yes. That is true in a sense but—"

"Yewen", Muzi was quarter to losing it.

"Baby let him finish", Betso said through gritted teeth. The sangoma laughed lightly. He understood the frustration but also, he wasn't the type to react nor retaliate.

"There is a woman who is pregnant with your husband's baby because your sister sold his seeds to these western institutions that make babies in an ungodly test tube manner"

"Huh?!", the couple shot out simultaneously.

"I was also confused, so I asked to be shown what exactly happened. All this started the last time you were hospitalized. The scope of my information ends here. Anything else you need to know, ask your father's child"

The drive home was dead-quiet, thought crushing one. When they finally parked in their garage, Betso decided to poke into that deafening silence. She shifted in a way that allowed her to comfortably face Muzi in the car.

"How are you feeling?"

Muzi exhaled loudly before throwing his head back, resting it on the car seat.

"Remember when I strangled you in my sleep?"

Betso nodded to indicate that she indeed remembered, after all, who'd forget?

"I thought it had everything to do with what I had found out about my mother and how she orchestratedd my— ", his tongue froze. He couldn't bear phrasing it like that. He couldn't say the R word. He could not acknowledge being a victim of such an act.

"It's okay baby. You can say it", she mentioned empathetically.

"Well, I dreamt of a nurse doing the same thing to me", he revealed. Betso said nothing, instead, he leaned in closer to hug him.

"You don't have to feel ashamed because of what happened to you. You had no control over it"

Muzi scoffed over her shoulder.

"These things don't happen to us baby and you know it"

"In fact, they actually happen a lot more than you expect"

"Ay, whatever", Muzi dismissed.

"What are you planning to do with the information we've gathered today?", Betso asked. They both knew what it implied; that Muzi had been violated twice. He wasn't quite himself. He seemed devoid of any strength.

"I don't know. I just know I need to sleep right now", he slowly, absentmindedly informed while staring into the speedometer.

"Let's go do that then", Betso said in solidarity and Muzi huffed a breathy laugh.

"You don't have to tuck me in. I'm alright, I'm just tired", he assured. Not wanting to smother him with excessive care to the point of actually irritating him, she said she had to do her weekly groceries and would be back soon. He kissed her cheek and left the car with his jacket in one hand, handling his phone in the other. Betso jumped over the gear and transferred her body to the driver's seat. No hospital sells groceries, but that's where Betso was headed. When she got to the parking lot, she went to the boot to get the jeans she keeps there as a changing alternative, along with other clothing items like shoes, including her emergency toiletry bag. She went back into the car to put on the pair of blue jeans and took off the dress, leaving the white camisole, just in case things got messy. She tightened the headwrap over her weave and left the car with a screwdriver she took from the glove box, placing it in her back pocket. A security guard was seated by the entrance. She asked if he could go get nurse Lehumo for her, at a price of course. This is South Africa, nothing is for mahala. She was seething with anger as she paced back and forth outside the entrance, waiting for him to come back with her.

She saw the two approaching, chatting away probably useless banter about long shifts and lunchboxes. Betso used this moment to level with the devil in her so she could calm down.

"Oh my God sesi! Hi!", Lehumo ran in jubilant spirits and threw her arms around her in excitement. If she was attentive enough, she would've felt how febrile Betso skin was from boiling with all that fury.

"I never thought I'd see the day important people in society like you come to see me", Lehumo mentioned. Betso wasn't sure if this was coming from a sarcastic or genuine place. Also, she didn't give a toss. She wasn't here for that. She faked a smile.

"Arg, I was passing by and thought I should come see my father's daughter. You know?", Lehumo giggled and exposed her dimples.

"Don't you want to maybe catch a smoke break?", Betso suggested to the guard, indicating the need for some privacy. He couldn't afford to say no to the generous lady. He took a corner and disappeared. Betso wanted to thrash Humo with a spiky smack but two colleagues of hers parked and got out of the car.

"So, how are the kids?", she asked in faux concern.

"They've grown so much. We should come visit you one day so they could see their aunty's mansion", Humo replied. The two doctors greeted the two humanely before walking past and into the lights of the hospital. Betso asked Humo to walk her to her car as they conversed.

When they got there, she slammed her against the wall. Humo tried to scream but Betso had the sharp tool to her neck.

"One nywee...", she threatened while keeping guard for who was coming.

