



Sikelele

TELL THE WARRIORS I'M HOME



Written By

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SIKELELA

PROLOGUE

“Mkhonto has been killed.”

He lifted his eyes and looked at his mother. There was no twinge of sympathy or pain in her eyes. But he didn't expect her to feel anything for that man. In his life he only saw him once, after he turned three years old and he can't even remember it vividly. He carried him once, gave him a packet of Cheese Curls and that was the last time they saw or heard from him. A very prominent figure in his community, Mkhonto Hlongwane of Mashoba village. A handsome husband of three wives and a father of many children that Sikelela has never met. His mother single-handedly raised him from birth to seventeen. At eighteen he had to grow up, be a man and start taking care of his mother. He's the only child, that was expected of him as a black child; it's part of life. Your parents raise you until you're old enough to have an ID, if lucky a piece of qualification as well, then you return the favor and take care of your parents.

His uncle took a wife, the vicious MaGwala who divided the family from the moment she stepped inside the Dlamuka premises. He had to build his mother a separate kitchen, which was just a shack with a wooden table, two-plate stove and old cupboards

that MaGwala sold to him when his uncle bought her new ones. Luckily he was able to save up and rebuild a better kitchen for his mother and renovate their house. He's a certified security guard working under Prasa- not the most respected job in South Africa. However he's able to put bread on the table, sustain himself and take care of his mother. His uncle was kind enough to buy him security guard certificates after he finished high school. He got his shooting and driver's licenses shortly, and then he was good to dive into the real world and make a living. Obviously that was before his uncle got married, to him he was still a brave and intelligent nephew. Even though his relationship with his uncle now hangs on a thin string, he's grateful for the foundation he built him, now he can stand on his own.

His name is Sikelela, translated as "Bless" and quoted from the national anthem. He's a spitting image of his father who in the last 25 years of his life has never sent a single letter nor made a phone call. He was turning 28 yesterday, which happened to be the day his father took his last breath. So coincidental!

"Who killed him?" he asked.

His mother blinked twice, rapidly, and narrowed her bulbous eyes at him. Fine woman isn't how to describe Cebile Dlamuka, she's the African version of the Malibu barbie. Now approaching 45 and aging gracefully like a fine wine.

"How's that any of your business?" she asked with her snub nose flaring out. 28 years later and still angry at Mkhonto Hlongwane,

the man who got her pregnant at 16 and left her to fend for herself and her little baby.

“He was my father.” There he said it for the first time in front of his mother; he called that man his father! Even though he always did in his heart, a few times that he’s talked about him to his mother he always addressed him as Mkhonto.

Cebile took a deep breath. Disappointment wasn’t a fitting word. “What do you want for breakfast? Porridge or bread?”

He did not answer. He lied on his back and shut his eyes. His father was dead. He didn’t care about bread or porridge. Useless as he was to him; absent like the reality of his dreams, he was still his father. Mkhonto didn’t know the size of his shoe, never did, never cared, but he was still HIS FATHER. Nothing and nobody could’ve prepared him for that day, to finally know that there was no chance for them to reunite and become father and son. To know that he was never get to call anyone Baba.

“Sikelela don’t!” his mother said firmly, her voice carrying a brutal warning.

He was scratching his earlobe and he was only going to stop once it bled. That’s the only way of releasing pain he knows. Luckily he’s dark-skinned, or pitch-black, however you call a man of his skin tone, none of the scars he’s caused to his body are visible enough. Black doesn’t crack, that’s a fact!

“Close the door on your way out,” he said grumpy, turned and lied on his stomach.

His relationship with his mother is both good and bad, but he loves and respects her. She did enough as a mother, that’s the part Cebile struggles to understand; she raised him well and perfectly mothered him. However that didn’t make her his father, he still had space for Mkhonto in his heart. Or was it just a gap? Whatever it was, his mother couldn’t have fulfilled it. A lawyer can give you pain tablets and heal your headache, but that wouldn’t make him a doctor. That’s the part Cebile doesn’t understand, after everything she did to make her son a man he turned out to be he still saw Mkhonto as a father. Wasn’t she everything to him? A mother, a father and a best friend?

She took a deep breath and turned to the door. There was nothing she could do except letting him deal with the news of Mkhonto’s death the only way he knew how. It did hurt, too much. She had watched her son do the most horrific things as coping measures and didn’t understand why. He has multiple scars on his head from field fights that his uncle used to motivate him to partake in. A part of her blames her own brother, Muzi, for how her son turned out. He’s a very quiet boy, but the inside of him is burning flames and you get a glimpse of that once he starts scratching his ear and daring anyone to lift a spear and come fight him. That’s how he communicates with other men, but with his mother it’s always a struggle. Cebile is loud, very opinionated and

outspoken, and Sikelela is the opposite of everything she is.

A day after his birthday turned sour and full of tension between him and his mother. She didn't understand his pain and his need of comfort over a man he never had. 28 years is a very long time, Mkhonto could've reached out but he didn't. Cebile had seen the Hlongwane trucks on the road and knew exactly how well-established that business had grown over the years.

She also knew Sikelela's elder brother because Mkhonto once came to see her with him in his arms. He was around four at the time and born from his first wife. They now call him Sguqa- he's shorter than all his siblings and muscle-built, but she knew him as Sthembiso. They've never talked though, he might not even remember her because he was really young and she only spent a day with him. From what she heard Mkhonto only had two sons; Sthembiso and another one from his second wife. But guess what, his youngest wife had a son she got before marrying into the Hlongwanes and Mkhonto was more than willing to take the boy in and raise him. Yet he forgot about his own son, this is one of the reasons why she chose to let Deborah Fraser's melodic voice fill up the yard and cooked stew and rice to celebrate his death.

Sikelela couldn't stand his mother's lack of sympathy. He wore his jacket and boots, and took the gravel road leading to the north of the village known as Enkangala. After exiting the main gravel road

he followed a narrow path and stopped under one of the trees where he folded his beanie and sat on it. Then he took out his phone and typed a text to his girlfriend of four years, Vumokuhle Ntuli. There's an age gap of four years between them, when they started dating she was only 19 and he was 24- already on the streets and adulting. With that came a lot of judgement and disapproval from her family. Love always wins though, two years later they conquered all the tests and objections- they made things official. A delegation of maidens was sent to his home and he organized abakhongi with the amount of money enough to make his in-laws know his true intentions. Coin plus coin; he's been saving up for two years now and soon Ntuli's bride price will be ready.

He felt her coming before he could see her. Their relationship hadn't been without ups and downs, but they still held onto the promises they made to each other.

"MaGodide." He stood up and leaned by the tree trunk. Dry leaves kept falling down, birds chirped happily above them, nature was receptive and collaborating with deep feelings they had for each other.

"Hello," Vumo smiled and dropped her eyes blushing.

"Ukahle?" He asked that pulling her into his arms. It was always a hug and a kiss, nothing beyond that. One of the promises he made was to not touch her until she was released from her role of being an ambassadress of Hlabathini maidens. It's important for

her to stay pure and lead by example through three years of her leadership. He's been supportive to her in every way, it's almost the end of her third year- the end of her journey. They're just four months away, the wait is almost over.

He kissed her but there was no passion. When Vumo locked her eyes into his she quickly saw the emptiness in him. It had always been there but that day it was different. He looked shattered.

"Is everything alright?" she asked with her hands on his chest. Her voice was angelic, so was her melanin round face with dimpled cheeks. A full-figured African princess that smiled lazily and blinked like a robot with her naturally long eyelashes and big eyes.

"No." He shut his eyes and took a deep breath.

"What's wrong?"

"My father was killed."

She frowned. That was the first time she heard him talk about his father. It was never a subject, she just assumed that maybe he was no more.

"Oh no, I'm so sorry."

He dropped his eyes, "It's okay."

It wasn't okay, he just didn't want to stress her out. He always tries not to burden people with his burdens.

"I didn't know he was still alive all along." Vumo was still astounded.

“Mkhonto Hlongwane.”

She blinked disbelievingly.

“Wait, who?”

Neighboring villages and townships are all aware of who Mkhonto is, or was. He had his own share of fame and drama that came with his businesses.

Sikelela sighed, “Long story. I’m just feeling very messy and angered by the fact that someone killed him. People die on their own, in God’s will and terms. I hate it when people think it’s their decision to take lives, especially those of the people I care about.”

Vumo wrapped her arms around him and comforted him.

She only knows from the streets that Sikelela has a very belligerent side and believes in proving himself by violence. He’s never revealed that character to her, whether it is true or not, she loves the man she gets to see when he’s with her and cares less about who he is out in the streets.

Coming to his girlfriend he hoped he’d feel better, but nothing was taking the pain away. He knew exactly what he needed to do. He needed time to gather information, not about Mkhonto’s funeral but his killer/s. For his peace he needed to prepare himself for a fight and shed of blood, both physically and psychologically.

Vumo was nested on his chest with her mind running up a flagpole. A part of her wanted to fight him for not revealing his

true identity to her earlier, had he done that none of this would've happened. She felt walls slowly closing in on her. Four months started feeling like two weeks. If Hubo wasn't a Hlongwane maybe things would've been easy.

It happened a year ago, she just had been released from her ambassador position with immediate effect due to an altercation with girls, Sikelela was in Durban and she was just fooling around with Hubo. In that week of fooling around she ended up giving away something very precious- something that Sikelela has patiently waited for years.

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SIKELELA

CHAPTER 1

Igazi lomuntu liyakhuluma- how true this is depends on how the deceased fights for justice. When they pass to the other world they possess more power than the living. Mkhonto was always a fighter, his death wouldn't have gone in vain.

In villages it always starts with gossips, which results into accusations that end with concrete leads. The law hardly invests in village crimes, maybe because they're very much capable of resolving things on their own or because villages still remain at the tail of the country.

It's been a week since Mkhonto was buried, and it hasn't taken longer for Hubo to sniff around and get leads. He vowed to avenge his father's death and prayed to get all those involved before karma does. Karma is a bitch, he is a bulldog!

He has gathered all his brothers and cousins to ready them for a war. With the word already out on the streets, he knows the Mshengus are also preparing themselves for defense. There's no bad history between two families, in fact their father and Mshengu used to be good business partners. Even when they decided to split it was harmonious. Or so they thought. Finding out he plotted their father's death with his sons has them looking over their shoulders constantly and reevaluating business deals and friendships. There are no friends in the game of money, that they've learnt in a brutal way. It's still unclear what their father

took from Mshengu that was worth his soul, not that they're trying to get to the bottom of it, what matters right now is that Mshengu widowed their mothers and orphaned their sisters. An eye for an eye!

"I hope all of us have been mourning," he says pacing around with his hands clasped together. He's always been a troublemaker of the family, the one who got into fights and bunked school.

"That goes without saying," Manqoba says checking bleeding incisions on his wrists. He's the cousin from their father's eldest brother.

"No women, right?" Hubo raises his eyebrow. Anything that includes violence, he does it with passion, that's his language.

They all shake their heads except Sguqa who's lying in bed with his knees up and eyes glued to his phone.

"Okay, this is not a criminal act, we go straight there and we kill Mshengu. If anyone stands on our way we eliminate, unless if it's a woman. We don't want women's blood on our hands." He picks the bucket filled with intelezi and asks them to place all weapons on the floor.

"Bafo?" he snarls at Sguqa who hasn't complied with any of the orders.

"Let me know if you're not coming,"- him.

Sguqa shifts his eyes from the screen of his phone and looks at him wearily. "We are not going to get him. Not today. All of us know the Mshengus, they're waiting for us."

“They’re welcomed to do so. This is war and they started it. Bayinyathele emsileni!” He bends to tie his laces tighter and starts sprinkling intelezi over the weapons. His father was never a coward, they can’t back down because of how the Mshengu boys have been painted as the destructive force of Mashoba village. It’s just five tomfools who never went to school and drive people’s taxis to provide for their horse-faced father.

Sguqa has no choice; an injury to one is an injury to all. Unprepared as he is, cautious as he wish he’d be, his brothers have decided and he has to be with them as the eldest. He’s still settling in this leadership position, throwing his weight around is never and was never his code of conduct.

Lights are off. Their mothers and sisters have gone to bed. With the help of his flashlight, Hubo sprinkles black powder below the kraal and tells all of them to jump over. Their heads cannot turn back, they’re heading straight to the Mshengus and only facing home once they’re done.

Everyone’s blood is boiling, even Sguqa’s who was initially very hesitant. The whole village has been waiting for their response. Their dignity hangs on a thin string, an example needs to be set. No tomfool messes with the Hlongwanes and lives to drive people’s taxis!

In the villages a fence is only essential if you’re planning to plough a garden inside your yard, other than that you can just build your

house and mark where the yard ends with your eyes. Mshengu never saw it fit to fence his home and today that's not working on his favor. The Hlongwanes have scattered around the yard, Hubo is knocking with a gun outside his bedroom door, Sguqa is monitoring the surroundings while Manqoba and others stand by the windows.

Hubo breaks the door, a woman's scream pierces throughout the yard. But before he can turn the bedroom lights on he hears a gun going off and Sguqa cursing at someone. Instead of doing what he broke the door to do, he turns back and storms out with his gun in hand.

Manqoba is being beaten by two guys in the dark. One dragged their younger brother, Thobani, from the other window and took his gun. The same gun that just shot Sguqa in the arm.

Hubo bumps into a body- Busizwe Mshengu, and stands face to face with him.

"Ukhumbule uyihlo, mfana?" Busizwe asks pointing a gun at him. Just like they were prepared to die for their dead father, he is also prepared to die for his.

His question presses the right buttons in Hubo. Guns go behind their waists and they jump onto each other. He's older than Hubo, if he had time to choose an opponent he would've taken Sguqa but this one needs to be taught a lesson as well.

Sguqa came back with a gun wound. Thobani is hiding from his mother because of the swollen face. He's just 21 years old and not really a Hlongwane by blood, but Mkhonto was a father to him and if his brothers say there's a fight he picks his weapons without questioning.

Sguqa is the eldest, he has a wife and his own separate house, which is where Thobani's wounds are being nursed at, away from their mothers and sensitive sisters.

Despite getting a few punches from Busizwe and losing his gun in the process, Hubo still wants a rematch. This will only end when Mshengu goes six feet underground like their father.

"Madoda, inqama ayihlehli isuke ilanda amandla. I want an open fight with the Mshengus." He looks at Thobani and takes a deep breath. There's never been any crack in their brotherhood. Even with their cousins, Thobani is one of them.

"You don't have to come," he tells him.

Thobani nods with relief. He's lying in bed covered by a lean blanket with a steaming pot of muthi waiting for him. Some scars are too deep for the western medical care; village civil wars are intense and full of tricks.

Sguqa walks in and throws car keys on the table. The Mshengus have left him with emotional and physical scars, maybe he wasn't angry enough before, but now he is. An open fight is what it is!

“Wena stop with your stupid nyangas. How did they injure us with our own weapons?” He’s directing his anger towards Hubo.

“Why didn’t you go to your clever ones then?” Hubo thunders back.

He stops and turns with his eyebrows furrowed. There’s time and place for everything, but mostly there’s a man for every bullshit. And unfortunately now Sguqa isn’t that man for Hubo’s bullshit. Words are meant to be chosen, not just anyhow, but wisely.

“Unganginyeli!” he says.

Hubo withdraws and lowers himself on the bed taking a seat next to Thobani.

“Tonight Manqoba and Nhlalo are coming. No muthi is going to help us beat the Mshengu boys or get our hands on their father. Training and thorough preparation will get us ready for tomorrow.”

“Your wife allowed that? Them coming here to prepare for a fight?” Thobani asks with his head lifted.

“She’s leaving in a few hours. I told her to go and spoil herself as my WCW,” he says.

Stares!

Silence.

Persistent stares...

He sighs, “It’s a women’s thing. You choose a woman you have a crush on Wednesdays and celebrate her.”

Well... they're still confused.

"Who did you choose last week?" Hubo asks.

"Her," he says.

"And the week before?"

"It was her."

"What if you choose a different woman? You can't have the same crush every week. Have you seen Pearl Thusi?"

"No, does she come and warm your bed after you've chosen her as your WCW?"

He's scared of his wife, not in a bad way, it's all love and fear of making her uncomfortable.

"I can choose my mothers and sisters, but I can't just pick a random woman who won't even console me if my wife divorces me."

They're laughing. Seemingly now everyone is on the same page, hopefully that would work on their favor. United warriors stand and divided they fall!

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Hubo has always had it in his veins. He's shirtless and already standing in the middle of the Mashoba playground where both parties agreed would be open enough for them to kill one another.

There's no hurry, Mxolisi Mshengu will face him in a moment but he's still chatting with his tomfool brothers. The disrespect!

"I want your brother, not you. You still smell breastmilk," he yells. Mxolisi is five years older than him, the Busizwe he's calling out is eight years older. He just laughs and shakes his head, if he faces anyone today it would be Sguqa or Nhlalo- his peers.

It may end nasty but for now they're having a fair physical fight. The Mshengus aren't called the destructive forces for nothing, they either destroy you or end you. Yes, end you and reunite you with your maker. Just like they did to Mkhonto. But his sons aren't their usual easy opponents, Sguqa follows up on his name; he does bring people to their knees. Most have, except for Busizwe.

The fight is taking longer, now there are sticks involved and Hubo can't just stand still and watch. Had a few village elders been not around to keep an eye, he would've shot someone already. Manqoba is inside the car with a bag of guns, it will go down, just not now. Sguqa still needs to bring Busizwe to his knees, if that chance is taken away from him he'll braai their lungs for dinner.

It's getting hectic, more people are bleeding while others are being held back from meddling with weapons. Sguqa is still standing. Hubo is pacing up and down with his head bleeding.

There's someone in the audience. He's not from Mashoba village because here everyone knows one another. His face looks

familiar though. He's wearing a black beanie, a duffle coat and Bermuda shorts. He's distanced himself from the crowd but his eyes are glued at the uncivilized scenario taking place.

Hubo's restlessness lands him two feet away from the stranger. He can't see his face clearly but the fact that he looks so dark and is wearing a beanie makes him look like a threat.

"Are you one of them?" he asks.

No response.

"Yeyi wena, ngiyakhuluma!" His voice bawls up and grabs a few eyes to their attention.

The beanie man doesn't move an inch nor does he turn his head to him. Hubo charges towards him with his fists balled out. When he's just an inch away from grabbing him by the duffle-coat he lifts his bloodshot eyes.

"You might want to not get your hands on me, in any form or move." With that said his eyes shift back to the fight.

Hubo hates threats, he needs a second to contemplate what to do next. Before anything further happens between him and the stranger, Mxolisi runs and breaks the fight unexpectedly. He pulls his bleeding brother aside, more Mshengu men flock into the scene. There's something else going on- another war that needs their urgent attention. There's a message from home.

"Did you attack my father?" Busizwe roars at Sguqa.

"You said I'll go through you before I get to him, so get your ass

back here,” Sguqa says.

“You’re lying! You attacked my father.” His brothers scatter around, now violence begins. The audience leave behind only their shadows. Only the Mshengus and Hlongwanes remain facing each other with guns. Oh, and the strange duffle-coat guy.

He’s actually making his way down to the playground. There’s massive space left between two fighting groups, neither any of them know the intruding man. They watch him attentively, if he’s not careful enough he’ll be an opening corpse of this gun-fight.

He goes straight to the Mshengus. Hubo clicks his tongue and curses. He knew that the Mshengus cried for help and got other tomfools to come help them. The duffle-coat guy moves through the Mshengus until he’s standing face-to-face with Mxolisi - the one who pulled the trigger.

“Do we know you?” Busizwe.

He ignores him and taps Mxolisi’s arm, “A minute, please.”

His face isn’t recognizable enough with that beanie covering half of his forehead.

Mxolisi gives his brothers a nod and steps aside. It’s very strange to be asked by someone aside while you’re camping for war.

“This better be good,” he says.

“It is good!” A knife plunges below his left breast in a split second.

It takes him a minute to lift his gun, but the duffle-coat guy was

ready for him, he grabs the gun and points it at his brothers while he succumbs to pain and falls to the ground.

They're now surrounded by enemies, the Hlongwanes jumped into the opportunity and stepped closer. Gunshots go off, their attention instantly shift back to their first enemies. Nobody really sees where the duffle-coat guy disappears to. Mxolisi is on the ground and losing lot of blood.

SIKELELA

CHAPTER 2

They haven't talked about it. They're still trying to make sense of everything that happened.

"Thobani, you didn't go there, right?" Sguqa asks with concern.

Thobani shakes his head, "No."

"Then who attacked Mshengu?"

Well, this is the question everyone's looking an answer for.

"And who was that guy who killed Mxolisi?" Manqoba.

"That was the most strange thing I've ever seen. How did he kill him in front of his brothers?" Sguqa shakes his head stunned.

"I had a little argument with him," – Hubo.

They look at him. Not his bullshit again! They're still trying to take care of the Mshengus and he's creating more enemies.

"Say you're joking!" Sguqa.

"I'm not. I've been thinking about it, I just realized how strange it felt talking to him and how carelessly he threatened me." He shakes his head and taps his hand on his knee. "And the way he looked. I didn't get to see him properly but damn, he had familiar features."