"How did you get a hold of my husband's sperm?"

"Your husband's what?", Humo asked squeakily as Betso's hand was blocking her airways.

"Stop wasting my time. Your life is practically in my hands right now"

"I don't know what you're talki—"

"Humo otlo nnyela?!" (You will shxt yourself)

"Okay fine! I'll tell you I'll tell you", she succumbed to Betso's terrorization. The security guard walked back to his post, laughing joyfully on the phone. Betso quickly hid the screwdriver and let go of Humo. She fixed Humo's white work shirt to iron out any creases like the loving sister she pretended to be.

"Bxtch, I expect to see you at my house after your shift. I will be having you watched so don't trying anything stupid", she said with a smile that could've fooled anybody walking past. Humo nodded before marching off nervously. If something was done with that semen, she wasn't prepared to die alone; she was planning on exposing her accomplice. Betso waved the security guard goodbye, who enthusiastically waved back to the friendly, pretty lady.

...

Even in it's peculiar, extraordinary nature, it is one thing having to unearth that your husband's sperm got stolen, but also finding out that a sister you happened to have and forget about was involved in this God-awful underhandedness. Betso sat in a parked car by the corner of the hospital, wetting the material of her jeans that covered her thighs, with her forehead against the steering wheel. She allowed the tears to flow freely as she thought about everything that went wrong, including the fact Lizwe's demise that took place in the centre of her kitchen, right before her eyes. Never in every expired moment of her life did she ever think she would ever have to wrap up a dead man's body with refuse bags and duct tape, like she was sending off a package through a courier service. She always saw this act in movies and as the aloof and naïve wife of a ruthless man, she fleetingly, nonchalantly thought of it as something confined within the four corners of her screen, with no prospect of it becoming a lived truth. A stranger knocked consistently on her window to no avail. She just wanted to cry and be left alone to lodge her heart in her misery. The stranger eventually gave up and walked away. When she felt she was exhausted of discharging salt waters, she raised her head so she could find her phone. She put the phone on speaker as she waited for Tebogo to pick up the phone. She remembered the days where he was the one responsible for her safety while Muzi dealt with her stalker; the days where she accused him of murder and all turned out to be untrue. Unbeknownst to her, that was one of the rare cases where he hadn't ended a life. She began wondering why till Tebogo jumped on the phone.

"Eita", he answered. She sniffed away her tears before clearing her rheumy throat.

"Tebogo, hi. Ke Betso. I need your help"

Tebogo went quiet for a short moment.

"Err... What kind of help Mrs K?", he questioned in a clearly baffled voice.

"I need to have someone followed. Just for today after she knocks off", she went on.

"Mang?" (Who?), Tebogo asked and Betso cleared her throat in discomfort.

"Some so-called sister of mine"

"Eish, I'm in PLK at the moment wabo"

"Can't you get someone to do it?"

"Why don't you just ask MK instead? Unless...", he started ligating the disconnected threads together. "He doesn't know about this aker?", he asked and Betso sighed.

"Ah, ska chuna die deng. You know it won't end well"

Betso saw right there and then that Tebogo fast becoming a useless element of time-wasting. She cut the call and grabbed a bottle of water from the holder and finished it off. It did the bare minimum in quenching her thirst and extinguishing the flames of her stress. A few minutes later, a call from Muzi came through. A good portion

of her mind was already positive that the call she made to Tebogo was plainly a bad idea. Nonetheless, she still answered the phone but met the caller that is her husband with silence.

“Mkami?”, he prodded.

“Hm?”, she replied with zero excitement.

“Where are you and wenzani lapho?”, he questioned with a tone that alerted Betso that he already knew; somewhat soft, but warningly interrogative. Tebogo couldn’t wait to vomit this info, she thought to herself. She failed to reply. She was emotionally tired for any argument.

“Ngiyakcela, come home before you get hurt while fighting my battles. There’s nothing I can’t handle. Buya shandwasami”, he was solid in his plea. Betso retired from her quest.

“I’ll be there in a few”, she assured

“Ngiyabonga”

She had to expel some air and gather strength to get herself home. She turned on the radio and Lalah Hathaway’s ‘Angel’ began soothingly keeping her company as she took a slow, mind-cleansing drive back home. When she finally reached her destination, she found Lwandile sitting outside, facing away from her.

“Hi baby”, she greeted and Lwandile almost rocketed out of his chair. He placed his hand on his chest to pacify his highly frightened heart.

“Hao, I thought you could hear my footsteps, askiies”, she apologized as she visually examined him in concern. He seemed to be overreacting. He sat back down, and she sat on the chair next to his.

“Are you okay?”, she had to ask, with her hand offering warm, softly-squeezing comfort to his shoulders. He released a deep sigh.

“There is someone in the house”, he enlightened.

“Someone? Who?”, she asked as she shifted her behind around to get comfortable.

“A gh... a ghost mom. I spoke to him an hour ago. He says his name is Lizwe and he wants to go back home”, he proceeded and cold pangs of severe anxiety and apprehension sharply clamped onto Betso’s heart. Her ears disabled themselves after the mention of Lizwe’s name.

“Wait wait wait. What?”, she questioned in a hushed tone to ensure that her stressed mind wasn’t playing sick tricks on her. Lwa was also still trying to make it make sense himself. “Is that who you were talking to, the other day?”, she added. Lwandile nodded. When she realized that they had a much bigger problem on their hands than an imaginary twin friend, she got lost in the whirlwind of her depressive thoughts. She kept silently asking herself questions that her mind couldn’t birth the answers to.

“Mom?!”, Lwandile snapped, pulling the absent Betso back to earth.

“Hm?!”, she replied with her eyes ballooned out, alarmed.

“We have to find a way to get rid of him. Let’s call the family sangoma”, Lwa suggested.

“Did he tell you how he ended up here?”, Betso had to make sure. Lwandile shook his head.

“He didn’t, but the odd thing about him is that he’s always dressed like the guards back at home”, Lwa mentioned and Betso felt herself choke on an abundance of her own saliva.

“Where is your father?” – Betso

“You just missed him”, Lwa indicated and Betso stood up and dialled his number. She went away from Lwa and paced the grass as the phone rang.

“MakaLiwe?”

“Where are you? Lwandile is seeing Lizwe”, Betso shot straight to the point.

“I don’t think I follow. Lwa is what?”

“You heard me Mbulazi. Make your way back here”, she cut the call and violently scratched her scalp through her hair. She became certain that her grandmother’s warnings were actually true. She used to scold them whenever she would find them treading the earth on bare feet, claiming that they would step on and collect all the bad luck people shed in their everyday steps. Her life has proven more than once that she was born to prove that one can go through the worst and still come out alive. It always served her the old and ruined fish at the bottom off the barrel, wrapped in gold. The lemons she got served were ingredients for a tongue-burningly sour lemonade.

“Mom I know you’re worried but come sit down. You’re gonna make me dizzy”, Lwa pleaded unto dead ears. Betso continued biting the nail on her thumb, going back and forth like a sand delivery van.

...

While the bottom of Betso’s shoes ate the grass in their yard, Muzi walked the stairs to Bongiwe’s place; he felt the elevator was taking its time. He knocked once and Bongi got the door. She had been notified by security of his arrival.

“Mr K, come in”, she offered and he walked, browsing around the place and not saying a word.

“How can I help you?”, she asked as she led him to the couch in her pyjamas. He began scanning her. She was two times lighter and had gained weight.

Her energy made it obvious that she had put their last saucy conversation to bed. The very conversation that made him realise she was also innocent in this. Muzi sat down and calmly placed his phone and keys on the coffee table. His palm closed his mouth as his index finger went over his nose as he continued looking at her incredulously. It was Gugu’s last day at her place and she was upstairs packing her bags.

“Are you okay?”, Bongiwe’s concern was growing limbs.

“I don’t even know where to start”

“The beginning would be nice”

“See, somehow, there has been a mix up at the clinic where you did your IVF. The baby you’re carrying... happened to be mine”, Muzi explained. Bongiwe look at him like he had shaved off all his eyebrows and bleached his lashes.

“I am really starting to worry about you. Are you on drugs?”

“Bongi— “

“No. What are you trying to do? I didn’t even know that you’re a donor. It is not your profile I chose!”

Her rising fury was draining the last bar of his energy

“I understand that. I am not a donor. Remember the time I was in hospital? One of the nurses— “, he struggled to finish the sentence and swallowed the rest of the words.

“One of the nurses did what?”, she pinched her eyebrows in worry and curiosity.