"You think you know him?" Manqoba asks curiously. At times like

these they need bodyguards and he'd love to have that man as his.

"I think we need to find him and ask him who he is. Was he helping us or he had his own score to settle with them?" Hubo says thoughtfully. He can't ignore the strange feeling he had of that guy. Whether he's an enemy or friend in disguise, he needs to be known.

He picks his comb, inserts it into his hair and stands up with his jacket in hand.

"And then where are you going now?" Sguqa.

"Stretching my legs."

"Mshengu is reportedly dead, be careful not to get your legs broken while stretching them," Sguqa says and collects dishes from the table. He prefers to brother Thobani over this one. Things were easy when their father was still around because he could manage his own kids.

"I won't," Hubo says and walks out whistling.

He's a grown man, 26 years going to 27, he's not a child Sguqa needs to reprimand and tell everything. If the Mshengus get him that's all on him.

It's late, he needs to go to bed as well. He turns to Thobani who's grabbed the opportunity of being injured with both hands and used it to do nothing.

"You're still not feeling better?" he asks.

Thobani shifts his eyes from Facebook and groans painfully.

“Call if you need anything,” he says shaking his head. He has to switch from Sguqa to Sthembiso- the husband. There’s an ice-cream bed-date he’s invited to, one of many bed-dates he’s been subjected to in this marriage.

He takes off his jacket and steps inside the bedroom. Whoever is singing through speakers will break his eardrums.

“Hhayi bo, sifelani?” He doesn’t lower the volume, he switches the whole thing off.

“Thank you for annoying me. Tell me why didn’t you sleep in the backroom?” Zime says getting off bed and pulling down her bum-shorts.

Sguqa shakes his head.

“Why do you wear something short if you’re not happy with how short it is?”

“Who said I’m not happy? I just don’t want you to see my bum-bum.”

“I’m sure it’s such a private part!” he mocks.

Zime rolls her eyes and walks out. She’s everything. His better half, best friend, confident and the love of his life. Unfortunately that’s not how his family sees his wife, according to them she’s too indecent for the role of being a wife. From wearing shorts, to drinking and spending Sguqa’s money in a way they don’t approve of. That was one of the reasons why he moved out of the main

homestead and built his own separately.

She comes back with a basin of warm water and towel. They both try to accommodate one another; as much as Sguqa tries to understand her love of wine and preference of short, fitting and expensive clothes, she also understands that he's a Zulu man and he loves a submissive wife.

"I'm washing my hands for ice-cream?" he asks drying his hands with a towel.

"Sthembiso, I served dinner an hour ago and you all said you were full," she says with her eyes narrowed at him.

He frowns, "I said that?"

A deep sigh!

"This is an ice-cream date, I'm not dishing samp and cow gut again."

"But I'm really hungry."

He knows how to spoil things. How can he be hungry an hour after chowing a full plate samp? But she's a wife and going to bed with a grumpy, hungry man is not an option. She goes to the kitchen and dishes for him again.

"Don't forget cucumber, baby!" His voice echoes from their bedroom.

She rolls her eyes before taking it from the fridge and slicing it. He's probably the only man in the whole KZN who eats and enjoys

cucumber slices. It always goes with his food, and sometimes with nothing, he just eats it to release stress. Don't ask, that's a man she married on broad daylight.

He looks at her walking in with a plate of food

"Hawu, you didn't bring water?" he asks.

Phewww! Not even maids get sent around the house like her.

"Sorry Hlongwane, let me turn my boneless legs back to the kitchen and get you some water. What else would you like to have? Guavas? Must I go and climb the tree outside and get them for you?"

He laughs. So typical of him! 33 years of life and he still hasn't understood the meaning of humor. He finds it in most random things; like her throwing a tantrum or threatening to kill him.

Zime comes back with a glass of water and puts it next to bed, on the bedside table.

"How did the meeting go?" she asks.

"Good." He's not looking at her.

"Was it really a meeting? People say there were gunshots?"

"Zime!"

"Sthembiso?"

The stare battle...

"I just want to know what's going on. Are we in danger? Who killed Bab' Hlongwane?"

She doesn't question most things he does with his brothers because in the Hlongwanes men don't meddle in women's affairs and vice-versa. But there are times when she just can't keep quiet.

"Where's the ice-cream?" – Sguqa.

He's done eating and drinking water. It hasn't been more than five minutes.

"Let's postpone it," Zime says crawling onto bed.

"I was looking forward to it."

No response.

If it was any other day he would've rejoiced over this bed-date cancelation but not today. She's canceling because she's not happy with him. He needs to come right!

"Mshengu killed my father and now he's reportedly dead as well. We wanted to kill him, there's a war brewing between us and them, but it's not us who killed him," he says.

That's all she needed, the truth.

"So the gun wound is not from the attempted hijack?"

He exhales heavily, "No."

"Why did you lie to me?"

"Because I don't want you to feel scared. Nothing is going to happen. We are doing this to protect this family." His hand massages her hip. He's looking at her in the eyes, now she has no reason to doubt her husband or ask any other questions.

“Relax, okay?” He tucks her face in his hands and kisses her lips.

She nods, “Do you still want the ice-cream date?”

“No, I want babies.”

That’s...*coughs!*

.

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HUBO

Instead of using the main route to Mashoba, he joins the gravel road that drives through Hlabathini just to see if there’s no girl who can tickle his fancy. No, he’s not a ladies’ man, he just loves having fun. And Hlabathini village has the most prettiest girls, he’s hooked up with a few in the past, but it was nothing to hold on to.

There’s one walking at the side of the road, she’s looking a bit familiar with her back turned.

He slows down and hoots.

She turns her head. It’s that one who hates his guts for no reason.

He smiles at her annoyed face and sings; “Dali usungaze ungishiye ngempela, dali wami? Uthe usubona abangcono was’ ungishiya mina...”

If she had a gun she would’ve probably blew his brains.

“Get in the car before the sun ruin your perfect skin,” he says.

She's hesitant, but he can wait.

Another minute passes...

"Come on Vumo, it's just a lift, I'm not asking you to marry me."

Heavy sigh! She stops.

He's staring at her adjusting to the seat with her face cold as that fateful night.

"Hello gorgeous," he says.

"Please stop Hubo." She glares deadly at him.

"I'm just greeting you."

"Okay, hello. I'm good, I can see you're good to."

If that's a way of shutting him up then she's mistaken.

"When am I seeing you?"

Silence...

He smiles, shaking his head and purposely driving slowly.

Then she releases a sigh and turns her eyes to him.

There was an attraction between them. Whether it was physical or emotional, he doesn't know. She didn't give him a chance to process it, she just called things off a week after giving her virginity to him. How strange girls can be!

"Hubo, I'm in a relationship," she says.

His face... oh shit!

“So that’s why you act so weird?”

“No, it’s because I did something wrong and I regret it.”

“How was it wrong? We had fun. I didn’t hurt you, that you even said yourself.”

There’s a moment of silence...

“He’s your brother,” she says.

He frowns.

“Who’s my brother?”

“My boyfriend...he’s your brother.”

Oh, hell no!!

“Thobani?” His heart is running a race.

He’s many things but not a betrayer. He’d never do that to his brothers.

Vumo shakes her head, “No, Sikelela.”

“I don’t have a brother called Sikelela.” He’s confused but relieved as well.

Vumo’s brows knit, “I don’t understand.”

“Maybe you’re mistaken. I don’t know anyone called Sikelela. Maybe we can continue smashing, I mean you were tight and your response was quite awesome to my touch.”

She’s still confused, but now more than anything she’s annoyed.

"I'm a fiance," she says.

"Oh, shit! That's deep."

"Yes, so please stop saying I left you because we were never an item. My life may end in four months when he realizes that I made him wait for nothing."

"Meaning?" He raises his eyebrow.

"I'm not a virgin anymore."

"Wait, he doesn't know?"

"No, he doesn't."

He breaks into a fit of laughter. Now that's funny, who proposes to someone he doesn't even know that well? Tomfool!

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After he's dropped Vumo off, he continues driving around the village and seeing some old friends. He still wants to smash Vumo, now just for the fun of it. There's a man standing at the corner, probably waiting for public transport, with a Nike bag next to his feet. Typical village guys who reside in big cities!

Just as he drives past him, he catches a glimpse of his face. Damn, this is the guy he's been looking for the last couple of days. The most wanted at the Mshengus. Is he even aware of the danger he's in? He shouldn't be standing at road corners like this,

he killed Mxolisi and Mshengu for crying out loud!

Hubo stops the car at the side of the road and walks up to him.

“If you didn’t look so neat I would’ve concluded that you’re mentally disturbed,” he says.

No response, no acknowledgement or whatsoever.

“I’m Mahubo Hlongwane.” He extends his hand for a shake. This is the humblest he’s ever been to a stranger. But guess what, this stranger thinks so highly of himself that he doesn’t even look at his hand.

He goes straight into it. He, too, doesn’t like him.

“Why did you kill them?” he asks.

No response.

Is he dumb or what?

“You have this thing of wanting people to punch you in the face without them even knowing you.” He’s fed up. He’d beg to have a conversation with a girl, not a guy he doesn’t even know.

But whoopsie, he looks up. That striking familiar resemblance again!

“How often does your brain go on vacation in a day?” he asks.

Hubo frowns.

“Excuse me?”

“How stupid are you? If you can rate yourself from the scale of 1-

10.”

Okay, breathe in Hubo. And out- in and out!

“I’m not your friend!” he says firmly.

“Neither am I your friend. So what’s good?”

Same height. Different attitude. Same wish of punching each other’s faces.

“They’re going to kill you,” Hubo says, his voice lowered and not matching the anger firing in his eyes.

“I’ve never died before, I’m not scared of the unknown. What else?”

“Your name, motherfucker!”

“You just said it, I’m motherfucker.”

“Okay, where are you going motherfucker?”

“Durban. Get out of my face!”

“I will, first get in the car. I’ll drop you at the rank.”

Heavy sigh...

Hubo doesn’t wait for his answer, he goes to the car and reverses back to where he’s standing.

After a moment of hesitation, Sikelela picks his bag and goes to the passenger door, he opens it and hops in.

They've been driving silently for more than five minutes. They know if they keep talking one may end up with broken jaw or rib.

Hubo clears his throat, "There's a picture of my dad in the old photo-album, he was in his early thirties or late twenties, I'm not sure. You look like him. Are you related to the Hlongwanes?"

"No, I'm not," Sikelela says.

His answer was too quick. Hubo thought he'd give him some attitude at first.

"Then why did you kill the Mshengus?" he asks.

"Because I had a dream..."

Hubo chuckles, "Ah, Mandela. Tell me more."

"I don't like fighting, Hubo lethu Hlongwane."

"Okay, sorry. What was your dreeeeam?"

"It's none of your business. What you should know is that I don't like people who get in the way of my dreams and visions because I hate change. I hate adapting to new realities. Mshengu and that boy, whoever his name was, made me do that."

Sounds serious than Hubo thought. Deeper even.

"Was it worth killing them?" he asks.

"Maybe not, I don't know, I haven't thought about it."

Killed two men and didn't think about it, okay!

"So what do you do in Durban?" – Hubo.

"I'm a security guard," he says.

"Oh, nice. Do you have any kids?"

This is slowly becoming an interview but...

"No, not at the moment. I'm in the process of getting married though, hopefully in the near future there will be some little ones running around," he says.

"Found your better half already?" Hubo grins.

"I found her four years ago, I didn't have to go around the world looking, our paths crossed early and I'm grateful for that. I'm not a social person, I needed someone I can grow with."

"Grow old together kind of love, nice one. Some of us will find love in our late 50s."

"Are you looking though?" Sikelela asks.

"Not really. But my older brother is married and happy, I might want what he has in future too. Love is a beautiful thing," he says.

"I know, right?"

They're now almost at the local taxi rank where he'll drop his new anonymous friend off.

"So who are you?" he asks.

"Sikelela Dlamuka."

Pause...breathe...think.

"Sikelela?" he asks.

“Yes,”

“Did you know my father?”

“No, I did not know him.”

Strange...very strange.

They're here, it's time to part.

Sikelela opens his wallet and takes out R50 note.

“I don't know if you have change,” he hands the money to Hubo.

“This is not a taxi. I'll see you around.”

“Sure, thanks for the lift.”

Hubo stays in the car and watches him crossing the road with his bag. There are some dots missing, there's more to this than what he's letting on; a hidden truth. He hates that they're alike, he cannot bully him, but he also likes how they went from arguing to holding a decent conversation. Whether he's hiding something or not, he'd love a friendship with him, hopefully he's not the Sikelela that Vumo was talking about because that would be just too bad.

SIKELELA

CHAPTER 3

Hubo gets home and goes straight to MaXulu, the first wife and mother of Sguqa and Londeka. She knew their father more than anyone. They were married for over 40 years, there's no family relative or secret she wouldn't know.

He knocks at the kitchen and lets himself in because she probably wouldn't even hear the knock with that loud singing.

"Ma," he says with his voice raised and grabs a chair to sit.

MaXulu stops singing and looks at him. She's still cooking, usually they come to her side if their mothers haven't cooked.

"You'll wait, my boy. I put rice on the stove just now," she says.

"I'm not hungry but I can wait." All of them eat like hunters, even their sisters, they just chop grocery within a week. Shopping is done almost every week in all three Hlongwane houses.

"I actually wanted to ask you something. Do you know anyone by the name of Sikelela?"

MaXulu pauses and looks at him with her eyebrows knitted. She looks rather alarmed than confused.

"Where did you get that name?" she asks.

"I know him. Do you?" Hubo.

"No, I don't know him." There's so much that's missing from her

response. She's holding back something.

"You've never even heard about him?" Hubo persists with his questions.

"Umh, no."

Hubo sighs. He knows that she's not telling him the truth and it's so bad because he needs it. It's important for everyone to know, Sikelela needs protection.

"He's a Dlamuka. Dad was a ladies man, maybe there's a girl of that surname who once troubled you."

MaXulu shakes her head, "Not any that I can remember."

"You're not a good liar, Ma." He's getting fed up. "What's going on? He looks like Baba and the fact that he crossed his village, came here to fight the Mshengus for unknown reasons says a lot."

MaXulu's eyes widen. Fear trembles from the tip of her toes to the strings of her hair. This can't be! Sikelela has no ties to Mkhonto except for the blood running in his veins. It was hard but Mkhonto made sure of it. Sikelela is a Dlamuka, isphandla ceremony took place there, his uncle united him with the Dlamuka ancestors, even his umbilical cord was buried there.

"How did he fight them?" she asks Hubo, worry etching in the corners of her eyes.

"He actually killed Mxolisi and he's the main suspect in Mshengu's murder as well. I mean, me and everyone was at the playground with the Mshengu tomfools, nobody went to kill

Mshengu.”

“Oh, Nkosi yami!” She pulls the chair and sits.

Is she really crying for the Mshengus?

Hubo raises his eyebrow, “Ma?!”

“How did he kill Mxolisi?”

“In less than 5 minutes, he plunged the knife into his chest and strangled him while pointing a gun at his brothers. It was quick, brutal and senseless.”

“Get me a glass of water.” She’s fanning her face with a hand. Her forehead is sweating up a storm.

Hubo rushes to the fridge and gets cold water for her. She gulps the bottle down and releases a heavy sigh.

Now it’s clear that she knows and whatever she knows is deeper and bigger than her and Hubo. But still, he wants to know. He’s that child, even MaXulu knows him, if she doesn’t clear his confusion he’ll keep digging.

“What did you notice about him?” she asks him after cooling herself down.

“That he’s a young version of my dad,” Hubo says.

“And what did you notice about your dad in terms of looks?”

He frowns and thinks for a moment.

“That he looked like my grandfather in pictures,” he says and stares at MaXulu intensely.

“Your father had a very strange relationship with umkhulu because he blamed him for most things that happened in his life; how he turned out and the sins he unconsciously committed.”

“But how was it Mkhulu’s fault? Baba was an independently functioning human being with his own brain and heart.”

“I wish I had answers but I don’t. You see sometimes things happen not because they’re meant to be, but because they’re a repetitive circle from past generations. And here they seem to be patterned with strong heredity. Your father had his father’s genes, hence his character strongly mirrored that of Mkhulu. Sikelela was cut off, completely disregarded and disowned, because he’s better off as a Dlamuka than a Hlongwane.”

This is like sitting in a class of Life Sciences with the highest level of mediocre.

MaXulu sees the confusion on his face and exhales deeply. She knows this and she understands it, but she wouldn’t expect kids or other wives to do so. It will never make sense.

“I didn’t expect him to turn out like his grandfather but it looks like your father’s sacrifice went in vain. He gave up his child for nothing, this is out of control.” She’s talking about Sikelela. Mkhonto told him about the child before he was even born. Strangely he was born a year after his grandfather passed, exactly on the day that he lost his life. That alone was a sign, Mkhonto was scared, he knew it was deep. In this family there’s been many cases of reincarnation from old generations coming down.

It took him 3 years to gather courage to go see his child, second born son, and he didn't disappoint when it came to the blood-curdling semblance. The most afflictive form of protecting your child would be running away from him. It would be making sure you're out of the picture so he wouldn't know anything about you, lest learn something from you or take your identity.

Hubo lifts his eyes to her, he's not getting all pieces of the puzzle, but he gets the complexity of it all.

"He called me Hubolethu and I thought he made a mistake," he says and exhales deeply.

"He did?" MaXulu with her eyes popped out of their sockets.

"Yeah," Hubo says. He didn't pay attention to it but now he remembers how thoughtlessly Sikelela addressed him as Hubolethu as if it was normal and kept it moving.

His name is Mahubo, registered on his birth certificate and Stanger Hospital birth records, but he's always been annoying. He was a crybaby, apparently nobody wanted to babysit him as a baby because of his annoying temper. His father ended up calling his cry the 'chorus of the family', twisting and adding to his original name- ihubolethu. Everyone called him Hubo, in short of Mahubo, but his father uniquely called him Hubolethu.

Londeka walks into an intense conversation and looks at both her mother and brother with curiosity.

There are too many secrets in this family, she can't even keep up.

“What happened?” Despite them being constantly taught to stay out of elders’ business she still wants an update.

“Londeka get your brother a plate and check if the rice is boiling,”
– MaXulu.

That’s what she gets, it’s very late for her to disappear. Phewww!

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SIKELELA

He goes home every chance he gets, usually he works four days and gets three days off in every week. If there’s no one to stand in for, he goes home or invites Vumo to his rented room.

Today he’ll be leaving work and taking a taxi home since he’s off the next three days. They exchange shifts, he was working the day. He proceeds to the guard booth to get the rest of his belongings and notices a very familiar guy talking to his colleague, Mhlengi.

Their eyes meet, strangely he waves his hand.

“Ubekwa yini la?” he asks. (What brings you here)

“Ubusoka,” Hubo answers. Sounds exactly like him.

It’s too coincidental that he’s at his place of work because of his charm, but with Hubo you can never know, he’s everywhere.

“I didn’t know you liked guys,” he says referring to him and Mhlengi.

Hubo frowns, "What?!"

"Him. Or you are what they call bisexual," he says.

The excitement they had of seeing each other after a few days quickly disappears.

"I don't know whether to slap you or show you my girlfriends," Hubo says scratching his cheek.

He's irrational, impulsive and not so smart. It doesn't take too long to understand him. He's the type elders would tell; 'you'll die soon if you continue like this.'

"Whichever makes your afternoon brighter," Sikelela says folding his work jacket on his arm and adjusting his lunch hanging bag.

Mhlengi has excused himself. He was grilled with questions about his colleague and couldn't answer half of them.

"Are you knocking off already?" Hubo asks changing the subject.

"Yeah, I'm actually going home. I'm off for the next three days," he says.

"I can give you a lift but I have someone to check in town before leaving."

"I'm also going to town to get my lady some essentials and goodies."

Hubo laughs, "I thought you were going home, I didn't know home is between the sheets for you."

Back to buddies!

“I’ll start at home, obviously.”

“Yeah, just for the sake of it. But I don’t blame you, this weather makes you remember your one-nightstand.”

“She’s the ambassadress of Hlabathini maidens. We are not on that level yet, so get it out of your mind.”

Hubo feels his soul threatening to leave his body. His breathing slows down, if he lets it out he might breathe his sins too loud. This is the confirmation of his worst nightmare- betraying someone he shares blood with. Even though Sikelela is still hiding his identity, now he knows the truth, and like any of his brothers he wants a close relationship with Sikelela too. He wants them to be there for each other, he wants him to come home and understand that he has a family. He also wants to punch his face, just to test how strong he is. He’s a bit cheeky, quiet but very annoying once his mouth opens.

“You really love her?” he asks opening the car door for Sikelela.

“She’s my life.” These three words stab his heart like a sword. Out of all people, why did it have to be him that Vumo gives her virginity to?

“You trust her?” he asks before he can process it carefully.

“Yes,” Sikelela says confidently without reading too much into it.

Heartbeat!

Guilt is chopping him like an axe.

“So you came all this way to meet with a random girl in town?”

“She’s not random. I’ve been her Facebook friend for 6 months.”

“Makes perfect sense!”