“Let’s just say she had her way with me and harvested my sperm. It found its way to the clinic. I don’t know what happened there, but I know your eggs got inseminated with my seed”

Bongiwe dropped her lower set of teeth.

“Muzi that—, that is rape!”, she was in disbelief. Muzi shrugged while biting onto his upper lip and stared. Bongiwe pushed back her hair before saying: “Yoh”. Gugu plodded down the stairs and stopped when she realized Muzi was there.

“I know that this might be detrimental to your marriage, but I can’t promise you that I’ll abort this baby. It is too much to ask. I’ll stay out of your life and pretend that this never happened. I loved this baby from the day it became a tenant in my body and I can’t just get rid of it like it doesn’t matter, just because it’s yours...”, Bongiwe said with as much empathy as she could manage and Muzi fell back on the couch. Her hand began caressing her tummy.

“This is a mess”, Muzi stated. Gugu thought she was hearing things. A string of question marks began rotating in her head.

“Is that why you’re here? Do you want me to have an abortion?”

Muzi’s eyes travelled up to Gugu. He stood up.

“How long have you been standing there?”, he asked.

“Long enough to know that my best friend had an affair with my ex”, she mentioned as she took slow steps down the stairs”

Bongiwe stood up.

“Gugu, it is not what you think”

“Cliché”, Gugu mentioned.

“Honestly. It is nothing like what you think. What happened was—”, Muzi tried to explain. Gugu’s eyes were dead set on Bongiwe as she digested the betrayal.

“Don’t you have a wife to go home to?”, Gugu cut him short.

“Please don’t do anything crazy. I would never take your man and you know this”, Bongiwe begged as she stood up from the couch.

“Oh no honey. He’s no longer mine and this isn’t about him. It’s about the fact that I thought we were on the same page when coming to betrayal, but you clearly had a different memo. You even lied about how you got pregnant Bongiwe! Bxtch I trusted you?!”

“Mabuyi, cel’ uychlise umoya” (Please calm down), Muzi pleaded. Gugu laughed.

“You will never change, and I am so damn glad I got over you a**”, with that, she shot off and fetched her luggage. Bongiwe threw her hands in the air before dropping back on the couch.

“I wouldn’t suggest that you sit and relax like that. As much as she is your best friend, she’s my wife and I’ve gotten to know her like the back of my hand. She holds grudges and this will not end well”, Muzi warned and Bongiwe wore alarmed eyes.

“Come, I’ll drop you off at any place of your choice till she calms down”, he said and extended his hand to help her up. She quickly found her handbag and keys, and they left.

...

When Muzi arrived home, he found Betso seated with two women in their living room, all dead silent. One of them being Lehumo. The mere sight of her made him want to smash her head against the wall.

“Sanbonan”, he greeted with a raised brow. They greeted back.

“Baby. Can I see you in the kitchen for a second?”, he said and left, leaving no opportunity for any response. She followed him.

“Did I not say I have everything under control? What is she doing here?”, he questioned through gritted teeth.

“You need closure. Maybe if they tell you what happened you’ll be able to deal—”, Betso said with certainty.

“You don’t like my definition of closure, yet you bring this bxtch to my house. I don’t give a damn what she has to say. Baby, I’m trying to steer clear of spilling more blood. It’s probably the reason why everything is going wrong. If I don’t stop this shxt my kids are not going to live a normal life. I don’t want that”

Betso sighed as he made sense.

Lehumo’s companion appeared by the kitchen door.

“Mr Khumalo, I would like to apologize for the part I played in this whole mess. I undermined the consequences of my actions but please, I came here so I can explain myself. I cannot lose my job sir. I’m the sole breadwinner at home”

Muzi’s brow went even higher, creasing his forehead.

“What actions be those?” – Muzi

“See, the day the insemination occurred, I was under a lot of stress. I had just recently lost my baby daddy to a fatal car accident. When I was washing the sperm, I was heavily distracted and that led to me dropping the test tube samples to the floor. If Dr Benjie does not take any excuses for any incompetence. So, I remembered that Humo once asked me to store semen for her and keep it healthy. I then used it because I thought there was no harm that it could do because no one would know. Mrs Bongwiwe had chosen a black man afterall”, Lehumo was standing behind her as she explained.

“Lehumo, what was your aim in all this?”, Betso asked.

“I wasn’t thinking straight sis please forgive me”

“Just answer the damn question”, her accomplice, Kedibone was also getting impatient with her.