It doesn’t make any sense but he’s not interested in Hubo’s explanations.

“How was it like growing up in your village? I heard people steal goats on broad daylight there?” Hubo initiates another conversation.

“It depends on who you are. They’ll never steal from me.” It sounds even more convincing with that hushed tone of his.

“My father loved livestock, goats and all that, but theft and heavy rains made him sell everything,” Hubo says and steals a glance at him. His face is hard and impenetrable.

“Understandable,” he says.

This won’t go anywhere. Maybe a different approach would do.

“The Mshengus are on the hunt for blood, maybe you’re safer at home than...”

Sikelela’s brows snap, “Which home?”

“My home. Our home. Sikelela, I know who you are and I understand why you’re not honest with me.”

“How do you know?”

“I figured it out. Your genes are not hard to recognize.”

He doesn’t comment any further. The car is filled with silence but there’s no tension. He looks easy than Hubo thought.

“I’m not my father,” Hubo says.

“Hence I’m not asking you any questions, I’m aware of that. Can we not talk about this?”

“What about the Mshengus?”

“I can handle my own fights, Hubolethu.”

“So you didn’t make a mistake?”

“With what?”

“Calling me Hubolethu.”

“Is it not your name?”

He sighs and doesn’t answer.

Sikelela continues, “I’m not on any side, I did what I did because I saw it fit at that time. If they want me they’ll find my address and come to me. I’m not hard to find, you did with no effort.”

Hubo chuckles, “You think I came here for you? I don’t find you that interesting.”

“Whatever!”

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VUMO

It’s around 10pm, everyone has gone to sleep except her and her

sister, Qambi, because they stayed behind to do dishes. Her phone rings, she just got in bed that she shares with her sister. It's Sikelela...

She answers in a lowered voice like most girls do in phone calls.

"Hello," she says.

"MaGodide, I'm outside."

Her heart skips a bit. It always does when she hears his voice so unexpectedly.

"Okay, please give me a few minutes." She drops the call, gets out of bed and changes back into the dress.

Qambi lifts her head, "And now?"

"Sikelela is outside."

"Mmmh! He knows which days to choose, the weather is perfect for a cuddle."

Wait...breathe, Vumo.

"Are you okay?" Qambi asks.

"Ummh yeah, I'm okay."

Qambi knows her sister better than anyone, she can tell that something is going on.

"Oh, you two don't share a blanket yet," she says and laughs at her own stupidity.

Vumo stands still, staring at her like she has answers of her

unasked questions.

“Talk,” she says softly.

A sigh!

“Let me get him inside the house first, I’ll come back.”

After a while she comes back with a few shopping bags filled with her cosmetics and goodies. Sikelela was already working when they started dating, it was easy for him to maintain her from the onset. He takes care of her basic needs, pays for her transport to college since she travels to town everyday, and also gives her money monthly. Not girlfriend allowance because it’s not a fixed amount, it varies depending on how his budget is. She’s an understanding girlfriend, very patient too. She never puts any pressure on him.

“I’m waiting for you to tell me udliwa yini? Your man is here with all the goodies and you still have this long face,” – Qambi.

“Sikelela thinks I’m still an ambassadress of the girls.”

“Why didn’t you tell him you were removed from the position?”

“I was going to tell him but something happened.”

“Okay, I’m listening.”

She takes a deep breath, “I was not thinking straight, I slept with someone else, and Sikelela is still waiting for me.”

“You’re joking, right?”

“I’m not. What can I do to make it in tact again? Days are turning into weeks, it’s almost time and I’m scared as hell.”

“Unfortunately you cannot get the hymen back, just pray that he understands because this is really messed up. Why couldn’t you not think straight and sleep with him instead of someone else? This man would lay his life down for you, you know how much he loves you.”

She sheds a tear, Qambi gets off bed and comforts her. This creates a bad image for all of them as the Ntuli girls. Vumo is the role model, an example and shining star of the Ntuli clan. When everyone doubted Sikelela he kept proving his love over and over again, until everyone accepted him.

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She gave him bathwater and left the room to think and have some time alone. He doesn’t eat late, so she doesn’t have to worry about that.

She walks back into the room after a moment carrying an extra blanket. He’s staring at her, he always does, and sometimes it feels weird.

They sleep with their clothes on to avoid temptations. She gets in bed and lies at the far side of the bed- out of his reach.

“You don’t even want me to kiss you?” he asks with a chuckle.

Get it together, Vumo!

She shifts closer, Sikelela pulls her to his chest and wraps his arms around her. He smashes his lips on her and massages her clothed back with his hand. The kiss gets heated and takes longer, both of them are panting and warmed up.

He lifts her face with his finger and stares into her eyes eyes.

“You don’t look happy. What’s wrong?” he asks.

“Nothing.”

“MaGodide, please talk to me. Did I do something wrong?”

“Sikelela, I’m not a fool. I know I’m not the only one, I know men can’t stay four years without having sex.”

He was not ready for this direction. He’s confused and surprised.

She glares at him, “I know I’m the only one who had to take care of her body.”

“If there was someone else I would’ve changed. I’m still the Sikelela you know, I don’t remember treating you differently or being dishonest to you.”

“Okay then, look at me in the eyes and tell me you are still a virgin too.”

Deep breath...

“You know how old I was when I met you. It was impossible for me to...”

She cuts him short, “So because you’re a man it’s okay for you to come to me damaged? I still have to stay pure for you.”

“I didn’t ask you to, I didn’t need you to be a virgin, I found you as one and supported your dreams.”

“Sikelela! I said look at me in the eyes and tell me you’ve been perfect these four years.”

They don’t fight, at least not like this; over nothing and so aggressively. He’s scared, this is the only person who can do this to him.

“If there was someone else Vumo you would’ve known. I’m still the same man I was four years ago, I still fall in love with you everyday. I don’t see myself with anyone beside you, and that’s the truth.”

“Did you fuck someone in the last four years or not?” Vumo.

He shuts his eyes, takes a deep breath and looks at her. No, he can’t lose her!

“No, I didn’t,” he says.

“Give me your phone!”

“It’s in my jacket.” His heart is sore. His trust is on her, she’s the center of his dreams and visions. If she leaves him too...that would be the end of him. She came into his life and made his future make sense. Only if she could understand how much she really means to him.

His breath has been held up the last 10 minutes while she was searching through his phone.

She puts it away and looks at him remorsefully.

"I'm sorry." She lies on his chest and breaks into tears.

"It's okay, sthandwa sami." He cups her face and kisses her affectionately. Even with her face messed up with tears she's still beautiful and able to make his heart beats like a drum.

His erection grows. Their bodies are embraced together and his hands are running all over her body.

"I know the wait is almost over," he says and bites her neck softly.

She moans. It turns him even more on. "It's cold, are you still not comfortable with ukusoma?"

She wants to say yes but the guilt chopping her heart doesn't allow her to.

"We can try," she says.

He kisses her forehead and whispers a "thank you." He's never touched her inappropriately, their relationship never went beyond hugs and kisses.

He strips his clothes off and helps her out of her dress and panty. His erection is poking his navel and throbbing. It'll be hard not to thrust into the cookie while it's on display, but he's grateful for what he's getting and he's not going to break her trust or make her uncomfortable.

He pushes his shaft between her firmly shut-thighs and starts moving in and out. It's not bad as he thought, he's getting some

pleasure.

“MaGodide, please don’t leave me. I’m nothing without you.” He’s not saying this from the pleasure of her thighs but from the depth of his heart.

“I love you too, Dlamuka.”

He shuts his eyes, apply more pressure to his moves and grabs her buttocks. His orgasm builds up, he’s crying to be let in but that wasn’t part of the agreement.

“No babe, chama khona la.”

“Okay, sthandwa sami!” He’s breathing heavily.

He nuts between her thighs and releases a loud groan as he does so.

Tears burn her eyes as she watches him lies next to her with his fingers trembling. There must be something she can do!

SIKELELA

CHAPTER 4

Vumo is lying on his chest, they're still under blankets, time reads 4am and he has to leave before elders wake up. His fingers are linked into hers, he's drawing a map on her back with his other hand. There's something new that he's been feeling ever since she gave her body to him, even though it wasn't the cherry itself, he's been overwhelmed with gratitude ever since.

He clears his throat, "I don't know how things are going from your side. Month-end I'd like to send my uncles over to pay off my debts."

Vumo holds her breath for a second, and then exhales deeply.

"What's the rush?" she asks.

"It's been years, Vumo. This is not a rush, if I was well off I would've paid everything your father requested from the get-go."

There's a moment of silence.

Sikelela plants a soft kiss on her forehead and pokes his erect shaft on her thighs. It's a cold morning, *Jumbo* is up and ravenous.

"You've taught me a lot about love." He says inhaling a sharp breath and lowering his hand to her naked butt. "I know I haven't opened up to you about my real identity and that may have caused you to doubt me as a man."

“Really, why didn’t you tell me your father was Mkhonto?” she asks lifting her eyes to him. Her thighs are firmly shut but between them is a heated cookie and throbbing clit. The moist between her folds gives her chills down her spine. If Sikelela realizes that she’s longing for penetration he might ask questions. She already knows how it feels like to have two fingers slide inside her core, how to wrap her legs around a man and move with his rhythm- Hubo taught her that. She already knows how it feels like to have an orgasm building up, being muffed and squirting over a man’s face.

“Because I didn’t have a relationship with him. I know nothing about him and his family. He didn’t want me and I don’t know the reason. I was born a Dlamuka and raised as one. I hate the idea of not being wanted by a parent, I’d rather not talk about it.”

“I understand,” she says and suppresses a moan caused by his hand stroking her butt-cheek.

“Did you go to the cleansing ritual after the funeral?”

He slightly shakes his head and pushes his shaft between her thighs. His jaw tightens, he looks at her, and his eyes are filled with nothing but lust.

“Can I mess your thighs again?” he asks with a shallow smile.

Hesitantly, she nods and wraps her hands around his neck. His body is firm and musclebound, his melanated skin is smooth like butter and worth an eye. Theirs was love at first sight, even though she didn’t accept his love proposal right away but the moment her eyes set on him she felt attracted and drawn to him.

He doesn't stand out, he's always the dark-skinned guy at the back who hardly talks to anyone, that turns her on.

"Sikelela," she calls him softly.

He shifts his eyes from her thighs to her face. He looks high on lust.

"I love you," she says.

His response is locking her lips into his and kissing her like the world is coming to the end. His hand is squeezing her butt, his fingers sliding into her cleft and making her uncomfortable.

"MaGodide, you're my life. In the next few months we'll have the freedom to express our love with our bodies." His lips stretch into a lazy smile. "I can't wait to make you a woman," he says.

Her eyes drop. He thrusts between her thighs and moans deeply. He's doing another round, the pleasure is one-sided and the moisture between her folds is turning into a flowing river.

He explodes between her thighs and screams her name as the wave of pleasure throws him off the land of living for a minute.

They both take a bath before getting in their clothes. He asks if it would be possible for him to have a word with Qambi before leaving, Vumo makes the bed and goes to Qambi's bedroom to pass the message. It's common for him to discuss some other things with her sister, especially if it concerns lobola issues.

She wakes Qambi up and remains in their bedroom while Qambi

goes to the rondavel where Sikelela is.

“Sbari unjani?” Qambi greets walking in and taking a seat on the edge of the bed.

“I’m good, sisi. I’m sorry for waking you up.” His smile is rare and quite charming, she has no choice but to pardon him.

“There’s little something I’d like to do for Vumo when she steps down from her position.”

Qambi takes a deep breath and nods. Suddenly she can’t look at him in the eyes. Vumo has put her in a very difficult position.

“I want it to be a surprise and I need you to help me. A little celebration with her friends and peers, you know how girls love their parties, I don’t.”

“Where do you want it to be held?” Qambi asks.

“It could be here or you can book a venue in town. I don’t know if I’d be present, either way I want her to have a great time and to know that I’m proud of her.”

A part of her wants to refuse to be part of this but then Sikelela is in the dark, he won’t understand her reasons.

She sighs, “Okay, please contact me when you’ve organized the funds.”

“Thank you so much, MaGodide.”

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It's normal for her to wake up late if Sikelela had paid a visit, even though they don't do much intimately they still stay up till late hours. She wakes up just a few minutes past 11 and decides to cancel her day. It's not like she'll miss any important classes.

"Are we eating the yogurt or what?" Qambi asks walking into her making the bed.

"Take it, Qambi. I don't have appetite anyway," she says.

"Where did it go? Are you sick?"

"No," she sighs and sits back on the bed with a folded blanket in her hands. "We started ukusoma last night. Today he gave me R1000, that's the biggest amount he's ever given me for no reason and it's not even the end of the month."

Qambi sighs! Her appetite has depleted as well.

"This is not fair, just tell him the truth," she says.

"It's not about the virginity, he said it wasn't a factor but, because of the role I had in the village he had to support my journey. Whether I was a virgin or not, he would've come for me and things would be how they are."

"Then it's easy, just tell him the truth," – Qambi.

"It's about trust, Qambi. If it happened before our relationship things would've been easy, but it happened during our relationship. He's sending cows at the end of the month. I just realize how I messed things up for myself. I might lose this man and I don't

know if I'll ever find love again."

"He's throwing a surprise party for you when you 'step down from the ambassadress position' to celebrate you and show you how proud he is of you."

Vumo buries her face in her hands and sobs quietly. One lie led into another, now she's buried in this deep hole of lies with no way of getting out.

"Vumo tell him the truth," Qambi begs.

She shakes her head, "I don't want to lose him."

"Then what are you going to do?"

"I'll say I was raped."

Qambi's eyes widen in shock.

"Say that and I will personally tell him what you did. You think rape is a joke? You think it can be a cover-up for your unfaithfulness. Do you have any idea what rape is? You slept with a guy willingly, enjoyed yourself multiple times and now you....hey, Vumokuhle!"

She's crying. Why can't her sister understand her fears? Even if Sikelela and her don't work out, she wouldn't want it to be nasty. They've created great memories together, he's the only love she knows and understands.

"You created the tune, now dance to your music, lil sis." Qambi is saying this opening the packet of chips brought by the same relationship she doesn't care about.

Vumo wipes her nose, sniffs back tears and thinks of another

plan. There must be something else, confessing is not on the cards- losing Sikelela is not an option.

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AT THE HLONGWANES

Sguqa walks into his wife watching her TLC channel. She's in their house wearing comfortable short skirt, long socks and baggy T-shirt.

"Babe, you have to dress up," he says.

Zime lifts her head, "Dress up?"

"Urgent family meeting. We are going to the main house," he says.

She yawns! No lie, she loves her husband and his family, but it's hard for her to be comfortable around people who don't want her to be herself.

Sguqa looks at her with his eyes narrowed. "Zime, we don't have much time."

"Okay!" she sighs and gets off the couch.

Sguqa grabs her arm and pulls her by waist back to him. He knows how she feels about his mothers, they don't hide that they don't like her and always make it a point to throw hurtful remarks whenever she's around. All three of them, once those old ladies unite against you there's no winning them over.

“I know how you feel but I can’t leave you behind, you’re a Hlongwane,” he says with his eyes penetrating through her and reading all her emotions.

“I know, Sthembiso. I’m sorry about the long face, I know you need me by your side and...” He shuts her with a kiss.

“Don’t explain, I know. Just keep your head down, I’ll reward you later,” he says.

She smiles, “With what?”

“All I can say is, there’ll be screams of joy filling this house and someone’s legs trembling with juices flowing down.”

“Mmh, I can work with that.”

They both laugh and lock into another intimate kiss.

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There’s an announcement that MaXulu wants to make. Everyone is gathered in her dining room eagerly waiting.

“Which kind of a meeting is this? There’s no food, no drinks and no snacks,” – Thobani asks.

His mother, MaJiyane, looks at the second wife, MaDlamini. There’s a silent conversation they’re exchanging, it ends with a look directed to their ‘lazy’ daughter-in-law and chuckles.

Sguqa senses his wife’s discomfort and holds her hand under the

table. She relaxes.

MaXulu joins in accompanied by Hubo, which is very strange because Sguqa is the oldest, if there's anything concerning the family or business it is ran by him first.

"I'm sorry to disturb everyone. I'm sure some don't even like it here."

Sguqa sighs, "Ma, please get straight to the point."

"Okay, I recommend that MaJiyane and MaDlamini take deep breaths."

Their eyes widen. Were they excluded from the will or something?

"Hlongwane had another child."

Hell, no! They should've taken those breaths.

"From who?" they ask simultaneously.

"Before MaJiyane there was a girlfriend from the Hlabathini village. A Dlamuka girl who ended up falling pregnant with his second son. But unfortunately Hlongwane decided it would be better for him to be raised by his mother's family for certain reasons."

Silence....

Sguqa clears his throat, "Did he support him?"

"No, he cut ties, in every way possible. Nothing should've linked him back to us but it looks like blood calls blood, he's already made his first mark as the off-spring of Dabula Hlongwane."

“So he’s the child that was abandoned? How are we going to fix that?” – Sguqa.

“That’s why we are here, to figure things out. Hubo worries that he’s not safe since he’s attacked the Mshengus.”

Gasps!

Sguqa looks at Hubo awestruck.

“That boy from the playground?”

“Yes, I’ve been following him. He’s not aware of the danger he’s in, I mean these people killed Mkhonto Hlongwane, how more dangerous they could be? He’s a good guy, he’s getting married soon and has great plans for the future.”

“Wow! What if one of us dated him? Baba didn’t think this through,” Londeka says.

“He knows that his father was a Hlongwane and you’re not his type,” Hubo says.

Londeka rolls her eyes and gets off the chair. “Who’s going to help me in the kitchen?”

Sguqa nudges his wife with his elbow. She looks at him with a slight frown and realizes that most eyes are on her.

Damn! She leaves with Londeka.

The family discusses a way forward. MaXulu and one of her sisterwives have to go to the Dlamukas and do what their

husband couldn't do.

There's a tractor driving in. It's not unusual for their drivers to pay a visit if there's something that needs their attention at one of their hardwares. But there's a gunshot before anyone can walk in. A second one follows shortly and everyone on the table scatters. Their sisters are crying, MaXulu and other wives are screaming for help and calling Jesus.

Thobani is holding back Sguqa who wants to run outside and find his wife and sister. They don't know where the attackers are, it's not safe for any of them to just go out.

Another gunshot!

Sguqa pushes Thobani back and dashes out with his gun in hand. Hubo has no choice but to follow out as well, if they die they die.

Their cousin, Nhlalo, is lying in the pool of his own blood next to the tractor. He did say he was going to come around but he wasn't specific. Hell breaks loose but there's not even a shadow of the attackers. But everyone knows who it was. Sguqa runs to the kitchen and finds his sister and wife hiding under the table. Seeing them alive brings him short-lived sense of relief but the fear in their eyes strips him naked from his manhood.

"Please stay here, don't move!" he instructs and storms out angry and hungry for the Mshengu blood.

Not so long ago they killed his father and now his cousin. How much blood are they going to spill from this family? And on the

record, they haven't taken any life from the Mshengus. Sikelela did, for his own personal reasons.

The Mshengus have gone too far!

He needs to get the warriors together and prepare them for a real war.

SIKELELA

CHAPTER 5

These have been the longest four days of his life. Not because there were extra hours in a day but his heart has been looking forward to this weekend. He was actually working, but after receiving that call from Hubo he asked Mhlengi to swap shifts with him so he could go home.

“They killed Nhlalo,” Hubo said over the phone with his voice breaking.

Obviously he didn't know Nhlalo, he only knows Hubo because he's dipped his claws into his life by force. He's not complaining though, for the first time in a very long time he has a friend. Yes, they disagree a lot, when they're together threats and curses fly around like nobody's business, but he'd be lying if he said he wants Hubo out of his life. He's the first connection he has of his father, hearing that nincompoop breaking down over the phone shifted something in his conscience.

“Is he one of you?” he asked Hubo.

“Yes, he's one of us,”- Hubo.

He sighed, “I'm sorry. So what's going to happen now?”

“I'm going to fight and die for my family. They can't do us like this.”

Without thinking twice, he said; “Wait for me, Friday I'm coming.”

He thought it'd be easy, that he'd just swap his shift with Mhlengi, go home and inform his mother that he's going to Mashoba village. But now that he's sitting across her, looking straight into her eyes and cracking his mind about how to begin, he knows he didn't think things through.

"I thought your off starts Tuesday," Cebile says. She hasn't even unpacked the grocery he came with, her instincts tell her that her son is up to something no good.

"I swapped with Mhlengi," he says.

"Why?" – Cebile.

He takes a deep breath, rubs his hands together and drops his eyes.

"Ma, I'm going home," he says.

There's harrowing silence that falls into the room the next two minutes.

"They killed one of Hubo's cousins, he's my friend and I need to be there," he says.

"He's not your friend, he's your father's son and that makes him your brother. Do you think I'm stupid?"

"Whatever he is, I'm going to be there by his side. That cousin paid for my sins."

Cebile frowns, "What do you mean?"

“I mean just that, I’m going to leave before the sun set,” he says.

Cebile sighs and gets off the chair. She picks the shopping bags from the floor and disappears to the kitchen. She didn’t need more reasons to hate Mkhonto, but even in death he’s still hurting her. The son he never wanted is now needed to fight the Hlongwane battles. If she loses her son she’ll personally go and burn all his wives alive, that’s a promise.