“I wanted to have his baby and Kedi was going to help with the procedure, illegally”

Betso scoffed. “And what exactly were you hoping to achieve with that?”

“I was gonna claim that I fell pregnant on one of his nights out. I used to see him at the bar chilling and drinking with his friends”, she carried on explaining, coated in humiliation.

“Hoping for child support”, Kedibone added on her behalf. Humo nudged her to stop filling in the blanks. Everyone went quiet. A frustrated Betso had both her hands against the kitchen counter.

“Please don’t press any charges”

“You’re pathetic. Get the fxck outta my house”, Muzi said before they bumped heads trying to find their way out.

“Lehumo...”, Betso finally said something. Humo turned back to hear what she had to say

“Sis?”, she answered. Betso threw a thrashing backhand slap across her face. Kedibone gasped on Humo’s behalf. Betso kept a straight face. Lehumo blinked multiple times, trying to send back the tears that were threatening her eyes.

“I’m sorry”, Humo mouthed and Kedibone held her hand so they leave.

...

After Manqoba received the news about Bayede’s death, he pretended to be as shocked as everyone else in the house.

“The cruelty of the person who killed him is dangerous. How can a person beat up an old man to death like that? I hope the police do him justice bandla”, Mam Nokwanda commented as MQ was getting himself a glass of water from the fridge dispenser.

“Mm, hayi. What can we say? We live in a truly cruel world”, he said and failed to express the matching emotion as he calmly drank from his transparent tumbler. Mam Nokwanda was still failing to process everything. She clapped once and went back to wiping the oven to resuscitate its shine.

Melokuhle appeared in the kitchen and asked mam Nokwanda if she had seen his calculator. Mam Nokwanda pulled it out of the big pocket of her apron and said: “You mean this one? The one you left on the table outside”, handing it over with a motherly smile. Melo laughed.

“Where would I be without you?”, he mentioned and kissed her cheek. She laughed and gently hit him with the tablecloth, commenting on how reckless he is. Manqoba was distant. Melo noticed this amidst the shared laughs with Mam Nokwanda.

“You okay?”, Melo asked. Mam Nokwanda excused them and claimed to have washing that she had to take down.

“I’m fine. Are YOU okay?”, MQ asked.

“I think I’m alright. He was family but we weren’t close”

Manqoba shrugged.

“Anyway, we’re welcoming Mtho into the family soon. How do you feel?”

“Am I supposed to be feeling anything?”

“Ntwana, Busi is no longer with us. I think it’s about time the two of you bury the hatchet, don’t you think?”

“It’s not only about that. I don’t like Mthokozisi and he’ll never take Mxo’s place. Stop getting your hopes up”

“No one is looking at him as a replacement though”

“Why did he have vumbuluk out of the blue when Mxo died? If it wasn’t for his existence Mxo would still be alive”

“Where do you even get that?”

“These walls have ears”, Melo said and left Mnaqoba there. When he got to his room, he found an SMS from Zamo, stating that she found their relationship to be destructive to her studies and that she wasn’t born to be a second option. He tried to convince her otherwise but found that she had blocked him on all social media platforms. What hurt the most was that he knew her, once she set her mind on something, there was no changing it.

...

After Lwandile relayed Lizwe’s messages to his father, in front of his mother, Muzi couldn’t help but feel a migraine roughly pulling on the muscles around his head.

“Is he still there?”, Muzi asked from Lwandile’s bedroom. Lwandile nodded.

“He’s always there. It’s creepy. I don’t remember the last time I slept well. Please find his family dad”

Both Muzi and Betso knew what this implied. It meant the secret was going to push itself from right under their feet and come out, sooner than later.

“Let me go ask him how he ended up here”, Lwandile said and stood up.

“Nooo”, both his parents went, at the same time. Lwa’s eyes suspiciously danced between both his parents.

“No?”, he asked. Muzi cleared his throat, Betso scratched her neck.

“Further talking to this person will harm you Lwandile, emotionally that is. I don’t think you will remain normal if you keep entertaining him”, they tried to talk him out of it but Lwa was a smart child, and he knew his parents.

“What are you hiding, mom and dad?”

“What makes you think we’re hiding anything?”