Leaving for the city, sending abakhongi to the Ntulis, and many milestones he’s climbed in his life, he’s always needed his mother’s blessing. Today he needs his mother’s blessing to leave what has been a home for the 28 years of his life to his real home where his father was born.

His bag is packed and hung over his shoulder, he knocks on the kitchen door and receives one glance from Cebile.

“Ma, I’m leaving,” he announces.

No response.

“I’ll be back soon.” He turns back with his heart aching, he didn’t want the first day he goes home to leave his mother in this sour mood. When he’s a distance away from the yard Cebile stands at the door and watches him. It should be a ‘fuck-off’ situation, a ‘hamba juba bayokuchutha phambili’, but those instincts are there. This child laid in her womb for 10 months- yes, you read that correctly- and her heart is in tatters as she drowns into the reality that he may not come back on his feet but lying on his back in a

casket.

“Hallowed be thy name!” she mutters watching the shadow of her son disappearing down the valley.

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HUBO

He informed everyone about the arrival of Sikelela but he didn't mention the intention behind it. His mothers are under the impression that he's coming for the cleansing rituals. MaXulu is restless more than other wives, she's scared of the questions he might ask her. Hlongwane has left her in a difficult position, the mess he left behind is now hers to solve. Boy children are uncontrollable, there's a war brewing and they can't leave their houses for hiding because they're still mourning. But they've sent the girls to their uncles, there's three of them; Londeka, Azile and Sanelisiwe. Sguqa sent Zime to a vacation, one of many, but this time he's just hiding her from the unrest in the village. The village have taken sides, some are with the Mshengus and some are standing with the Hlongwanes. It can happen any day, women are now living in fear.

Sikelela calls to inform Hubo that he's almost near Mashoba village. He gets into his Hilux single cab and drives out to fetch him. The Mshengus are burying tomorrow, Nhlalo's funeral is next

week and taking place at his mother's home, KwaMaphumulo. If it was up to him they'd attack them at the cemetery, right as they take down their father and brother's coffins. It would be a good show.

He meets with Sikelela next to the famous local bar, Snayi. It's been long since he went out and had a drink, because of the mourning and fighting, today he's really tempted to come and cool down his head.

"We should check this place later," he tells Sikelela.

"For what?" – Sikelela.

"It's a bar, for drinks obviously."

"Oh, not my thing."

"You'll be my bodyguard then, the Mshengus are sneaky and cowardly as a fuck."

Sikelela doesn't comment any further. All he wants to do is fight, kill and go back to Hlabathini. His heart is still with his mother, how he left her still weighs him down. Hubo won't shut up, he's talking all the way to the Hlongwane grande homestead. It's an open yard, very big, with separate three brickhouses and many rondavels that belong to children. Across the road there's a cross-gable roofed house with overhanging eaves and attached garage. There too, rondavels are symbolic and resembling the ones from the main homestead. It belongs to Sguqa and his wife.

“That’s where we hide if we have problems with the elders,” Hubo says with a chuckle.

Sikelela nods, his eyes are on the fresh grave below the main homestead. It’s awakening emotions he didn’t even know existed. Mshengu and Mxolisi took his chance of meeting this man and getting his answers. They deserved to die, he’s not sorry.

Sikelela doesn’t come from a big family, before his uncle got married it was just him, his mother and uncle. Walking into a house full of people pulls him back into his shell. His face turns darker, he’s tightened his jaw and lowered his hoodie over his forehead. These are strangers and he doesn’t do well with them.

His father’s wives are staring at him. Mkhonto was the same height as him in his late twenties, for them it’s like a sneak back to the past. They’re looking at the young version of their husband and their wounds are still fresh.

“Sikelela, we are happy to finally meet you,” – MaXulu nervously.

He doesn’t anything, there’s nothing to say.

She starts introducing everyone, even the absent sisters.

“Welcome home,” Sguqa says pulling out his hand.

Sikelela shakes it and moves on to the next one, Thobani’s. The wives do the same, they still look uncomfortable though. He’s sitting on the chair, staring at everyone below the hoodie and not opening his mouth unnecessarily.

“We are sitting under the dark cloud, your aunts are not around but Sthembiso will cleanse you tomorrow, namhlanje uzokhotha umlotha ukuze ukwazi ukudla. I’m sorry he died before you could meet him,” MaXulu says.

“Thank you,” he mutters almost inaudible.

“I’m sure you have a lot of questions, before we get into it we have to eat. We’ve been waiting for you the whole day.”

“I don’t have any questions,” he says.

They’re shocked...how come?

Sguqa gets off his chair.

“Let’s step out,” he says.

Hubo gives Sikelela a look of approval. He didn’t need his permission, he gets off the chair and follows out. They’re heading below the yard to do some things...he wants to sleep.

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“She’s a good woman who’s just misunderstood by many people,” – Sguqa. He’s talking about his wife, that’s what he does if he’s not talking about work. He looks peaceful than Hubo, the only reason he’s sitting here and plotting against the Mshengus is because they started it. He looks like his mother, MaXulu. He’s actually a fitness trainer, which explains his physique, and he owns a gym in town.

“I heard you’re in the process of getting married too.”

Sikelela chuckles, “Yeah, hopefully things will come together.”

“Are you in love or you just needed someone?” -Thobani.

“I’ve been in love since I was 24. I’m in love with her, she’s my world.”

Hubo gets up from the pillow he was lying on, he yawns and pulls his shoes.

“Let’s go and check that place,” he says to Sikelela.

Things are surprisingly flowing between him and his brothers. Maybe because they’re not asking him about his life without a father nor bringing him up. They’re talking about themselves, brotherhood talk.

“Which place?” Sguqa raises his eyebrow.

“Snayi. We’ll grab a drink and come back.”

“Do you still remember that we are mourning and the Mshengus are out there and hungry for our blood?”

“They’re singing Hosana at the night vigil for their father to get to heaven,” Hubo says nonchalantly.

Thobani laughs.

“Sikelela, you need to choose your friends wisely,” Sguqa warns.

Hubo chuckles, “I’m not his friend, I’m his brother, he can’t choose or not choose me because I’m his brother for life by fire, by force.”

It's a few ticks away from 9pm, they leave Sguqa's house in Hubo's car and head to Snayi local bar. Thobani wanted to tag along but Sguqa told him he's not going anywhere.

"Tonight was our perfect chance," Hubo says.

"We don't have to sneak up to them. You should call them and tell them to be ready after the burial, I only have three days here and I want to leave once everything has been settled."

Hubo chuckles, "Does it ever occur to you that life is short?"

"I should be asking you. I've been fighting my whole life."

"Why? Do you have anger problems?"

"Because that's how I am. But I do have issues as well, if you were me wouldn't you have them?" He takes a glance at Hubo.

"Not when I have a girl who is my world."

"I see."

Hubo pulls up at the bar, the music is deafening, Sikelela quickly withdraws back into his shell. They walk in, head to the counter, and Hubo orders a bottle of Skky Original, tonic water and a packet of cigarettes. They get seats at the end of the bar, afar from the sweaty crowd and bar fights.

"You're not even going to do one shot?" he asks mixing his drink.

"Nah, I'm good," Sikelela says. He leans back on his seat, throws one foot on top of the table and watches. He has nothing against

alcohol, he's drunk it a few times and could do it again in future, for now he's just focused on saving up for marriage. He wants Vumo home with his mother. Cebile stays alone, literally, because her and MaGwala hardly visit one another even though they're just a heartbeat away from each other. Vumo's presence can change a lot of things, but that waits to be discussed because she might not see things his way, especially with her college education. He's just a security guard, soon his salary won't be able to maintain an educated wife, she'll want more.

Hubo shakes his arm, "You're still good?"

"Yeah," he says with a heavy sigh.

Hubo laughs. He's getting drunk very quick.

"But you look stressed. Who gets stressed in a bar?"

He doesn't say anything. It's not stress, it's fear of the financial future of him and Vumo. She's never complained about money, never directly asked for it or said anything ill about his job, but that can change once she finishes college. He needs a plan, how he's going to make extra cash?

"I don't even know what I'm going to say drives you crazy," Hubo says and claps his hands dancing to the song playing. He's been downing shots after shots, hopefully he won't need Sikelela's help to stand up because that would get him a slap first.

"Bafo, we don't need Sguqa's approval or anyone. When I finish this drink we are going there and shooting them."

Sikelela just looks at him and doesn't say anything. He's not going

to sneak up to the Mshengus, he wants them fairly so that they'll understand who they're dealing with- broad daylight war.

"I know you didn't know him but Mkhonto was a hero bafo. That dude made things happen, I can't believe he's really gone." He hits his head and shakes it. Tears fill up his eyes. Oh Lord, he's that type!

"I miss him," he cries.

Sikelela sighs, only if he listened to Sguqa.

"But it's okay, you're here. I appreciate you, bafo. I know you cannot fill the void he left but you are here and doing great." He holds Sikelela's hand and firmly shakes it.

"Are you done drinking?"- Sikelela.

He wants to go, now!

"I'm proud of you, bafo. I know this country is full of shit, people are full of shit and judgement. But you don't judge people, you always believe in others and...you know what, I love you." He stands up, staggers and almost trips over the table. Sikelela puts him down on his seat.

He laughs, "See, you think I'm drunk. You're judging me. Ah Hubo, you drink too much and and and. I'm not drunk, I'm telling you I'm not drunk."

He pours another shot and gulps it down. He doesn't even react to the bitter taste of vodka. Someone walks past them, Hubo tries to grab him by his jacket but he's already passed.

“Msunu wakho!” he swears at him.

The man looks back and frowns. Hubo swears at him again. He walks back to their table with his eyebrows knitted.

“What did you say?” he asks with his fists balled.

Hubo lifts his one open eye to him, “I said msunu wakho, nokanyoko nokayihlo nokadadewenu nowomfazi wakho no...”

“He didn’t say anything,” – Sikelela.

The man shifts his eyes to him. He looks enraged.

“Oh, you think I’m a fool?” he asks.

“Did he call you by name?”

“No, but...”

“But nothing, please clear from my face, sir.”

He’s hesitant but the stare he’s getting is giving him creeps. He turns and leaves.

“Hubo!ethu stand up, we are going home now,” Sikelela gets off the chair and grabs him up by arm.

“I haven’t finished my drink,” Hubo.

“You did. You are drunk. Please don’t make me slap you.”

He laughs and follows out singing loudly. They manage to get out of the bar, Sikelela scoops him up and goes to the car. He fishes the keys out of his pocket, opens the passenger door and throws him on the seat.

Everyone has gone to bed, all lights are off. Thobani slept at Sguqas. These two will be sharing a bed, but it looks like Hubo is not ready for bed yet. He wants to watch TV but the remote is under Sikelela's pillow.

"You need to open your eyes," he tells Sikelela and squats on the floor humming a song.

He stops humming, "I'm going to tell you something because I'm a good guy and I love you."

Sikelela sighs and pulls the covers over his head.

"Women are liars. In this life do not trust a woman, especially if you are living far from her. Uzokuhurda boy!"

He's silent for a moment, then he breaks into laughter.

"Don't pay lobola, take that money out of savings and drink it." He crawls onto bed and sees that Sikelela is under covers.

"Wake up, I want to tell you the truth. I know something...you shouldn't be waiting for shit!" He sighs heavily and presses his eyelids to release tears. "I'm sorry but it wasn't my fault. I snacked on what was given to me, there was no label."

Sikelela peeks out of the covers, "Hubo, sleep!"

"Bafo, I'm telling you the truth. I don't even remember how long it has been. And now all of a sudden she's telling me that she's someone's fiance. I'm like, who, you? She says she made a mistake and she regrets it because her man is waiting for her. I'm

like yoooooh! You know I'm a good guy, and you're a good guy too Bafo."

Sikelela sighs and pulls covers over his head.

"I'm not drunk, Sikelela. I just sipped, sipped, sipped. ABUSHE, DEMED!" He laughs and rests his head on the pillow.

"Abushe maarn!!"

(Another nomination, please help me win tenants)

SIKELELA

CHAPTER 6

He has blended in with his brothers but not with 'his mothers.' He's been spending most of his time at Sguqa's house, which makes sense because he's not here for a family reunion, he's here to fight the Mshengus. Today is the day, a very sunny Sunday that will set down as the day that shed blood across Mashoba village. He was born ready for war, but here Hubo strengthens everyone with his trusted powders. He woke up everyone by dawn and took them to the river to drown in icy water. There are men from the village, some that are related to the Hlongwanes and Mkhonto's old friends.

While they all go to the main homestead to furtherly discuss how they're going to kill the Mshengus, he stays behind and calls Vumo. He didn't inform her about his departure, he knew if he'd told her she would've reacted the same as his mother and that was the last thing he needed.

She picks up and stays quiet.

Hint number one!

She's angry.

"MaGodide," he says in a lowered voice and rests back on the pillow with his knees up. "I know you're not happy with me and I deserve it."

She sighs audibly, "Two days Sikelela and you haven't called me!"

"MaGodide, I'm sorry. Things have been busy, I wanted to call but I knew you wouldn't understand," he says.

"What wouldn't I understand?" she snaps.

Deep breath!

"That I left, I'm at Mashoba," he says.

Silence...

"I'll explain everything when I come back. Please know that I love you, and I miss you so much," he says.

"What are you doing there?" She sounds different. Not angry but let down- disappointed.

"I'm...I came to help Hubo with something," he says.

Heavy breaths!

"He's my brother," he explains.

"When are you coming back?"

"Tomorrow, hopefully."

Loud sobs...

"MaGodide, I didn't mean to be untruthful to you. I knew you wouldn't understand, I didn't want us to fight. Please find it in your heart to forgive me."

"Please come back," she begs.

“Give me a day, my love.”

She cries openly and loudly.

He feels his heartbeat slowing down. This is the person he cares about more than anything in this world, hearing her cry while he’s on the other side and unable to leave everything and go to her breaks his heart.

“Just one day MaGodide, I will explain everything.”

Sobs...

“Vumo, talk to me.”

“I love you, Sikelela. With all my heart, just remember that, I never stopped and I never will.” Her response puts his heart at rest. His lips stretch into a smile, he takes a deep breath and lifts his eyes to a heavy figure at the door. It’s Hubo with two plates of food.

“I won’t forget, you’re the first thing on my mind when I wake up and the last thing before I close my eyes at night. Please take care of yourself, I will call you tomorrow.”

She sighs deeply, “Okay, my love.”

Hubo sits down with his plate and eats silently for a few minutes. A minute is a long time for him to just shut up. He’s topless, his fresh incisions are still tearing blood.

“Are you okay?” Sikelela asks him.

“I’m good.” He continues eating silently.

Sikelela starts eating as well. He can see that Hubo is not himself but he's not a person to force others to open up. He'll wait until he's ready to talk.

Hubo clears his throat. Took long enough!

"I don't think you should be talking to women and softening up like this before stepping into a war zone," he says.

"She's not just any woman," – Sikelela.

"Do you know her?"

"No, I don't. I met her last week." He's being sarcastic.

Hubo sighs. This is serious to him.

"Check your woman, Sikelela. I know you've been together for a very long time and have great memories together, but don't let your guard down and allow love to blind you."

He frowns, "What do you mean?"

"I know the ambassadress of Hlabathini. I'm trying to get her older sister in my bed. Strangely, she's not Vumokuhle Ntuli."

He's confused. No, actually Hubo is the confused one.

"Vumo is the ambassadress, a new one will be appointed after she's stepped down," he says.

"Wasn't she demoted for bad behavior?"

He frowns, "What? No."

"Ask her, and ask her if she knows me and how does she know

me.”

He stops eating and pushes the plate aside.

“Hubo if you know something let me know, you’re talking about my future wife here,” he says squinting his eyes and popping his fingers.

“What I know is that I’ll never let someone who has my DNA running through his veins be made a fool in front of the whole village. I’ve done something, I regret some of them, I’m enjoying life and learning everyday. During my moments of enjoying life I’ve broken hearts, destroyed people’s hopes and made enemies. I hope you’re not going to turn into one because I really want to be a brother you never had. I know you are the only child at the Dlamukas, which explains why you’re the way you are.” He was coming well until that last statement, but it’s no surprise, his middle-name is Childish.

“Who’s making me a fool?” Sikelela asks impatiently.

“I said talk to your woman, all I can tell you for now is that she’s no longer the embaddaress and she’s hiding a lot from you.”

“How do you know her?” – Sikelela.

“I know her the same way I know other chicks in your village and neighboring ones. Find out more from her.”

He’s uneasy and uncomfortable. Vumo may be famous around the villages but he didn’t think she’d be so known. And the fact that Hubo is saying different things makes him even more uncomfortable. Now more than ever, he wants to finish what the

Mshengus started and go see his Vumo. Why would she hide that she got demoted from the ambassadress position? It doesn't make sense. He would've been there to support her, that's what he's here for.

--

He's impatient, this has to be over so that he can go home and see Vumo. He leaves everybody behind. It's a very hasty decision that he didn't even think twice before wearing his coat, lacing up his sneakers and arming up. He's marching down the valley to join the route leading to the hill that nests the Mshengus. He wants to be done! He want this over.

There's a very intimate bush not so far from the homestead, he knows they'll come out anytime from the houses. He sits behind the trees and waits with his gun next to him. His hands are wrapped around his knees, he's rocking himself back and forth with his jaws clenched. It takes quite some time for the Mshengu warriors to come out, there's a lot of them, the Hlongwanes are definitely outnumbered. He lets them walk past the bush, they're humming a low chorus about "killing" and "winning." He waits until they climb down the hill and then comes out of the bush dusting his pants. He follows behind them.

On the other side of the hill the Hlongwanes are making their way

down to the valley where blood will be shed and the lucky ones will survive. There's no coach, whoever starts shooting first just do so unannounced. The first ones to shoot are the Hlongwanes, undoubtedly Hubo.

Sikelela leans by the tree and watches. What makes the whole scene interesting is that both parts are hurling insults at one another.

Bullets are flying both ways but nobody seems to have caught any. Waste of time and bullets!

Then out of the blue he sees one of the Hlongwane man falling to the ground and the Mshengus rejoicing with insults. Hubo is about to do something stupid, he spots him by the red shirt distancing himself from others. He stands on top of the rock facing down at the Mshengus and fires three times with only one miss. The game of guns is over, now the real war starts. This is not a talk show!

Nobody has extra pairs of life, people start scattering around and running towards different directions.

"Whoever you are, I will find you and I will kill you,"- these are Busizwe's last words before he clears from the scene leaving dead bodies on the ground.

"Tell your warriors I'm home!" Sikelela responds.

He's all charged up, and maybe even taking his anger out on the wrong people. The Hlongwanes cross over to get him from the other side. Everyone is happy with what he did- cornering the

Mshengus and not giving them any chance, there's one person who's not happy with him though.

Sguqa!

--

He's packing his bag. They did the cleansing and got intelezi out of their systems, there's nothing keeping him at the Hlongwanes anymore.

MaXulu walks in, she looks surprised when he sees him packing.

"Why are you packing?" she asks.

Sikelela glances at her, "I'm going back home."

She looks disappointed.

"Oh, when are you coming back?"

"Coming back? I don't know."

"We will come to talk to your mother once we are freed. Please do come back, Sthembiso has to give you what's due to you. Your father left a legacy for..."

"For his children, and he didn't regard me as one. I didn't come here because I needed money, I needed love from him and he left without giving me any. So, I'm good. Thanks for your hospitality."

"I can explain..."

“I’m good.”

Sguqa walks in, unaware of the situation inside.

“Ma, did you see my...” He stops and looks at them.

“Is everything alright?”

“Your brother is leaving,” – MaXulu.

Sguqa looks at Sikelela and nods disappointedly. MaXulu asks him to take Cebile’s number before Sikelela leaves and walks out.

“Why are you leaving? I thought you are only going to work tomorrow night,” Sguqa asks.

“I’ve decided to leave today.”

“Why?” – Sguqa

He sighs, “There are things I need to do.”

“When can we expect you back?”

“I don’t know.”

“It’s not safe for you to be separated from us, especially after that stunt you pulled there. I thought you were better than Hubo but it seems like you’re far worse than him.”

He doesn’t say anything. He zips up his bag and sits to put his trainers on.

“Do you need anything?” – Sguqa.

“No, I’m good,” he says.

“Call if you need something, we are your family regardless of what Hlongwane did. I’m sure he had his reasons and soon you’ll be informed about everything. I will send people to guard you because right now you’re the least safe one.”

“I don’t need anyone to guard me, I’m a guard myself.”

“I didn’t ask you. I’ll send all the information to your phone. And please say goodbye to your mothers before you leave, you don’t know how much this whole thing weighs on their shoulders. Life is not black and white in this family, you’ll understand soon.”

--

It’s late, almost 10pm and he just got home with his guest. Cebile is still sitting in the kitchen, she’s been struggling with insomnia ever since he left. Sikelela walks in, his eyes widen when he sees his mother still awake.

“Ma, are you okay?” he asks.

She doesn’t look at him. Not even one glance!

“I heard about the fight between the Hlongwanes and the Mshengus. You were there too, fighting for the people who’ve never cared about you,” she says.

He takes a deep breath and leans against the cupboards.

“Why are you creating more enemies? Don’t you have enough in this village already?” – Cebile.

"I'm sorry," he says.

He does this everytime to avoid a confrontation with his mother.

"You're not going to apologize, Sikelela. Answer the damn question!"

"I'm sorry," he says.

Cebile lifts her eyes to him. She's breathing fire.

"You're not mentally well. Some screws are loose in your head. What did you fetch MaNtuli for?" She pushes her chair back and stands with her arms folded.

Silence.

"What if they come to attack you and she's here? What am I going to say to her parents?"

Silence.

"You're going to follow your deadbeat father, and I'm sure he'll reject you even in hell." She grabs the keys and walks out, slamming the door behind her.

Her words find a nest in his broken heart. He ignores the strong urge that wants him to break something, so he sits on the chair and starts scratching his ears. A while later he stands up, takes a paper towel and wipes the blood. He washes his hands and looks for something he'll prepare for Vumo.

--

VUMO

She's sitting on bed, playing with her hands and constantly glancing at the door. He didn't explain anything, he called her and told her to be ready while he waited for her outside her home. They always communicate before meeting up, this is very strange.

He walks in an hour later with a plate of sandwiches and juice. He puts it on the table and takes out the basin of her bathwater. She's wearing her nightie and has zero appetite. She only takes two sips of juice.

He walks in, takes off his shirt revealing new incision marks, and he looks at her with a slight frown.

"Why are you not eating?" he asks.

"I'm not hungry," she says.

He nods and covers the plate. Normally he'd beg her to eat until she takes at least one bite. Strangest!

"So, I wanted us to talk..."

Heartbeat on the race!

She cuts in, "About what?"

"Are you still the ambassadress of Hlabathini maidens?"

Her throat instantly turns dry. She drops her eyes and fondles with her hands. Sikelela sighs and sits next to her.

“So it’s true that you were demoted?”

She stutters; “I...I was...umh...I.”

“Vumo, damnit! What’s hard? Were you demoted or not?”

She swallows hard, “Yeah...yes. I had a fight with the girls and Sis Thenjiwe replaced me.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I was ashamed and scared.”

He blows out a huge breath.

“That’s pretty sad because I thought I was your shoulder to lean on and your best friend. But it’s all good, so how do you know Hubo Hlongwane?”

Her eyes pop out. Her heart almost stops beating. She reaches for the juice with a trembling hand and takes a few sips.

He’s staring at her, not in an adoring way like he usually does.

“Vumo, I asked a question,” he says.

She shakes her head, “I don’t know who that is.”

He takes his phone from the table and scrolls down his Whatsapp app. He stops on Hubo and zooms in his picture.

“This man,” he shows her.

She blinks rapidly and shakes her head.

“I don’t know him,” she says.

“Okay, let me call him then.” He logs out of Whatsapp and dials Hubo’s number and presses the call button. It rings to voice-mail. Vumo cuts her silent prayer with a silent Amen.

But no, he’s calling again.

This time Hubo answers.

“Miss me already?” he asks.

Sikelela takes a deep breath.

“She’s saying she doesn’t know you.”

Hubo chuckles, “Okay, maybe I know the wrong one because that one knows me very well.”

“How does she know you?”

“She knows me the same way other girls know me.”

Sigh! He drops the call and looks at Vumo.

“What’s going on?” he asks.

“I don’t know. Why did you bring me here?” She’s blinking back tears.

He gets up and paces around the room. His ears are burning, from the scratching and frustration.

“Vumo, do I know you?” he asks, squatting in front of her and placing his hands on her legs.

“Yes. What kind of a question is that?”

“I’m not sure of anything now. The baddest player of all times claims to know you and he accurately told me about your demotion. Make it make sense, please.”

The vein on her temple is throbbing. She lets her tears flow down freely. His jaw tightens, he takes his eyes off her because the state she is in now breaks his heart.

“I’m sorry, I was ashamed about my behavior. You’ve done so much for me, I know it made you proud that I was the face of this village and you always supported me. I didn’t want you to be disappointed in me.”

He inhales sharply and nods.

She brushes his head and apologizes again while sobbing.

“I’m still disappointed, MaGodide. You don’t trust me enough.”

“I’m sorry,” she says.

“So what’s next?”

“I don’t understand.”

“I’m asking where do we go from here? I don’t know if I still trust you but I know I do love you and I want us to work on trusting each other again. I want you to know that I’m here for you, no matter what happens.”

“Okay, let’s do that. I will prove myself to you, I’ll never hide anything from you again.”

He releases a sigh and gets back on bed. He links his hand into hers and kisses the back of it. Their eyes meet, he looks broken

and she looks guilty.

"I had a dark day, my sorrows keep piling up. I don't know what I did wrong in this world." He shuts his eyes and shakes his head vigorously.

"I'm not normal, MaGodide. I know Ma said it out of anger but I know there's something abnormal about me. People already have opinions about me, if I go to the doctor it will give them more reasons to say I'm crazy."

"What do you mean?" she asks with a slight frown.

"I'm different from other people. I feel it everywhere I go, even at home I felt different," he says.

Well, she knows he's different, that's one of the reasons why she fell in love with him. She kisses his lips and stares into his eyes adoringly.

"It's not a bad thing to be different and having your emotions, and mental state evaluated does not mean you're crazy. If you need me I will go with you."

He sighs with relief, "Thank you, MaGodide."

They kiss again. This time it's deeper, sensual and longer. His hands are grabbing her hips and massaging around her waist.

He's breathing heavily. "Mama!" he says pushing her down on her back and chasing her lips once again.

He slides between her legs and locks her lips into another intimate kiss.

Her nightie is pulled up, he's brushing her thighs.

"MaGodide, let me make love to you," he asks.

She blinks rapidly and pushes his chest off her.

"I'll be gentle. In two weeks time my uncles will pay for all the damages, I've waited for too long, MaGodide. Please free me, ungizwele kube kanye."

"I was not ready for this, Sikelela."

He chuckles, "Neither was I. But do we need to prepare?"

"Umh..yes...I mean, no."

He brushes her lip with his finger and smiles.

"I know you're scared but trust me it's not bad as you think. I'll stop if you tell me to, I just want to wake up tomorrow as a happy man."

"What if you don't wake as one?" she asks.

"Being inside you is going to complete me, MaGodide. Right now nothing matters more than to be inside you and making love to the only woman I love in this world."

She chuckles, "What about your mother?"

"Ah, you know the drill."

She frowns, "What's that?"

"Hubo's language."

Dry chest!

“Manje ungibekaphi MaGodide?” (So what do you say)

She wants to grab her bag and run out. She wants to faint or fake sickness. But this moment is coming, whether she delays it or not.

A silent prayer is needed!

“Okay,” she says.

He plants a soft kiss on her

SIKELELA

CHAPTER 7

LONDEKA HLONGWANE

We are different from our brothers. We were raised differently. We were closer to our father than we are to our mothers. I know most people would disagree, but my father had a heart of gold. That man loved loudly and whole-heartedly. He defied the odds and worked his way up to build a legacy for his family. Just like they always advise in funeral policy adverts; my father prepared for his death and made sure we'd be covered even after his death, both by the love he gave us while he was still alive and financially.

I hate that our lives are now in danger. I hate that my brothers have to stay armed at all times because the bloody Mshengus are out for our blood. But I'm proud of them for fighting for our father. Mkhonto was never a coward, he didn't fight unnecessarily but he surely did deal with people who messed with him.

I'm my father's daughter; tall like he was, with a snub nose and dark skin, though I'm a shade lighter than him. I have a deep voice, almost sounding like him when I laugh. But one thing I missed was his eyes, people used to tease him about them calling him the viper. His pupils almost looked slit like those of a venomous snake, the viper. I have big eyes and normal circular pupils. He always praised me for them, saying he was grateful that I didn't take after his. It felt as if he hated his eyes, and everything about himself. But he didn't have low self-esteem, which made it a bit

strange.

Enough about my father, I'm in hiding here. Forget that I'm in a bar and sipping on Savanna, as far as Sthembiso and my uncle know I'm at the Xulu residence tucked in my bed safely. We were sent away, Azile went to the Dlaminis and Saneli is at the Jiyanes. We are safer at our uncles than we are at home. As I said, I'm a daddy's girl, I don't do well when I'm away from home. I get frustrated and depressed. Being 25 and unemployed also adds to my sorrows. Everyone thinks it's not a big deal because I get everything I want at home. I have a car and a loaded credit card and a very fancy flat in town. However I need to be on my own feet. I long for independence and soon I'll be bribing companies to take me in. Playing by the book hasn't taken me any far, I'm bottoming chairs with colorful certificates in my drawers.

I'm on my phone browsing through the internet for jobs, loud giggles break behind me. The last time I checked I was the only girl here, some came to buy and left. I'm drinking inside with a few gents scattered around the tables. I'm not ugly but I know I'm not the most approachable girl with this Gumtree height and shaved head. Gosh, I even walk like a man, it will take a really brave man to ask another man out.

I turn my eyes and they meet the one and only Melamina Mshengu. I'm about to stab a bitch to death! She can't be here laughing and eating ribs with those men while my father and

Nhlalo are dead because of her family. I think I'm two years younger than her but that doesn't amount into anything, I'm taller than her and I've been very friendly to my brother's gym getting muscles.

I empty the remaining drink down my throat and collect my purse, I slide it under my arm and make my way to their table.

I'm tempted to say "hello bitches" but us, the Hlongwane ladies, were taught to carry more dignity. So, I walk around their table with their eyes following me and stand behind white T-shirt man whose face I didn't even look at carefully.

"Londeka," – Mela.

I fake a grin, "Thee Melamina. So how far are your brothers?"

"What does that have to do with me?"

"Weren't you all shitted by the same father?"

She tilts her head back and breaks a chuckle. I hate people who laugh at my face. I grab a glass from the man I'm standing behind and empty it on her face. The chaos breaks! I was wondering how long she was going to act cute for these men.

"Move, motherfucker!" I shout pushing the annoying man standing in front of me. Bottles are flying around the bar. I don't know if these men are her bouncers or pussy-lickers, they're not letting me get to her. Then all of a sudden there's a buffy man cuffing my hands. I turn my head to look at him, he's a bloody security guard.

If he wanted to be a police officer he should've went to college, I'm not his doll to practice his dream job on me.

"Hey wena gqayinyanga, who do you think you are?" I'm trying to fight him off. On the other side of the table Melamina is being cuffed and yelling too.

Where's the white T-shirt man who's been holding me? Now he's scared of a damn bar security guard.

I turn my face to him, "You're just going to stand there?"

He frowns. Oh Lord, I hate him!

"Tell them to let go of me!" I scream.

Mela screams too; "Sgcino, dammit!"

He clicks his tongue, pours himself a shot and drinks very relaxed. Security guards take us to a dark backroom with empty crates of beer and one smelly bed. I bet this is where the manager sleeps with female employees. I can picture them holding onto the stacked beer crates and giving him from behind.

"If I go to jail you're going to pay," – Mela.

She thinks this is time for threats. And she makes weak threats with that yellow face of hers. I can't be threatened by a light-skinned girl, not even in my wild dreams. One scratch on that face she'll be bleeding a blood river.

"Why can't your useless boyfriends get us out of here?" I ask her.

"They're not my boyfriends. Colleagues, bitch! People I work with, but you wouldn't understand that because you don't work."

Wtf! Bitch get out of the manager's fuck room.

"I make what you make in 10 years in 10 months," I say.

She rolls her eyes, "Trust-fund baby. I can't wait for us to go to the holding cell, bed-bugs are going to have you for dinner. We will eat stale bread and sugarless black tea, cooks fetch water from the sewage pipe before they cook."

I scream! I want my brothers. I can't spend a night in jail, I'm not that strong. Why did my father leave me?

"There are cockroaches too, I've been there. Do you know scorpions? They crawl on your skin while you're asleep, some lay eggs on your face." She wants me dead, I swear the Mshengus get a reward for each soul they take from the Hlongwanes.

My skin is itching, I'm scratching my body and crying my lungs out. The door handle turns, someone steps in with a cigarette between his fingers. It's that white T-shirt guy. I can't remember his name but I've never been so happy to see a stranger.

"Please get me out of here, tell the bar manager I'll pay for his glass and repair everything I destroyed." I'm begging, if my knees weren't so cute I would've knelt down.

"We are going straight to the car, if you start fighting again I will drive you back here and let security guards to call the cops," he says.

Relief spreads throughout my toes and ears. I swear I've never loved a stranger like this.

We follow him to the car outside quietly and climb to the back. This is not the smartest decision because he's one of Mela's colleagues, that means he's on her side and they can both turn against me along the way.

He fastens the seatbelt and turns his head back to us.

"Where do you stay?" he asks me.

It's a secret location, if Mela finds out her brothers will know and they'll come and kill me.

She looks at me and rolls her eyes. "You're not that important, say the damn address!"

"Bitch, shut the fuck up! You..."

The man grunts angrily, "Geez! You two, I'm going to leave you here and go back inside."

Phewww!

"Blackwood Park, Khoza Street next to the library. If anything happens to me you two will be responsible," I say.

"Here we go again!"- Mela rolls her eyes.

The man laughs. So I'm their clown, they laugh when I talk?

"What's funny?" I ask.

"How much did you drink? You don't make any sense when you talk."

Wow, I've never been insulted like this in my life! I don't make sense when I talk, I graduated with Cum Laude from Wits.

"Mela please talk to your friend," I warn.

She laughs, "Why? He's saying the truth."

Okay, I didn't need their lift. I have a car at home and it's a better model than this one. I will call a taxi. I open the door and climb out.

I cross the road and stand on the other side scrolling down for the driver's number. I don't know when he got out of the car, I just see him standing in front of me and boring me with his stare.

"It's not safe for you to be standing on the road like this?"

Oh, how humble! So down to earth, in fact even under the earth.

"And it's safe to be with you and Mela in the car?" I ask folding my arms and holding his stare.

"Mela is harmless, we work in the same department and she always talks against violence. It's a pity that she comes from a family of violent people but she's not what you think. And I know you're not what I saw tonight either, you just lost your father and you're adjusting to a new reality. I'm so sorry about that."

Deep breath! I cancel the call and look at him. He looks...gorgeous is not the word to describe a man, however handsome doesn't describe him accurately.

"Sgcinumyalo Zulu," he holds his hand out.

I roll my eyes and shake it. Talk about starting on the wrong foot! How is he abiding by the instructions- gcinumyalo- while he's out here with girls drinking? We always disappoint our parents.

"Call me Sgcino, please," he says.

"Alright, I'm Londeka Hlongwane. Are you Mela's boyfriend?"

"Colleague, Londeka! Maybe one day you'll meet her special person. Can we go to the car now?"

I nod, "Okay."

He opens the door for me, Mela rolls her eyes as I take a seat.

"Did she throw another tantrum?" she asks Sgcino.

He chuckles, "Peace, please. Do you guys want ice-cream?"

"Nooo!" – we both say.

What are we now? Toddlers.

"I guess we are going straight home then because I'm not allowing neither of you to drink again," he says.

Did my father rise from death? This man just used the word 'allow' one me, I don't know whether to tell him or not.

On second thought, let me behave for once.

He turns up the music, which perfectly keep Mela's and my mouth shut. I don't know if we would've gotten to Blackwood Park without grabbing each other's throats.

He pulls up outside the gate. My uncle is coming back in the morning, that one sleeps 'ama-outs', so I'm not worried about anyone asking me questions. I open my door to get out of the car, and Mela opens hers too.

"Where are you going?" I ask her.

She mustn't test me! I hate the Mshengus with my heart, lungs and kidneys.

"You think you can mess my dress and get away with it? I'm coming inside, you're giving me something clean to wear," she says.

"You're joking right?" She has to be, I mean...

"We can stand here all night if you want. I'm following you inside and you're giving me something to change into. Next time you'll think twice before acting like a brat."

"Ask your boyfriend in the car to go buy you something to wear," I say.

"Sgcino is not my boyfriend and he's not the one who threw a drink at me. So what are we doing? Standing here and arguing or going inside?"

Fuck the Mshengus, all of them and their livestock!

I'm getting her the most ugliest dress I can find. The hideous one MaXulu got me from the free market will suit her perfectly. It's a green shirt-dress with bubble sleeves.

I lead her to my bedroom and tell her to sit on bed while I search. But no Mshengu ever listens, instead of sitting down she's wandering around the room and touching my things leaving her ugly fingerprints on them.

"I'm stinking, I think I need a bath before I change," she says.

This girl is tiring. I can't deal with her.

"No!" I say.

She...my goodness...she takes her dress off and stands in front of my mirror in her underwear. Nice body structure by the way!

"Do you know how expensive water is?" I ask her.

"You could've thought about that before messing my dress with alcohol," she says.

I roll my eyes and go to the bathroom to run a bath for her.

"I want a bubble bath," she yells.

"This is not a hotel!"

I leave her soaking herself in a bath and go to the kitchen to fix myself a sandwich. Guess who's sitting on the kitchen chair? Sgcino. Where do they think we are? If my uncle walks in here I have two pages speech to present.

"I was not safe outside," he says.

Sigh!

“You are a man, why do you need to be safe?”

He laughs. I hate his laugh because it’s too fake.

“This is not my house, if my uncle finds out that I let a man in he’ll chop me to death,” I say.

“You’re grown, they must understand that there are men who will come in and out of your life and one that will be in your life forever.”

Okay, I don’t know what that means.

“I’m making a sandwich, do you want it?” I ask.

“I want your number,” he says.

“Which sandwich is that?”

“Come on, you threw my expensive Scotch whisky and put me in the middle of your fights, the least you can do is to give me your number.”

I hold my hand out for his phone, he gives me something with buttons, how old is he? 70?

“Don’t you have a better phone?” I ask.

He chuckles, “Punch in your number and ignore other things.”

This is hard to ignore, even MaXulu who was born in 1966 now has a flat-screen cellphone.

“How old are you?” I ask him.

“38,” he says.

I gasp in shock. He’s so old!

“Why are you not in bed with your wife and kids?”

“I’m sitting with her right now, our kids are coming soon.”

Where was I? Oh yeah, sandwich. I should make one for Mela too before she reminds me how I threw a drink on her and messed her dress and possibly emptied her stomach too.

“Londeka, I need a plastic bag for my dress,” – she’s coming from the bedroom.

I turn my head and look at her. Hold on a second...

“Oh my goodness!” I choke in laughter. She’s the worst dressed woman I’ve ever seen. That dress has a ribbon below the neck, what was MaXulu thinking buying this for me.

“This is your dress, why are you laughing?”

Someone call double one-two, I’m dying here.

“Should I take a photo for Sboniso?” – Sgcino.

Now she’s finally realizing how ugly she is. She has her hands on her hips and rubbing her lips together.

“Take a picture with that phone of yours?” I ask Sgcino.

He fishes another one from his pocket, an iPhone with triple cameras. So he has two phones, a fancy one and old one with

buttons?

“So my number deserves to be stored in the ugly phone?” I’m hurt, what does he take me for. Am I that cheap?

Instead of answering he’s frowning at me. I’m not going to answer his calls, that’s it.

SIKELELA

CHAPTER 8

SIKELELA

He thought he'd be excited on this particular day but sadly he's nervous. He grabs her boob and fondles with her nipple. She's moaning in pleasure as his tongue swirls behind her earlobe. He presses his finger on her clit and plays with it.

She's wet, so drippin' wet!

"I love you, MaGodide," he whispers against her ear and looks at her in the eyes. "With all my heart." For some reason his heart is beating heavily against his chest, his hand is sweating up.

He gets off her and takes a condom from the drawer. She gives her a look that he ignores; men keep condoms in their rooms for unprepared moments like these.

He dresses his Rumbo up and locks her lips into another kiss. His hands massage between her thighs and tease her clit. He looks at her again, her eyes are shut but he stares at her anyway. He hasn't looked at another woman in years, she's his forever and right now he's not too sure she understands that.

She's always beautiful; like a precious stone he can stare at all day long. He's always considered himself lucky to have this beauty in his life.

"MaGodide look at me," he says.

She opens her bulbous eyes and locks them into his. His heart beats differently. How is it possible to love someone so much?

“I couldn’t give you everything because I didn’t have everything, but I gave you my heart. I don’t know if I can love another woman the way I love you and I don’t even want to try,” he says with a heavy heart.

She inhales sharply and nods.

“I love you too, Sikelela,” she says.

He’s still staring, she lifts her head and kisses his lips. He smiles thinly, worry is still gleaming in his eyes but he’s present, he’s here with her. He kisses her too, their lips lock longer. His tongue swirls in her mouth and chases after hers. He sucks her lower lip and moans in her mouth.

He brushes her mound and positions his tip to her button. He rubs her, she starts moaning again and digging her hands on his butt. He kisses her again and inhales sharply.

She’s ready!

“I won’t hurt you,” he says and lifts her leg up.

She flinches. He plants a soft kiss on her cheek and pushes the head in her opening. He makes two attempts and pulls out. Then he kisses her and pushes in again. Like a snake slithering into its whole, he slides in and fits half of his shaft. His head drops on her chest, he takes a deep breath and pushes in until he’s completely in.