“I mean, I’ve been thinking about this a lot and, Lizwe says he died on the 14th. I was on the phone with you mom and you insisted I shouldn’t come home on that day. When I came back, everyone was acting weird, including the nanny. I’ve been trying not to let my thoughts imagination run away with me but nah. Something happened here and I wanna know what it is”, Lwa demanded. His tantrum bore no answers.

“Okay, I guess I could go ask the ghost downstairs since my own parents have normalized the art of lying”

“Your grandmother killed him!”, Betso shot out, pressured by panic. Lwa drew his head back.

“What?”, Lwa had to make sure. Muzi grew tired of everything spiralling out of control.

“I’m the one who shot him. I killed Lizwe”, he confessed.

“Mbulazi!”, Betso sharply admonished. Muzi sighed heavily before sitting down on Lwa’s bed. She could see the emotional exhaustion in his eyes and hear from how spent how sounded. Lwa was in pure disbelief.

“And your grandmother and I helped cover him up so we could get rid of the body”, she also came clean.

“I don’t know what to say. Both my parents are murderers”, an emotional Lwa stated.

“Baby, it was a mistake. I swear none of this was meant to—”

“Killing a man might be a mistake. But the moment you cover up a body and get rid of it like garbage then that reeks of intention. You should’ve called the cops. You’re no different to the people who killed Mxo!”

They both sat and listened to Lwandile scolding them like naughty kids, covered in shame.

“I’m calling the cops”, Lwa said and Betso widened her eyes.

When he grabbed his phone and attempted to walk out, she jumped in front of the door and locked it.

“You will do no such thing!”

“You killed a man and now he’s haunting me!”

“Lwandile, you are not sending your father to jail”

“My father? I am sending all three of you to jail”, he was hysterical.

“Okay everybody calm down”, Muzi said and stood up. Lwandile, listen to me. If you’re gonna do this, you will not incriminate your mother. If it wasn’t for you, she wouldn’t have been involved in this. She was only trying to protect you from seeing that whole mess. Also, please give me time to sort out my things so you can live in a new, peaceful house after I’m gone and also that you can be well taken care of. I just need three days boy. I don’t blame you for how you’re feeling; in fact, I am proud that you turned out to be nothing like me. Think of your little sister”, Muzi pleaded. Lwa had tears suspended on his lower eyelids.

“Muzi you cannot go to jail. Lwandile I am begging you baby please don’t do this”, Betso was crying from the very bottom of her heart, holding on and twisting Lwa’s t-shirt. Lwa looked down and the tears finally dropped and immediately got absorbed into the carpet.

“Three days...”, Muzi continued trying to convince Lwa, who wiped his tears and looked up so he could stop himself from crying. It wasn’t happening. He thought of Mxo and what he would’ve done. He knew that the

very first thing Mxo would've done was to think of how he could protect and keep his parents. Mxo and Muzi were no different and he knew that's why they got along so well. They were jelly and custard to a toothless grandmother. Lwa heaved a sigh and hugged Betso.

"I'm not gonna go to the cops", Lwa lowly assured. "But we're still moving out of here and you're gonna find a way to give Lizwe the proper burial he needs and rest to his spirit. I don't care which member of his family you pay but you're gonna find a way to fix this. Also, you're gonna take care of his family for life. I mean a proper salary every month. I don't care how you get it done", he said and Betso nodded. Lwandile left the house. He couldn't stand the sight of them.

...

After about a month of futile exercises of looking for Mbalenhle with no luck, she finally showed up on his doorstep, looking like an amplified version of herself. Her skin was glowing, her eyes sparkling and alive. She was wearing a tight-fitting tube dress that accentuated her skin colour with its maroon. Her famous cleavage was out to play and of course, what's a dress to Enhle without a slit in front? To complete the outfit, she had on black suede stilettos and a matching clutch bag. She had black and predominantly gold braids tied to the crown of her head, out of the way for her full facebeat to be on display. Manqoba found her chatting and laughing with all the helps, listening and blushing to them admiring her. He couldn't explain the unusual beat of his heart. It was a combination of sudden excitement and fear, fear of the unknown. When they saw him, they all dispersed to their distinctive domestic priorities, only then did she see that he had arrived.

"Hi", he was the first to say. She smiled back.

"Hi", she greeted back.

"You look amazing", he complimented. He saw a slow blink accompanying a blushing face before she could say thanks. He really wanted to close the distance between them.

"I thought I'd never see you again", he mentioned. She pursed her lips and bent them out of shape; speechless.

"I'm sorry", said Manqoba remorsefully.

"I'm also sorry we couldn't work out"

"We can always give it another try", he suggested as he stepped closer with gentle eyes. Enhle took a step back.

"I'm just here to fetch my stuff. Please don't make this any harder than it already is"

"Ngiyakcela ngelosi yam, please reconsider. Ngiyakcela mama", he managed to step a bit closer and hold her neck, their foreheads meeting.

"Mntungwa, Mbulazi, nami ngiyakcela baba weyngan zami, please accept my decision because it's never going to change. Our relationship is emotionally expensive for me. I can't afford it anymore"

"So, it's final?", he asked with a broken heart, deeply hoping for a different answer. She nodded.

"Is there somebody else? Is it that Mhlubi guy?"

"No. There is no one. I am not leaving you for another man. I am leaving you for myself. Muhluri is in a happy relationship and I am actually on my way to his wedding right now", Enhle said. Manqoba didn't know which one hurt worse.

"It's gonna be okay. It'll hurt and heal. We're gonna be alright"

"Are you going away again?", he asked.

"No. I'm back for good. I'm going back to being a nurse and I'm furthering my studies, hoping to be a doctor soon", she mentioned with a tingle of excitement in her voice.

“I’m happy for you”, he mentioned, and she laughed lightly.

“Are you really?”

“Yeah. And I’m sorry for dimming your light for my own ego. I shouldn’t have gotten you to quit your job and your studies. I was just trying to show that I’m fully capable of taking care of you my love”

She shrugged, fighting the swirl of emotions she felt travelling up to suffocate her. The sexual tension was there. That urge to make out in order to make up, just like they’ve always done. He was willing to entertain it, but she took a conscious decision to fight it. The stare they shared was intoxicating. She had to clear her throat to break the spell.

“Uhm... I should... I should get going. I should go sort my stuff before the moving guys get here”, she said as she pointed upstairs with her car key. Manqoba nodded and said: “Sure”. She took careful steps up in her high heels as he watched her perfectly calved legs as they made sure that her hips swayed from left to right.

“Nqoba?”, she stopped to call out.

“Hm?”

“Don’t destroy her like you did to me”, she mentioned, and his head sank to the cold emptiness of his stomach.

“I’ll try my best”

She gave a nod accompanied by a soft smile, before walking up the stairs, leaving him behind.

...

Manqoba made sure there was a big lunch after Mtho’s ancestral ceremony, which he managed to achieve with Skhumbuzo’s help. He notified Muzi that he would be doing it and pleaded with him to arrive. All the helps were required to put on their best outfits and join the table. This was coming from Manqoba’s lesson that when it comes to family, blood meant nothing. Almost everyone was happy to meet Mthokozisi. Melokuhle was only there for the food. Manqoba asked him to leave his emotions in his bedroom. Ndalo was cordially called and she honoured the invitation. Sphesihle was the first to welcome her and make her feel comfortable. She then greeted the whole family as she came across them by chance. The table was set up outside under the shade of the trees. It was jolly spirits all around, something that had grown to be a highly unaffordable luxury in that household. An unfamiliar car with dimmed windows drove in and everyone looked to see who it belonged to. The other branch of the Khumalo family stepped out and everyone celebrated their arrival. Muzi and his family decided to show up. Everyone greeted everyone else with smiles and laughs and sleeping dogs were left to lie. Betso was very delighted to see Ndalo’s adorable face. They greeted one another and Ndalo took Odaliwe from her.

“She’s so cuuute”, Odaliwe mentioned while softly brushing Liwe’s cheeks.

Muzi found Manqoba, and the big brother gave a warm smile before giving him a hug.

“Mfowethu” (My brother), he greeted. Muzi laughed and hugged him back.

“I guess you’ve forgiven me”

“I’d be a hypocrite if I didn’t”, Manqoba said and Muzi took off his shades.

Ndalo gave the baby back and asked to be shown where the loo is. Betso directed her into the house. When she got there, she almost had a heart attack at the unexpected sight of Skhumbuzo.

“I’m sorry. I’m really sorry for bumping into you”, she couldn’t stop apologizing for touching the young sangoma. She had all these theories in her head that they’re not supposed to be touched, spoken to or even looked at. Skhumbuzo laughed.

“It is okay. Relax and take deep breaths”, he tried to get her to breathe. She laughed as she took conscious exercises to calm down.