“Babe!” she cries and groans loudly.

He stops moving, a minute passes with him buried on her boobs and saying nothing. He buckles his hip, she flinches and whimpers.

“What’s your problem?” he asks.

She sniffs, “It’s painful.”

“Yini ebuhlungu ngoba uyalazi ipipi?” (You know the dick, so what’s painful)

Tears burn her eyes but she grips on her emotions and looks at him hoping he’ll lift his eyes to her. There’s nothing she can say now but the love she has for him is written all over her eyes. She loves this man, more than she’s ever loved anyone in this world.

He plunges in two more times and pulls out. He lies on his back and shuts his eyes with his upper lip curved into a scowl.

“Please, let’s continue,” she says placing her hand on his chest.

He doesn’t move. She runs her fingers on his chest hair and lets tears run down her cheeks. She’s not proud, if anything she’s full of regrets and self-hate. She hates herself for laying in bed with a man that wasn’t Sikelela. Her heart is here, she can’t love another man, she wants her abnormal dark-skinned introvert.

“I made a mistake,” she says.

He takes a deep breath and rolls off bed. He picks his pant and wraps the condom and dresses up. Vumo starts sobbing loudly, he can’t be walking out on her!

“Babe let’s talk, I’m begging you!”

He grabs his phone, puts on his jacket and walks out. He’s leaving her with hiccups; curled up on bed like a little baby and crying her eyes out.

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Cebile knocks at their door, she’s not that kind of a mother-in-law but they’re now overdoing it. It’s almost 9am and these two haven’t woken up.

“Sikelela, are you two even alive inside here?” she asks banging the door outside.

After a minute the door handle shifts, Vumo opens with swollen eyes. Cebile’s eyes widen. Sikelela mustn’t dare practice GBV in her house! Yes, he built it and bought everything, but this is her damn house.

“What’s wrong?” she asks with a frown and steps inside.

Vumo starts crying all over again.

“Where’s Sikelela?” – Cebile.

“I don’t know, Ma.”

Now she’s confused. If Sikelela is not around then who made her cry?

“Did you fight?” she asks.

Vumo shakes her head with tears running down her cheeks.

“Then why are you crying?”

No answer. More tears.

Cebile searches for her phone, she finds it and calls Sikelela.

He answers...

“Sikelela where the hell are you?”

“Ngikwagogo.” Kwagogo is another rondavel in the yard.

She drops the call even more confused. Clearly there was a fight, they’ve never slept in different rooms, that’s a sign.

She asks Vumo to cover her head and follow her to the kitchen. She makes her a cup of coffee and leaves to check on Sikelela.

He’s lying on his stomach on a reedmat covered with a lean blanket, there are fresh scratches on his ears. Her heart drops to her feet, she walks in and stands next to him.

“I found MaNtuli crying in your bedroom. What’s going on?”

No answer.

“Did you hurt her?”

This time he answers; “No.”

“Can I talk to both of you? She’s in the kitchen.”

“No.”

“Sikelela, you said you’re sending lobola to her family and you

can't do that while you two are fighting."

"I don't want to see her, please bring me a kettle of water, I want to bath and leave, I'm working tonight."

"You're leaving her here?" – Cebile.

He shuts his eyes, "Ma please, I don't want to talk about her."

"Should I update your uncle?"

"Ma, please give me space." He opens his eyes and looks at his mother. He's broken; his eyes are empty and reflecting to the emptiness of his soul. Everything he's ever dreamed of, his life; present and future, just shattered in front of his eyes. He never got his father's love but he found love, he was sure he was holding onto that love for the rest of his life. He was going to have children with this woman and he was going to be the best father to them. But now all that is gone because of this fat lie.

Cebile walks into the kitchen and asks Vumo to go and sort whatever it is that's going on with Sikelela. She knows her son was created differently, he's one of the strongest people she knows, but when it comes to his love life Vumo has always been his weakness. She's watched him grow from a lonely boy into this loving man, and it's been satisfying knowing that he's able to do what his father couldn't do; loving and growing with one woman.

Vumo walks in and finds him leaning against the wall with a

blanket pulled over his knees. He doesn't look at her, not even when she kneels besides him and starts crying.

"I was stressed, feeling worthless and disappointed in myself. You were not around and I didn't want you to know. I was scared that it would change how you see me. I ended up getting mixed with a wrong group of girls and doing things without thinking. I lost myself in that week, not just physically but emotionally as well."

His Adam's apple bobs up and down, he inhales sharply and bares his teeth in a grimace.

"Sikelela, I'm begging you. Find it in your heart to forgive me."

"I forgive you, please now leave me alone."

"But..."

"Alone! Leave me alone, Vumokuhle."

She gets up, wipes tears off her face and turns to the door.

He exhales heavily, "Why didn't you let me go?"

She stops and swallows nothingness.

"If I wasn't what you wanted why didn't you tell me? Why did you wait until now to hurt me? So many years, so much love, so many dreams Vumo!"

"I still love you, Sikelela. Why are you talking like we are over?"

"On top of everything I endure in my daily life you thought it would be okay to turn me into a laughing stock as well? That's how much you love me, right? You love me to the point of being able to

wake up next to me and lie to my face the whole year.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t know how to...”

He shakes his head, cutting her short.

“Was it Hubo?” he asks.

He shouldn’t have asked this. It’s not a good...

“Talk!” he grits his teeth and gets up on his feet within a blink of an eye.

She steps back until she’s standing against the wall.

“Yes...Sikelela, I’m sorry,” she’s crying again.

He stops... and sits flatly on the floor.

“I wish I can give you my pain right now, not to hurt you, but to make you feel the amount of pain I’m feeling right now. You hurt me like you were hurting your worst enemy. So brutal, you didn’t even care about...” He buries his face and blows out a heavy breath. He presses his lips together firmly and shakes his head. She needs to leave, she can’t have that satisfaction of watching him break down on top of everything she’s watched him do out of deceit.

“Leave!” he whispers in a breaking voice.

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HUBO

It's been a week since Sikelela called him at night asking him about his relationship with Vumo. The next morning he tried to call but Sikelela wasn't answering or returning his calls. The Mshengus have tried to attack Sguqa but failed, however they're the least of his worries right now. He's worried about Sikelela who's been ignoring his calls and messages.

Again, he's at his workplace chasing after him like a girl he's trying to get to bed with. They don't do anything except walking up and down, checking passengers and making sure there are no break-ins or fights. This is a chilled job, only if the salary wasn't so low.

Mhlengi takes him to where Sikelela is. He's sitting on a plastic chair behind a guard-booth with his head lowered.

"Dlamuka, you have a guest," – Mhlengi.

He lifts his head and looks at Hubo. He doesn't look happy to see him, but he never looks happy to see anyone.

"So I'm chasing you around now? Ngiyakushela," Hubo asks trying to read his darkened face. "Are you good?"

"Hubo, I don't want to see you," – Sikelela.

He nods and lets a minute of silence pass.

"I didn't know about you being my brother, neither did I know about her being someone's woman. You understand that, right?"

"I only understand that I don't want to hurt you or her, and I don't

want to lose my job. That's why I'm asking you to leave me alone."

"That's not fair. I didn't know..."

"Hubo! I don't care! I'm hurt by a Hlongwane, the same way my mother was hurt by one. You didn't love her but you still messed with her. I really don't want anything from you. You have Sthembiso and Thobani, I don't belong in your world."

"We are brothers, whether you like it or not, we have one blood running through our veins," – Hubo.

Heavy breath and silence!

"I'm not going to be in your face, I'll leave because I respect your feelings, but always remember that you have a home and a brother in me." Hubo turns and leaves.

He shuts his eyes and buries his face.

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CEBILE

She's always wanted a daughter-in-law, but not this way. Vumo just moved in with all her bags, wore her headwrap and makoti dresses, and began her duties. Sikelela is yet to pay lobola for her, if that's still happening. She enjoys the company and loves that she does everything around the house, but this could lead to the Ntulis demanding a fine from them on the lobola day

It's day four and Vumo is still here. Cebile finally dials her son's number and calls him. He's been unable to talk ever since he left, that's how he is when he's going through something; he shuts everyone out.

He answers; "Sawubona Ma."

"My boy, are you well?"

"I'm trying to be. I'm actually on my way home, do you need anything?"

"Really? Let me ask MaNtuli to write a list," Cebile says rushing towards the door.

"Wait Ma, you're asking who?"- Sikelela.

"Oh, MaNtuli is here. She came with her bags and everything, I'm not sure if her family know but I'm enjoying her presence. We do everything together, she's also a good cook."

"I didn't ask her to come there. I have nothing to do with that girl. Maybe she's there to help you with house chores, like a maid. I think I'll take a taxi back to Durban and ask Hlabathini drivers to carry your stuff for me."

"Sikelela, you introduced this girl to me as your girlfriend. Not my girlfriend! You sent people there and asked for her hand in marriage. It wasn't me! So you cannot run away from home and leave me to deal with your woman. I'm not your grandmother."

"Then tell her to leave," he says.

"And become the evil mother-in-law?"

“You care, I don’t.”

Cebile sighs in defeat.

“At least send us money, she needs toiletries and clothes. And we are running out of grocery, I can’t feed her vegetables and tin food everyday. She also needs to travel to college. I don’t want her parents to blame me if she ends up not finishing school,” she says.

“She must get it from those she sleeps with,” Sikelela mutters in a very lowered voice.

“Huh?” Cebile frowns.

“I said I’ll send an E-wallet.”

“Thank you, but you also need to come home. She’s still young, she needs your company. She can’t be sleeping alone everyday.”

She doesn’t get it. That’s the problem about his mother; she wants them to be what her and Mkhonto never were.

“I’ll call you back, Ma,” he says and drops the call.

Cebile goes to Sikelela’s room and knocks. Vumo opens, she was just taking a nap after finishing all her chores.

“Sorry to disturb you, I just got a call from Sikelela. He says he’ll send an E-wallet, we can go to the shops tomorrow after your classes.”

“He’s not coming home this week?” – Vumo.

“No, he’s working, one of his colleagues went home for an emergency,” Cebile says.

She still doesn’t know what happened between the two of them, but she’s not about to hurt her daughter-in-law’s feelings. Sikelela has to man up and clarifies to her that it’s over, if that’s the case.

“Umh...Ma,” she calls as Cebile turns to leave.

She looks back at her.

“I’m not sure I’m okay,” she says and takes a deep breath. “I didn’t get my periods but I haven’t been doing...you know.”

“How so?” – Cebile.

“Sikelela and I haven’t gone all the way. We did ukusoma and with our attempt to the actual course he used protection and we ended up not doing anything.”

Oh, Jesus Christ! She has to have this deep conversation with a young girl. But maybe she wasn’t comfortable discussing it with her mother, that’s why she packed and came to stay here.

“I don’t know what the chances are, but I know that pregnancy can happen from ukusoma, depending on how close he was from your cherry,” she says.

“He won’t believe me. I don’t want to have a baby if it won’t have a present father, Sikelela will think I’m lying and pinning the pregnancy on him.” Now she’s crying.

“But he’s the only one you did it with, right?”

She nods, “Yes.”

“Then you don’t have to worry, Sikelela can be everything but not a deadbeat father to his own child. Don’t do something stupid, if you’re pregnant then motherhood starts now; protect your baby. You’ve been sleeping here, at home. I’m your witness.”

She wipes the tears and nods. But she’s not sure if she’s not about to become another Cebile; a single mother. Chances of Sikelela denying this pregnancy are high, and she’ll be deserving that. However, it’s been over a year since she slept with Hubo, who is the only man she’s ever shared a bed with beside Sikelela, so she knows who the father is. That’s if she’s really pregnant, her periods could be delayed because God was busy with other things and forgot her flow, she’s yet to test. Her heart is torn into two; one half wants this baby so that she can easily fix things with Sikelela, but another one doesn’t want to go through all the trials that being pregnant may come with.

SIKELELA

CHAPTER 9

Two weeks have passed, Sikelela hasn't come home. Cebile has been making up stories but now it's clear that she's being lied to, Sikelela is not coming home because of her. She took the pregnancy test and indeed she's pregnant. She wanted to share the news with Sikelela, the sooner he finds out about it the better, but he's keeping his distance. Cebile is supportive, she's reached out to her family to inform them about her 'visit' and her parents were okay with it. They know Sikelela, her father trusts him and considers him 'the perfect match' for his daughter. He worked for it; for the first two years Sikelela worked on winning every Ntuli's heart over. Even Qambi is blatantly taking his side on this, she made it clear that she would be supporting Sikelela on any decision he'd take after finding out. She's been telling Vumo to let him deal with the betrayal and come back home. But she cannot do that, hymen or no hymen she's still fit to be a Dlamuka makoti and she's ready to be one.

This weekend is the weekend that was set for lobola. Sikelela's uncle is coming home, he would have no choice but to come home as well. He hasn't canceled with the Ntulis, Vumo's parents are waiting for their cows. She should've gone home a few days ago to help with the preparations but she asked Qambi to manage everything, she needs to see Sikelela before leaving.

It's Friday today, her overnight bag is packed and ready, she's

travelling to Effingham where Sikelela stays. But she'll check in his work place first; she's not sure about his working shifts.

Cebile walks into her wrapping her head in front of the mirror and heaves a low sigh. She's been here before; pregnant and abandoned. She wouldn't wish that experience even for her worst enemy, sadly her son is now putting this child through the same thing. But she trusts him to change his ways; to come back home and take care of his pregnant fiance. Yes, he looks like Mkhonto, but he's not his father's son. He's a Dlamuka, and the Dlamukas don't run away from their responsibilities.

"Did you eat?" she asks Vumo.

She nods, "Yes."

"I wrapped ujeqe and boiled chicken for you to give him. I know he lives on bread that side," she says.

Vumo chuckles. She's been to his rented room, he actually cooks and lives normally. But mothers always worry, it's their nature.

Cebile walks to her and helps her wrap the back. She stands behind her and stares at their reflection through the mirror. She's worried about her, as much as Vumo tries to be strong she knows how it feels like not knowing the future of your baby.

"You're beautiful, MaNtuli. My son is lucky to have you in his life, I pray he realizes this before it's too late," she says.

Vumo blows out a heavy sigh and blinks rapidly. There's

something warm about Cebile, so warm that she wishes she was her own mother. She's easy-going, very transparent and affectionate. It's easy to discuss things with her than it is at home. Even living with her, she throws beautiful compliments randomly and empowers people with wisdom. She's always felt like a daughter 'with no law' at the Dlamukas.

Cebile smiles adoringly and brushes her cheeks.

"Fight, MaNtuli. You were made for my son, I can see it even when you walk on these premises that you are the right makoti for him. Don't let him let you go."

She nods, "I will Ma, thank you."

Now she has little hope to hold on to.

They will overcome this!

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The taxi dropped her at the station around 3pm, she checked in at his work and was told he wasn't working today. She's taken another taxi to his place of residence, the closer she gets the more nervous she is. She's never come uninvited, that's not a stunt she'd pull if she wasn't desperate. The white tube with two red lines is in her bag, together with her maternity case record book.

The taxi drops her off, there's no turning back now. She picks her

bags and makes her way through the gate. There's a washing line in front of his room, it looks like he did laundry today. What's surprising though is how his clothes are mixed with some lady clothes. There's an XL large tight and one of those mean-aunts bras hanging on the line. The last time she checked only men rented in these rooms, why is Sikelela's front washing line drying a chubby old woman's underwear?

The door is slightly closed, there's an aroma coming from whatever is being cooked inside. She doesn't knock, she pushes the door forcefully and walks in.

He's sitting in his short trunk on bed. The fat yellow woman is cooking on his two-plate stove. She looks even older than Cebile, his mother. She's wearing a short night-dress, her chunky thighs are all out advertising cellulite.

"Sikelela who is this gogo?" she asks charging towards the woman. Yes, elders should be given respect but not this one.

Sikelela jumps off bed and stands between them.

The woman is pointing a gravy-covered spoon at her and threatening to break her skull.

"What are you doing here?" Sikelela asks looking at her disgustedly.

He's crazy! He should be telling this woman who she is so that she can get her fat ass out.

“I’m here to see you. What are you doing with her half-naked?”

“That’s none of your business. Why are you here?”

This is embarrassing! She came all this way to witness this. He can’t even give her little respect and tell this woman to step out.

“We have to talk,” she says in almost whisper.

“I have nothing to say to you. Please leave!”

“Leave and go where at this time?”

“I didn’t ask you to come here, why are you making it my concern? Leave my space Vumo, I don’t want to see you that’s why I let you make my home yours.”

The old woman has a conniving smile on her face. Sikelela is half her age, how wicked is she?

“So you replaced me with a granny?” she asks.

Sikelela sighs and sits on the bed. There’s no other language he can speak to her with; he doesn’t owe her shit!

“What’s going to happen tomorrow? People are waiting,” – Vumo.

“Hey girly, didn’t you hear him telling you to leave?” – the granny. She’s annoying, only if she wasn’t so big!

“Is the stew still not ready?” – Sikelela asks his sugarmama.

She sways her hips to the stove and checks the pot.

“You’re starved, my poor baby. Let me feed you!” She switches off the stove and takes two clean plates.

Vumo fights back tears and walks out. It's dark outside, she doesn't know anyone in this place except him. There are no taxis to Hlabathini at this time, she can't walk there either. If she walks out of this gate she'll be a prey of amaphara and rapists.

She lays her jacket on the ground behind Sikelela's room and sits down with a flood of tears running down her face. The screen of her phone is flashing, Cebile is calling.

She answers....

"Ma," her voice is trembling.

"Are you alright MaNtuli?" Cebile asks in panic.

"He kicked me out. He's living with an old woman."

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

"I'm sleeping outside, behind his room in the cold with no blanket."

"Hold on a minute..." Cebile drops the call.

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Sikelela's phone rings inside the room. He's holding a plate of food but his appetite has vanished . Every pain he was trying to bury and move on from has resubsidied again. He's feeling worthless again; he's living today for today because there's no future.

“Why are you not answering?” Elizabeth asks.

She lives in two streets away, she broke up with her boyfriend a couple months ago, from there she made moves on Sikelela. He ignored her because he had Vumo and old women aren't really his type, that was until he found himself nursing a broken heart and feeling worthless. At first she comforted him like a friend, she'd come over and check how he was doing and if he needed anything, then a couple days later their level of comforting each other took another step. She's in his room more often and teaching him new bedroom tricks. It's been great, their energy compliments what they have going on. Most people call her Sis' Liz.

His phone is ringing again.

“Come on love, answer the phone,” she says.

He takes a deep breath and answers. He knows what's coming; he's about to listen to...

“Sikelela what the hell is wrong with you?” Here it comes!

“Hello Ma, unjani?”

“Why are you asking? You don't care, Sikelela. I've been calling you for hours.” It's been minutes, not hours!

“I've answered,” he says.

“Your uncle is here, the Ntulis are waiting for him tomorrow with their cows and you're there chasing their daughter out at night.

You want her to be raped and killed in the streets?”

That...he didn't think it that far.

“Of course not,” he says.

“Then where do you expect her to go at night? She doesn't know anyone in that place and she's pregnant for crying out loud!”

He feels his heart almost leaping out of his throat. He's on his feet, dashing to the door wearing only his short and barefooted. He's losing his sanity, he needs to keep breathing.

“Sikelela are you alright?” Cebile yells in panic.

Heavy breaths!

“Don't hurt her, it's your child!”

That falls on deaf ears, he dropped the phone somewhere after the door and ran towards the gate. He has to find her; she needs to look at him in the eyes and tell him why she had to hurt him so deeply.

He searches all the streets, asks everyone he bumps into and checks at the tuck-shop. Nobody has seen a dark-skinned girl with two bags.

He's calm now, but his nerves are all over the place. He may hate her at this moment but he doesn't wish anything bad to happen to her. He owes it to her family to return her home alive.

He remembers his phone and runs back to his room. He finds it

on the ground and dusts it up. He dials Vumo's number and it goes straight to voicemail.

Elizabeth appears and looks at him.

"Don't tell me you're searching for her."

He sighs, "She doesn't know anyone around here."

"So what? She's probably called her other boyfriends and they fetched her." Well, that hurts and makes sense too.

"Come in, stop stressing about people who don't care about you."

He follows her in and sits on the bed. He's still worried, he can't sleep not knowing where she is.

"You're not going to eat?" – Elizabeth.

"I'm not hungry, Sis' Liz."

She frowns, "I'm not Sis' Liz in this room."

"Sorry," he picks a pillow and buries his face on it.

Vumo can't be out there, for the first time he's praying for her to be at least safe with another man. He's accepted that he provided for a girl, bought her cosmetics monthly and made sure she wasn't short of anything only for other men to enjoy what she couldn't give him- her body. What makes it even more painful is that his own brother popped the cherry instead of him while he continued waiting for her to be ready. As they agreed, she stepped down from being an ambassadress and began engaging in sexual deeds, except that it wasn't with him.

“Where are you going?” – Elizabeth.

He glances back from the door.

“Ngiyochama,” he says. (I’m going to pee)

She gets in bed and waits for him.

Sikelela turns to the back of his room, at night he never uses the toilet because it’s too far and there’s no light inside. He releases his water and looks back to see a person wrapped on the ground behind his room. He recognizes the jacket, he bought it for her and those two bags.

He steps closer....

“Vumo?” he shakes his arm.

She freaks out and jumps up.

“Hey, it’s me,” he says.

She calms down and takes a deep breath.

“Why are you sleeping here?”

“There are no taxis back home.”

His heart sinks. He’s not a sympathetic person but this one always press the right buttons.

“Let’s go inside,” he picks her bags and goes back inside the room. Vumo follows wrapped in her big jacket.

Elizabeth sits up with her eyes widened. She's not playing games with these kids. Sikelela agreed to make her happy, that's a promise he's going to keep.

"Liz can we talk outside?" – Sikelela.

"If you think I'm going to leave then you're wasting your time. You asked me to come here, I'm not going anywhere."

"She needs a place to sleep," Sikelela says.

"That's none of my business. Who invited her here?"

Vumo's eyes are dropped. She's no longer confident as she was arriving here. She should've went home, this embarrassment could've been avoided.

"This is my room, I'm not trying to fight with you," Sikelela says to Elizabeth.

"Oh, so I must walk on the streets at this time and get robbed and possibly raped by amaphara? It's suddenly safe for me out there?"

He sighs and pours cold water in the basin. Vumo is still standing.

"Put your bags over there and get in bed," he tells her and washes his feet.

"With her?" Vumo asks with her eyes popping out.

"You came here uninvited and she's refusing to leave my room, what do you want me to do? We will share a bed, I only have one."

"She's fat!" – Vumo.

Elizabeth chuckles, "Exactly what got me this man. I didn't lie

about being a virgin to get him, he loves me fat and old.”

“I don’t argue with my ancestors,” – Vumo.

Sikelela looks up. He’s annoyed!

“Please get in bed or return outside.”

Elizabeth laughs, “Yeah, tell him.”

“You don’t know me that well,” Sikelela says giving her a dead look.

They both finally shut up. He pulls an extra pillow from the top of his wardrobe and throws it to Vumo. He’s sleeping in the middle, not even in his wildest dreams has he ever thought of being put in this position by women.

He’s facing up, Elizabeth's hand is on his chest, Vumo is facing the wall and sobbing quietly. He wants to ask about the pregnancy, who is the father, but he can’t do it in front of Elizabeth because she’s got a wet mouth and she’s too childish.

“I need to talk to her,” he tells her.

“Talk to her then, I’m not stopping you.”

“In private, Sis’ Liz.” His voice is firmer.

“I’m not going anywhere!”

It’s time he drags her out, he’s tried being civil and respectful but she seems to be mistaking him for a fool, which is what Vumo did too.

He pulls her out of the bed and throws her bag to her. Elizabeth is hurling insults at him, calling him all kind of names and using the issues he opened up to her about. This is a lesson for him to never share his problems with anyone.

“We are not done. I know tomorrow you’ll be running back to me.” She clicks her tongue and leaves in her nightdress with her bag. Everyone knows her in the streets, but they didn’t know about his entanglement with Sikelela. Now she’s announcing it to the world as she makes her way out the gate. Now he understands why her boyfriend left her, she’s a piece of work. Older women are said to be peaceful, but clearly not this one.

He locks the door and stands in the middle of the room.

Vumo is still facing the wall and sobbing.

He wastes no time; “Who is the father?”

She calms herself down and wipes her face. She’s hungry too.

“Vumokuhle whose baby are you carrying?”

“Yours,” she says.

He laughs. The loudest fake laugh he’s ever laughed.

“Your days of fooling me are over, you know that, right?”

She turns and looks at him. She looks different from the Vumo he knew and loved, she’s seen tougher days.

“I haven’t done anything with anyone since...” Pause. Heavy sigh!

“Since you fucked my brother?” he asks.

She shuts her eyes, a few drops of tears run down her cheeks.

“I swear this baby is yours. It happens, we can go to the doctor and enquire,” she says.

“Call your father and tell him to go and get his lobola from whoever you’ve opening your legs for. I don’t know if it’s my brother but I hope not, because I’d hate to have someone relating me to you.”

“Sikelela, no!” she breaks into tears.

“I want you out of my room at 4am, taxis will be operating by then. Make sure you don’t touch even my hair in your sleep, goodnight-ke tshitsh’ elimithi!” He turns the light off.

Loud sobs....

SIKELELA

CHAPTER 10

LONDEKA HLONGWANE

Things have calmed down, there's also an announcement that awaits me and the other girls at home. Guess who I'm updating about my movements? Melamina Mshengu. Yeap, the number one enemy. We communicated because I wanted my dress back, my mother has this tendency of waking up and randomly wanting to see everything she bought you, I'd be subjected to heavy emotional torments if she finds out I gave the dress to a Mshengu girl.

But things didn't go as brutal as I wanted, Mela has this magnetic thing that comes with her annoying character. She annoys you and still makes you want to be around her. It's strange, I hate her as a Mshengu girl and like her as a person. Upon hearing about my return back home she offered to take me to this dodgy coffee-shop for a cup of cappuccino and muffins to say goodbye. I came in my leggings and tank-top. It's early in the morning, and that's a perfect excuse for someone who's not so great in fashion like me. I've stopped publicly wearing a gown because of Facebook fashion critics.

"You're late," she says.

I glance at my wristwatch, only 10 minutes late- not that bad.

"I started at the garage to fill up," I say taking a seat. I've never

been to this place, I eat my breakfast at Mugg & Bean when I feel like eating out.

“How did you find this place?” I ask looking around. It’s just us and an Indian family. I love how peaceful and private it is.

“I met my man here. They sell the best muffins!” She looks gorgeous. Make-up on point, braids tied neatly and heels on! I can never be her, her life looks like a project that comes with a schedule and T&Cs.

“You woke up and did all this?” I’m looking at her neatly drawn eyebrows and eyelashes.

“I can’t step out of the house looking like a man.”

Oops! That touched a nerve in someone.

“I don’t look like a man,” I argue even though I know very well that Mkhonto left his image in me.

“No, you don’t. I wish I can cut my hair too but I know I’d look ugly. I need these beauty enhancers,” she says and laughs.

I don’t think she needs anything, she’s a yellow-bone, she can get away with anything because her skin tone aligns with beauty standards of our society.

“Not really. If you’re light-skinned and thin you can appear on national television and do anything you want. That’s a talent on its own in this country,” I say.

“That’s a flawed misconception. I’ve had struggles getting men and jobs, my skin tone has never opened any doors for me.”

“Maybe you haven’t gone to the right doors. I’ve lived among light-skinned sisters, I know how easy life is for them in terms of getting attention and all that.”

“We get attention from men only because there’s a misconception that light-skinned girls are easy to get and assumptions that we are loose and live off rich men.”

Our muffins are here! I don’t even know why we are here arguing about colorism whereas there are deeper issues back at Mashoba.

“Look at these muffins, they had to be brown to be appetizing,” she says.

I laugh. We can argue all day, we’ve both had different experiences and struggles as far as colorism in this country is concerned.

“So how long is the tension going to last?” she asks the most uncomfortable question. I like us being us, with no surnames labeling us and making us enemies.

“Maybe your brothers know,” I say. We are now taking that direction; Hlongwane versus Mshengu.

“Right now it’s not about who’s wrong and who’s right, people have died, at this point we are all fatherless. How many more people before it ends? That’s what I want to know.”

I wish I can get into their heads, my brothers and hers, and get all the answers. More people died at the valley the last time, it’s been funerals weekend and weekend.

“I’m tired of running,” she says.

I take the second muffin, she was right about them, they’re the best.

“I’m tired and I’m done running. Today I’m going home, if your brothers want to kill me so be it.”

“They’re not that cruel,” she says.

That can be debated. I know Busizwe kills people for a living.

“Is Sthembiso okay?” she asks.

I choke on my cappuccino. That’s my brother, a married one for that matter.

“He’s okay. Why do you ask?”

She smiles and sips from her cup. This girl is full of lust!

I narrow my eyes at her. “He’s married and you have a boyfriend, boo,” I say.

“Who asked?” she rolls her eyes, “I go to his gym would he be my personal trainer?”

God forbid! Zime is about to kill someone and twerk on top of her grave. My sister-in-law is a Miley Cyrus lite, when my brother brought her home my mother had a mini stroke. A year he married her we were in and out of hospital monitoring her blood pressure. To restore peace and ensure that everyone was happy and comfortable he moved out and build his own house across the road.

“He won’t cheat on his slay-queen wife,” I tell Mina.

“Don’t bet on it. Have you heard from Sgcino?”

Clearing my throat!

She raises her eyebrow, “I’m listening.”

“No, I think I blocked his number or something.”

“Why?” She frowns.

“He took me for granted.” I’m not sure this is a way of describing that old phone situation but I blocked his number merely because of it.

“I think you have LBDS,” she says.

My Life Sciences is on vacation.

“What’s that?” I ask.

“Last Born Demonic Syndrome.”

What we are not going to do is put the word ‘demonic’ next to Londeka’s name!

“You’re tripping,” I say.

“I’m telling you, that’s childish. Just hear him out, maybe you two are a match,” she says.

I don’t even know why I’m curious about his status. I met him once, I was a bit drunk and that’s where it ended.

“Is he single?” I ask.

She smiles and doesn't answer. I narrow my eyes at her.

She picks her cup and sips, that smile is still stretched on her lips.

What's the...

There's a hand on my shoulder and outrageously strong cologne intoxicating me.

"Why don't you ask me?" -

I know this voice. I turn my head. I'm not drunk, I'm seeing him for the first time during the day. He has a widow's peak which makes his forehead appear higher. His eyebrows connect in the middle, like a little baboon. I need to come up with a nickname...

"Don't stare, if you want an autograph or picture just ask."

What in the God's name?!

I laugh at his baroque confidence.

"No, bengibuka amanhlonhlo," I say. (I was looking at the V-hairline)

He grins and touches his head as if he wasn't aware of his hairline all along, it's breaking news to him.

Mela generously offers him her seat.

Now I think I'm being set up.

"Yes, I'm single," he says.

Why did I even care to ask?

He looks at Mela, "I will settle the bill."

She's leaving. This girl!!!

"Mela you set me up?" I ask.

"He's my friend and you blocked him."

I can't believe this!

"I'm your fake friend too, geez!" I say.

She laughs and collects her purse. She could've given me a hint to come looking more decent. I'm wearing flip-flops for crying out loud.

He crosses his arms on the table, rests his head on them and stares at me. Why am I suddenly shy? I'm a very bold girl, I can walk out and leave him here instead of being glued on this chair.

"You don't look happy to see your knight in the shining armour."

My what? He's so full of it.

"Sgcino, you only saved me once and I was drunk."

"And I drove you home," he says.

I roll my eyes, "Yeah, how do you want me to thank you? Throw a party and invite the president?"

"No, have lunch with me before you leave."

First it was Mela and breakfast, now it's him and lunch, if I didn't know better I'd have said I'm a lucky woman.

"Why?" I'm very old-fashioned, I might make him jump and kiss

the sky before agreeing to anything.

“Come on, we are adults here, obviously ngifuna ukushela,” he says.

I’m there between smitten and annoyed. He’s a fine looking man, I’m wondering how he’s 38 and still single.

“Why are you not married?” I ask.

“I was married, she passed two years ago.”

I didn’t expect this. I can’t imagine how it feels like losing a partner.

“I’m sorry about that,” I say.

He exhales audibly and sits up straight. I’m curious to know more about his late wife, what was the cause of death and all that. But it doesn’t look like he’s willing to share more.

He breaks a brief moment of silence; “I hear your brothers are militants. If you don’t have lunch with me today how am I ever going to get another opportunity?”

“Why are you so interested in me, Mr Zulu?”

“Because I’m everything you don’t know you’re looking for.”

My eyebrows furrow, “I’m not even looking.”

“I wasn’t looking either. I’m not a spontaneous person; I don’t just jump in. I want to get to know someone before I define whatever I’m feeling for them.”

“Okay, do you want a muffin?” I have no strong point to make on

what has been said.

“I said I want lunch with you before you go,” he says.

I give him a look hoping it'll scare him and make him stop staring and cornering me like this.

“So what are you saying? Should I get my nyanga involved?”

My face melts into a smile. He can be effortlessly annoying and charming as well.

“I will come,” I say.

He smiles, “Took long enough!”

Careful now mister, you don't want me to change my mind!

He takes out his Mobicel, the one with buttons that stored my number. He gives it to me.

I'm confused.

“Find your number,” he says.

I'm not sure what he's up to, I go to his contacts and look for my number. He has less than 20 contacts, most have the Zulu surname, others have company names, then there's 'Mayo' and 'Mam' Sibiya'.

“You only know these people?” I ask.

“It's people whose contacts I don't want to lose. I've been hijacked twice this year, robbed of my gadgets and personal belongings. This is the only phone they never take, every contact in there is safe.”

Oh, it makes sense. I didn't think of it that way, not that I'm a deep thinker anyway.

"So I'd rather have you here," he says lifting the phone up before sliding it back into his pocket.

He'd rather have me...alright, relax Londeka, he's talking about your cellphone number, not the actual you!

--

SGUQA

He wanted Zime to stay in Cairo another week. It's still not safe, the Mshengus have tried to attack him twice. But Zime didn't listen, she's back home. He loves her very much, but her stubbornness sometimes ruffle him up.

He stands by the door with his arms crossed.

She's listening to music via headsets and cooking on the stove.

He closes the door and locks it, only then she realizes that he's home.

She hasn't seen him in weeks, she quickly removes headsets and comes to him with her arms open.

"Babeee!"

He links his arm around her waist and pulls her to his chest. She knows her husband; he doesn't look excited to see her home.

"I was homesick," she says and pouts her lips.

He takes a deep breath and kisses her cheek. Without a word, he walks past the kitchen and disappears to their bedroom. A while later he's coming back to plug the electric water-bucket.

"You're bathing?" she asks.

He gives her a look.

She sighs.

"How long are you going to be angry at me?"

"Who said I'm angry?" he asks.

"You're not happy to see me. I thought you'd be kissing and fucking me to show that you missed me while I was gone."

"I'd rather miss you when you're away on a vacation than to miss you when you're dead. I told you to stay but you decided to come back because you wear the pants in this marriage."

"Okay, I'm sorry," she says.

"Sorry is not going to help the situation. I will bring security guards who'll be here 24/7 and go with you wherever you go."

Her eyes widen. "What???"

"Yes Zime, that's going to be your new life until I know for a fact that no danger poses against this family."

She says a low 'wow' and turns back to the stove. He takes his bucket and disappears.

She's almost done cooking. Lamb, potato and carrot stew. She went out of her way making bread from dough thinking today will be a great day. But now she's not even sure if her husband will eat. If he's happy he's happy, if he's angry he's angry, there's no grey line when it comes to his moods.

'Okay, I'll leave this here,' she whispers to herself and takes dirty bowls to the sink. As she walks back to the pot strong hands grab her by waist. She's pulled back and pressed against the sink.

It's her husband, he's only wrapped on the bottom by a towel. She knows he's still angry because his eyes are blood-shot and the vein on his temple is visible.

He grabs the back of her neck, pulls her face up and roughly kisses her lips. She feels tiny on her chest, she's trapped between it and his muscular arm.

She's a lover of short clothes, the mini skirt is pulled up to her waist leaving her in a narrow black G-string. His eyes travel down to her lower body, he inhales a sharp breath and inserts his knee between her legs.

"I hate that you're so beautiful and easy to forgive," he whispers and gently bites the side of her neck. She arches her back and moans in pleasure. His hand slides into her bra and strokes her nipples.

He turns her to the sink, she holds on to it.

“Unsafe sex for the dare-devil?” he asks spanking her butt-cheek.

She giggles and bends over.

“No sperms in my vagina, Sthembiso!”

“We’ll see.”

He kneels behind her and spreads her butt cheeks and inserts his finger in her opening. She’s already wet and too sexy for words.

He pulls the finger out and sticks in his tongue and draws it from her bunghole over to her vaginal entrance.

She forcefully pushes her behind to his face, he goes in harder and sucks her from the bottom like a calf. His name escapes her mouth, a few licks on her clitoris then he stands up.

He inserts himself slowly and holds her tiny waist. His strokes lack speed, they’re applied with double pressure and lengthily stroke her core. She’s getting weak and tired of holding onto the sink.

“Babe, wait!” she screams.

His eyes are shut, the only thing he’s listening to is the smacking sound of her ass against his front. She slips off and falls to the floor and lies flatly on her tummy.

“What are you doing?” He quickly kneels down and lays her on her right side.

“Sthembiso you’re fucking my intestines or vagina? That’s too

deep!”

“Okay, I won’t put it all inside now.” He separates her legs, brings one to his arm and thrusts in the scissor position. He only remembers his promise for two minutes and then pushes his whole shaft to the depths of her core.

She gasps and curses.

“Shhh! Take it like you took a flight back into a danger-zone?”

“Sthembiso, damnit!” She slips off and clammers away.

She finds strength to stand up and run behind the table.

He pushes it to the side, chairs fall down.

“Come back here!”

She has no where to go now, she’s pinned against the door.

“Okay, okay, okay. I’m sorry!”

He grabs her neck and looks into her amused eyes.

“How far can you run Mrs Hlongwane?”

“Not very far. Can I suck you?”

He chuckles, “No, I don’t want you to swallow my kids.”

“You’re such a demon!”

He lifts her leg up to his waist and presses her against the door.

But there’s a knock...

He lowly curses before he asks; “Who is it?”

“Hubo.”

“What do you want?” He’s pissed.

Zime holds her giggle.

“You’re alright in there? I heard noises and thought those tomfools have attacked again.”

“The tomfool is you, Mahubo.”

There’s a chuckle.

“Sis’ Zime came back? You didn’t tell me, I thought...”

“Go away with your thoughts!”

“How was the vacation Sis’ Zime? I heard you were in Egypt, how is the hunger there?”

“Uhm, it was alright.”

“Did you see the pyramids?”

Sthembiso covers her mouth before she can respond and pulls her away from the door. They’ll continue in their bedroom, Hubo can stand outside the door and freeze to death!

SIKELELA

CHAPTER 11

LONDEKA HLONGWANE

I'm looking at my closet and I can't believe my lack of style. What am I going to wear to this lunch date? Nothing looks beautiful enough. I have a new pair of leggings and skinny tops that I got for sale last week, I don't even know what got into my head when I was buying them.

I pick a dress that is less ugly than others, at least it hugs my skinny bones and shows my long legs in full length. I put on strap-heels and stand in front of the mirror.

No, I'm too tall. He might need to extend the doors of his house to accommodate me if I wear these heels. I change into sandals. I look...a bit plain.

My uncle can't just sit in the lounge and be useless. It's his fault that I don't have cousins who could be helping me pick a dress for my date.

"Mjay!" I call from the hallway.

I have a rare privilege of being a black child that calls her uncle by name. Mjabulisi Xulu, I shorten it to Mjay. He was born in 1977, he's already reached his 40s but my beloved uncle hasn't settled down yet. Sthembiso settled down and married before him, but

that didn't give him any motivation. It feels like he's the nephew and Sthembiso is the uncle.

I walk into the lounge, he's watching soccer and purposely ignoring me.

"Malume, didn't you hear me calling you?"

"I thought it was a bird," he says.

Really? He could've thought of a better excuse.

"I need help choosing what to wear today," I say.

He frowns, "Where are you going?"

Holy-glory! I didn't think it that far.

He's a fun uncle, he allows me to call him by name and shares his beer with me at times, but he's still a black uncle. He expects me to find a husband from the couch of his house.

No dates, no sex before marriage.

"Umh...out for ice-cream," I say.

"Is it finished in the fridge?"

Oh gosh!

"No, I don't want the one in the fridge."

He stares at me with his eye narrowed. I've been caught!

"Actually, I'm going to a friend for lunch," I say.

He frowns, "You have friends around here?"

"I met him recently...I mean her."

"Okay." He gulps down the remains of his beer and stands up. I'm confused.

He's agreeing, just like that? He's smart enough to know that I'm going to a man .

"Are you up to something?" I ask following him to my room.

"Didn't you say you want me to help you pick something for your date?" He knows, this is too strange.

"I did," I say.

"Then let me see." He opens my closet and pulls everything out. Who is going to pack all these clothes again?

He picks poloneck and my cotton winter pants.

"That's a big no, I'm going on a date." It seems like he thinks I'm going to the funeral of an Eskimo.

"Yes, you need to cover up," he says.

I don't think he's serious.

Poloneck and cotton pants on my first date?

"It's hot," I say.

"No, it's actually very cold. When is he picking you up?"

Picking me up? I thought I'd...phewww!

"I will call him and ask," I say.

"Put him on loudspeaker."

This may be the last time Sgcino asks me out. I look for his number and call. It's even my first time calling him, I'm sure he thinks it's his dead grandmother looking out for him.

He picks up...

"Hey," I say.

This is going to be awkward. My uncle is staring at me and reading every word before it even escapes my lips.

"MaSangweni, am I dreaming?"