“You’re a lucky girl. The one who’s responsible for your condition is very pleased to see you here today”, he mentioned and caught her off guard. The condition being her pregnancy. She raised her surprised eyes.

“Mxolisi?”, she asked and Skhumbuzo nodded. Ndalo felt her eyes getting surrounded by liquid. Skhu realised she was getting emotional. He softly squeezed her shoulder and left her to digest the message he had to deliver. Ndalo stood there and tried to pull herself together. It wasn’t happening. Mtho came down the stairs after his shower, putting on his watch. When he raised his eyes, he saw the angry Mayonnaise girl from the supermarket. Ndalo quickly wiped her tears with her hands when she saw that she had an audience.

“Uhm...”, that was Mtho trying to find some tissue for her. He found a pack of unopened white serviettes and quickly ripped them open. He handed one to her and she took it, lightly laughing her embarrassment away.

“What’s wrong?”, Mthokozisi asked.

“Nothing. I’m just... hormones”, she found the perfect lie to cover her breakdown. Mtho smiled.

“Seem’s like the universe is giving me a second chance to apologize. I’m sorry for what happened with the trolley the other day”, he said and scratched the back of his neck.

“Trolley?”, Ndalo was confused, then remembered. “Oh, you’re the boy who almost killed me in that shop the other day?”, Ndalo said and Mthokozisi laughed out loud.

“I’ve heard exaggerations before but this one takes the cup”, he said and Ndalo laughed as well.

“I forgive you”

“I didn’t realise that you were pregnant that day”

“Is there anything wrong with being pregnant?”

“No. I was just saying. The more reason why I should apologize”, Mtho said. Ndalo smiled and slapped the issue into the air, under the nearest bridge.

“I didn’t catch your name”, Mtho said.

“Ndalo”, she extended her hand for an introduction.

“Nice to meet you, Buhle. I’m Mtho”

“Mthobisi?”, Ndalo questioned. He laughed.

“No, Mthokozisi”, he corrected, still holding onto her hand. She was having an innocent conversation, whereas he on the other hand, was falling in love. He thought about her everyday since that day at the shop, feeling bad for that whole incident. Her smile was innocent, her aura was warm and welcoming. Melo walked in and found them still holding hands.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?”, Melo asked and dropped the hand that had his phone. Mtho was confused.

“What are you talking about?”

“Listen here, you are not Mxo and you will never walk in his shoes. Don’t ever think you can replace him cause I will beat you into a concussion”, he warned and Mtho scoffed.

“It is not what you think”, Ndalo tried to extinguish the fire before it blew up.

“I don’t know what the hell you’re on about but I would like to see you try”

“CUT IT OUT”, Muzi scolded when he appeared at the door. “Manqoba told me how much you fight over each and every thing and I’m already sick of it”, he reprimanded and they both looked away with shrunken faces.

“Shake hands to show that you forgive each other”, Muzi said. Melo shook his head in disapproval.

Mthokozisi said: “But we don’t?”

Muzi almost laughed but he knew he wasn’t supposed to. They were never gonna take him seriously if he did but at that moment, he saw his feistiness in Mtho. The resemblance was coming alive.

“I said shake hands and tell each other that you love one another as brothers”, Muzi meant it. Mtho hesitantly extended his hand, Melo also did the same. He then pointed at Mtho and said: “I am not your friend and ungalinge ungiwayel kabi after this”, he warned and Mtho sighed.

“I just want you to respect me, that’s all. Angiyona intanga yakho”, Mtho jabbed back.

“Shake hands already”

“I forgive you”, they simultaneously said. Ndalo also wanted to laugh.

“And I love you as my brother, go on, say it”, Muzi said.

“Ha ngeke”, both of them protested. Muzi realized they were more alike than they liked to believe.

When Manqoba saw Skhumbuzo making his way out with a Tupperware wrapped in a plastic bag, he made quick strides to get to him. He was growing concerned of the quarrelsome relationship between Melokuhle and Mthokozisi. When he asked who the pending chief was going to be between the two, Skhumbuzo said none.

“The ancestors say that these two don’t have the required kindness to rule in a peacekeeping manner. The blood spills and family wars are never going to end if either of them is appointed”, he answered. Manqoba was confused.

“Then who is the next in line”

“Ukhona odalelwe ukubusa ngomusa and she is going to make history”

THE END.