"No, actually I want to know when you're picking me up." This was not part of the plan. I told him I'll drive myself to his house.

"You want me to pick you up?" He's confused.

My uncle interjects, "You want her to fly there?"

Silence...

He's wondering what's going on.

"I'll be ready in 30 minutes, you know my address," I say.

"He knows my house?" – uncle Mjay.

People hear when you talk? How do I explain this one now?

"It was late and he drove me back home." Did your own grave,

babe girl!

"Where were you late?" he asks.

"Just out." I realize Sgcino is still on the line and quickly drop the call.

I'm sure he's freaking out wherever he is.

"Londeka, I hope you didn't invite a man into my house," uncle Mjay says giving me a fierce look.

Well, I didn't, he invited himself.

"Anyway, you're wearing this poloneck and cotton pant or sitting down and watching Barcelona with me."

"That's a new house rule?" I'm shocked.

Now he's policing what I wear. He needs my varsity feminist friends to put him in his place.

"Londeka, you're going to your lunch date or not?"

I pick the poloneck and secretly roll my eyes.

"You'll look beautiful, tell me when he's here," he says heading towards the door.

I'm not looking forward to this anymore.

Exactly after 30 minutes Sgcino calls to say he's parked outside the gate. I let him in and go to the lounge to notify the breadwinner.

“He’s not my boyfriend,” I tell him.

He chuckles, “I know, MyLo.”

“Then don’t give him hard time. He hasn’t said anything yet, just asked me to join him for lunch.”

“Relax, would you? You know Sthembiso is being targeted and you could be used as a bait to fish him out. I need to know who you’re going out with, where he’s taking you and when I should expect you home.”

He makes sense, but I’m still not relaxed. I don’t want Sgcino to think I come from a dramatic family.

I get him from the door. He’s dressed smartly, like he’s going to a conference or board meeting. And I’m standing here in black poloneck and navy cotton pants.

“You’re ready?” he asks giving me a lazy hug.

Gosh, I don’t even look ready.

“Yes,” I’ve never been so shy in my life.

“Come in and greet Mjay.”

He stops and frowns.

“Who is that?”

Is it jealousy that I’m sensing?

“My uncle,” I say.

He relaxes and walks in.

I want to laugh. What if Mjay was my boyfriend? As far as I know we don't owe each other any loyalty.

Uncle Mjay stands up and looks at him from his shoes up to his head. I'm glad he dressed so decently, he's earned one point.

"Is this a new garden boy?"

See this man now, he's well aware that I was expecting Sgcino.

"No, it's Sgcinumyalo Zulu," I say.

"Does he speak?" he asks.

Sgcino clears his throat and extends his hand.

"Mntomdala, I'm Sgcino Zulu from Izinsundu."

He doesn't shake his hand right away. This man is trying to give me a heart attack.

"Why are you calling me old?" he asks.

What does he mean? He's 43, that's old.

"It was a tongue slip," Sgcino says apologetically.

I'm liking his character.

Uncle Mjay chuckles and sits down.

"Are you a Barcelona or Madrid?" he asks.

"Madrid," Sgcino says.

Wrong answer!

“No, you love Barcelona, remember?” I say and he looks at me like I’m crazy.

I raise my eyebrow.

Finally, he gets it.

“Oh yes, I love Barcelona. Madrid is not that good.”

“True, that team is a joke,” Uncle Mjay says.

I almost burst into laughter, the look on Sgcino’s face is priceless.

“So where are you taking MyLo?” Uncle Mjay asks.

He frowns, “MyLo?”

“My Londeka.”

“Oh, I invited her for lunch.”

“Why?”

“I’d like to get to know her better, nothing malicious.”

“In your house, why not somewhere else?”

“A meal comes with bills in the restaurants, in my house it will come with love,” Sgcino says.

Butterflies in my tummy!

“I will use that line to get her an aunt, thank you.”

They both laugh.

“Remember she’s only 12, make sure she comes back home happy,”- Uncle Mjay.

“Don’t worry, I’ll make her happy.”

--

He’s not asking about my dress code but he keeps staring at me. I’m seated on a leather couch in his house with a cocktail in front of me.

Eventually he asks, “Are you comfortable in those long pants?”

“Yes,” I say.

“Come on, it’s not that cold. Don’t you want something else? I have T-shirts that can fit you as a dress.”

Sigh!

“I’m actually sweating in this poloneck. Give me a T-shirt, I’ll put these on when it’s time to go.”

He laughs, “I knew you were not comfortable. How long does your uncle think it takes for me to remove poloneck and cotton pant?”

My eyes widen. Did he just ask me that? Too sexual for a first date.

“You’re being inappropriate,” I tell him.

“My bad!” He’s mocking me.

He disappears in one of the rooms. I have enough time to appreciate his house. It’s not fancy, just a normal suburban house

with dull curtains and disorganized furniture. He's a man, I'm not surprised.

I change into his T-shirt, at least it covers my butt and upper thighs. Now I'm more relaxed and ready to feast in to whatever he's prepared.

"Where's the lunch?" I ask.

"Coming, I think my chef is almost done."

Talk about surprises!

"You have a chef?" I'm shocked.

He laughs, "Yes."

"That's amazing."

I think I undermined him, not in a bad way but I didn't think he lives with a chef.

"Chef, what's taking you so long?" he yells.

I hear shuffling sounds coming from the kitchen.

I think this is about to be one of those rich man who finds love in a hopeless place; I'm the hopeless place obviously, and...

Footsteps!

I turn my head to see the chef.

Never judge a book by its cover, I agree. But there's no way this guy I'm seeing is a chef. Chefs don't wear hoodies on duty.

He puts savory platter on the table and bows before Sgcino.

“Lunch served. I’ll bring drinks shortly,” he says and lifts his eyes to me.

I’m staring at him and judging him.

He’s not a chef, they ordered this platter or stole someone’s recipe.

“Sis’ Londeka,” he says with a grin.

“Hi, you are his chef?”

He glances at Sgcino, “Yes, he’s my boss. He’s been single for two years, he doesn’t touch alcohol, every Sunday he’s in church and praising the Lord.”

I laugh, I can’t help it. These two are lying, he’s either related to Sgcino or he’s his partner in crime.

“What’s in your platter?” I ask him.

He looks at the platter like it’s a Geography question paper he didn’t prepare for.

“Wings, umh, beef kebabs, and...is that cheese or what?”

So much for a chef!

Sgcino is laughing.

“Okay, he’s my cousin and he’s leaving now. His acting is mediocre,” he says.

There goes my ‘rich man finds love’ story!

“Ntuthuko,” he extends his hand for a shake.

I think I like him. That prank they just pulled broke the awkwardness in the atmosphere, I’m feeling at home.

“Let me leave, please greet me everytime you see me,” he says.

It’s a weird request. I laugh and promise to do that. He brings the drinks and disappears somewhere in the house.

“So you’re here,” Sgcino says.

I sip from my cocktail and hold his stare.

“The poloneck girl,” he says.

I roll my eyes and continue eating silently.

“Without beating around the bush, I want to get to know you better. I’m single, soon I’d like to give love another chance and maybe settle down as well. Even though I come from a traditional family, I’m open-minded to the diverse world, I’m an understanding man. But I’m not a fan of change,” he says and chuckles.

“Interesting. So why me? There are plenty girls out there and you’ve only seen me twice,” I ask.

“We had a very strange first encounter but obviously that’s not what attracted me to you. I think the heart always knows where to stick, there’s no timeframe for attraction.”

“If we are just checking compatibility then why have you told your

cousins about me?" I ask.

"They're my love life board members. You also told your uncle and made me badmouth my team."

He's hurt because of that? It's just a stupid soccer team, nothing deep.

"Is it Madrid or me?" I ask.

"Madrid," he says.

This man is not serious.

"Over me?" I just need to be sure.

He smiles, "Yes."

"Why don't you call them to come and have lunch with you then?" I can be very childish, he knows I once blocked him for saving my number in a cheap phone.

He moves to my side and sits an inch closer to me. He throws his arm around my shoulder. Am I still breathing?

"That's an unfair question. It's like me asking you to choose between me and your favourite lipstick," he says.

"Don't explain, Sgcino. I'm just here for the food, nothing much," I say.

He chuckles and feeds me a bread bite. He's sitting close to me with his arm over my shoulders, and now he's feeding me, where is this going?

“Your eyes are the most beautiful thing I’ve seen today,” he says in a lowered voice.

I won’t lie and say I’m not flattered.

“How long do I have to wait for you to avail yourself?”

I look at him and quickly drop my eyes. I don’t like to be weak for anyone.

“I’m a very patient man,” he says with a chuckle.

“Church-going as well, yeah?”

“Spiritually,” he says.

We both laugh.

I’ve eaten almost quarter of the platter and he has only eaten a wing.

“You’re not hungry?” I ask.

“I’m hungry, yes. But only for your attention.”

He’s persuasive!

“After you chose a stupid soccer team over me? Dream on it,” I say.

He turns my head and steals a kiss from my lips , I didn’t see it coming.

“That was for calling Madrid a stupid team,” he says.

That means if I use more demeaning terms for his team I could get an orgasm?

No, get a grip Londeka.

"I have to go home and start packing," I say.

"Now?" He seems shocked.

"Yes, now."

His face falls in disappointment.

"Is it because of the kiss?"

"That was a kiss?" I ask.

He chuckles and shifts away. I take last sip from my cocktail and stand up to leave. He looks for his car keys and takes his phone from the charger.

We head out and get in his car and leave.

He's silent.

I don't know, maybe I hurt his feelings. He thought it would be easy, just lunch in his house and stolen kisses. I like him, I think he's humble and matured, but I need more time. When I love, I love hard. I want to know about his wife first, then I will decide if he's good for my mental state. I already know he's good for my physical state, that one kiss was like heaven. If I allowed him to continue I'm sure my legs would've ended up opening, I'm too salty to be hugged and kissed on the couch for hours.

He stops outside my gate. It was a short lunch, it didn't even last two hours.

“Am I going to see you again?” he asks.

“Yes, Sgcino,” I say.

He sighs with relief and pulls me for a hug.

“Thank you for coming,” he says.

I smile and kiss his cheek. I don't know why I did that.

I climb out of the car and walks through the gate. I look back and wave my hand.

Phone beeps...text message.

I'm reading it as I walk through the door and smiling.

“This can't be, it's a movie!” Uncle Mjay exclaims.

He's standing with Sthembiso in the kitchen. We are not close because of the age gap thing. I'm even disappointed that he's here.

“Where is she coming from?”

I also hate that he treats me like a child.

“From a lunch date,” Uncle Mjay says.

I want the floor to open and swallow me. I was here to hide, before I left Mashoba Sthembiso pulled my ear about carelessly going out.

“Is it your T-shirt she's wearing?” he asks Uncle Mjay.

I'm not sure what he's talking about.

"The Londeka I know left my house in black poloneck and cotton pant. And please don't insult my T-shirts collection Sthembiso, I don't know this thing she's wearing."

Holy spirit! I'm wearing Sgcino's T-shirt, I didn't even feel different leaving his house like this.

"I think someone is become an uncle soon." Trust Uncle Mjay to pour petrol on the fire!

"Your mothers need to know about this," – Sthembiso.

I'd rather have him dealing with me than my father's stressed polygamous wives.

"You're going to tell them?" I ask him.

"Yes." He's not even smiling.

This is why we are not close, he doesn't have my back at all.

(I'm yet to edit other inserts, I'm back and ready to give writing my undivided attention. Thanks for your calls and messages)

SIKELELA

CHAPTER 12

He was fetched by his uncle, Muzikayise. If there's anything parents fear more than death in the community it's shame. They don't want to be shamed by their children, and Sikelela did exactly that when he failed to keep his promise of sending lobola to Vumo's family. Everyone is talking about it. The Ntulis want answers, they're in the dark.

Cebile is sitting across them on the other of the room. She's not friends with her brother because of his wife, their relationship has been rocky for years. But today they're harmonious siblings and uniting over him.

"I asked you a question," his uncle says.

They've been on his case for a moment now.

"I told you I don't want her anymore," he says.

"Too late, you've already impregnated the poor girl. Who do you expect to marry her with your child?"

"I didn't make her pregnant. She should go and find the man who made her pregnant."

"Sikelela!" Cebile yells.

Silence falls into the room.

Two pairs of eyes are glaring at him angrily.

“Vumo wasn’t a virgin, she fooled me,” he confesses.

Cebile frowns...she didn’t know that.

“That can’t be true, she has been attending the reed-dance,” she argues.

He takes a deep breath, “She admitted cheating on me. I know for a fact that she’s not carrying my baby.”

“But she said you’re the only person she’s been having intimate moments with.” His mother is in denial. That’s her daughter-in-law, she knows how innocent she is.

“I don’t know what you want me to say. Why don’t you marry her yourself then?” he asks.

His uncle clears his throat, “Let’s breathe and think of a way forward. The Ntulis need closure, you can’t just break promises you made to them and keep them in the dark about what’s happening.”

He’s right, they should be heading to the Ntulis to explain why abakhongi didn’t come.

“It could be his baby though,” Cebile says.

She’s alone on Vumo’s side, clearly her brother supports Sikelela’s emotional decisions.

“We can’t let him be fooled by a girl. He’s worked hard to prove his love for that girl, obviously she took him for a fool,” his uncle says.

“But denying her pregnancy is exaggerating, being pregnant and single is....”

Sikelela cuts her short, "This is not about you, Ma."

"That's rich coming from you!" Cebile snorts angrily.

Sikelela doesn't argue any further, he leaves to ready himself for the Ntulis.

--

Qambi walks in with plates of finger foods and 2l of Sprite. Why are they being treated like the in-laws? They're here to officially announce the break-up.

Sikelela is uncomfortable with all this. He asks Qambi aside and asks if it would be possible for him to see Vumo before the meeting starts.

Qambi leaves to deliver the message.

His uncle and mother have already feasted in.

Moments later Qambi comes back and asks him to step outside.

"Where are you going?" Cebile asks.

"Outside, to sort something really quickly."

"Don't do something you'll regret, Sikelela."

He ignores her and walks out.

He meets with Vumo, she's looking beautiful more than ever, he tries not to dwell on it. They walk out of the yard and stand by his uncle's van.

She's avoiding eye contact. Her eyes seem to be swollen. She's been crying all morning.

"You didn't tell them the truth?" he asks.

She shakes her head.

"You're making this more difficult. Do they even know that you're pregnant?"

"Only my sister and mom."

"Do they know it's not mine?"

There she goes again! Crocodile tears.

"Sikelela, I swear I haven't done anything with anyone this year," she says in tears.

"And you've done something with me?" he asks.

"Ma said it's possible to get..." He sighs before she finishes.

"It won't work, Vumo. I may have been stupid in love with you but I'm not stupid."

"You know they'll kick me out." She's weeping.

This is something she could've considered before opening her legs for other men.

"Then your man will take you in. We are not going to lie to the

elders, we are going in there and telling them the truth.”

She shakes her head, her face is now a mess of tears.

“Please believe me, I’m not lying. I can even go down on my knees, if that’s what you want.”

“Don’t, what I want is for you to leave my family alone. I wasn’t worth being your first and now I’m worth being a father of your baby?”

“But you said it wasn’t about my virginity. You lied Sikelela!” she sobs.

“It’s still not about it,” he says.

She’s confused and hurt. Sikelela knows very well how her father is, she’ll be kicked out.

“You want your baby to grow up like you?” she asks.

He sighs.

This is not worth his time, honestly.

“I know this is your baby and my father is about to kick me out. It’s a repeat of your life over again, your baby will grow up without a father. This has to be some kind of a curse!”

She’s delusional. He doesn’t like people who reference his life to get his point across.

“Let’s go inside,” he says.

She holds his arm and goes down on her knees.

She's still crying.

"I made a mistake, baby."

"You laid naked and let him take what you said was mine. You didn't stop him, you didn't think about my feelings even for once. Now I have to consider yours and believe that you made a mistake? What didn't I do for you? If you felt like you were ready why didn't you call me? You know I would've come at any time."

"I was...I was...confused," she says between the hiccups.

"You were confused by my brother's dick?"

"Please don't do this. I love you, Sikelela. I didn't think it would end like this." She stands up and wraps her arms around his waist and looks up at him.

Their eyes lock. She's hurt him beyond repair, but something is still there in his eyes and only she can understand it.

"I don't want to terminate this pregnancy because I know the baby is yours. You're angry, I understand. But I don't want you to make the same mistake your father made, I'm willing to do a paternity test once I give birth. But if my father kicks me out to the streets I will have no choice but to terminate so that I can struggle on my own, without a fatherless soul depending on me."

"How do I trust you again, Vumo?" He's weak and he hates it.

"Just think about the baby. You can leave me but not our baby," she says.

Fatherhood is a sensitive subject to him.

A tear drops from his eye. Having this conversation with someone he was sure was his is heartbreaking.

"I waited for your virginity, now you want me to wait for the baby. I feel like you're playing with me because you know how I feel about you."

She wipes his tearing eye with her thumb.

"I know you're going to be a good father, that's why I don't want to take that chance away from you."

He releases a deep breath and lifts his arms. He's a bit hesitant. Her eyes tear up. He gives in and hugs her.

"How did it happen?" he asks in a lowered whisper.

"When we did the outercourse you were too close and obviously your swimmers are strong and fast," she says.

It's funny but he doesn't laugh. There's a vein pulsating across his temple. The right thing isn't always a good thing.

"So what's going to happen now?" he asks.

"We can say you lost the money and can't pay lobola right now," she suggests.

"So I have to be a liar to protect you?"

In circles they keep going!

"To protect the seed I'm carrying."

He exhales heavily and nods.

She stands on her toes and tries to kiss his lips. He shakes his head and pushes her aside.

“You settled the score with that old woman. Please look past my mistakes as I do to yours,” she says blinking back tears.

“Nothing will ever settle the score. You will never see that old woman again but I have to see my brother for the rest of my life and remember that he touched you first.”

She drops her eyes.

“Let’s go inside,” he says.

--

Sikelela walks in first. Elders are already gathered in and waiting for them.

He takes a seat next to his uncle. Vumo follows in shortly accompanied by Qambi. They sit next to their mother.

“Dlamuka please talk before I die of curiosity. We expected your people last week and you’re here today with umkhwenyana,” Vumo’s father, Ntuli, says.

“It’s these children, what can we say?” Sikelela’s uncle says and takes a deep sigh. “I had to come and clarify things. We also didn’t know what was going on until...”

Sikelela clears his throat, “Malume, I will take it from here.”

His uncle and mother seem to be shocked.

"Firstly I'd like to apologize to all of you about last week. Things didn't happen the way I planned them," he says.

Silence fills the room. Vumo is holding her breath and clinging onto her sister for dear life.

"I saved money, it was enough for half of amalobolo that were requested, but..." His eyes go to Vumo on the other side, she's counting on him.

"But she cheated on me," he says.

Gasps!

Vumo covers her face with her hands and starts sobbing. How can he betray her like this? They just talked about this and agreed on protecting their baby.

"She made me wait, she lied to me about attending the reed-dance and leading the maidens. I was in Durban working hard for our future, and she was here breaking all our promises."

Ntuli is now standing on his feet and pacing around the room with his nostrils flaring out.

"Vumo is pregnant and pinning it on me. I loved her with all my heart and I wanted to have children with her."

Vumo cries sharply, "It's his baby, baba."

"I don't believe that, Ntuli," – Sikelela.

"Why would I lie? I'm not going to benefit anything from having a

baby with you," – Vumo.

"Then tell your family who the father is."

Cebile hisses, "Sikelela, stop it!"

"Stop what, Ma? You're all going to use my pain to neutralize the situation that hurts me? Vumo knows my weaknesses and she's using that to furtherly hurt me. Is it not enough that I'm a laughing stock in the community?"

"You're not a laughing stock," Ntuli says after taking a deep breath.

He's now seated and calm.

"You fell in love with a loose woman, it's not your fault," he tells Sikelela.

Silence!

You can hear a pin drop.

"I'm disappointed in my wife, I thought she was capable of grooming my daughters but it seems like she's letting them do as they please. Today I'm even ashamed to call myself a father."

The mood shifts. Nobody expected things to take this direction.

"I'd like to sincerely apologize to you and all the Dlamukas for this disgrace. I thought I was giving you a decent girl, her mother has been telling me that she's taking care of herself and passing her modules. I guess we will deal with this as a family."

Cebile clears her throat, "I don't mean to interfere but Mam' Ntuli is not responsible for what her daughter does. I'm a mother too, I

know how children are. Mine has been to Mashoba partaking in fights and I didn't know anything about it. It's unfair to hold mothers responsible."

Her brother nudges her with an elbow. This is why they don't get along, she talks too much.

"Not to be disrespectful MaDlamuka, but this ends here and now. Thanks to your son for bringing this to my attention."

That's it!

Meeting adjourned.

--

Qambi follows after them and asks Sikelela aside. He doesn't know it but he just destroyed the Ntulis. It was long time coming but his confession has given their father a solid reason to kick their mother and them out of the Ntuli homestead.

"Sikelela, you made a mistake," she says.

He chuckles softly. This is the girl she trusted, he opened up to her about everything regarding his relationship with her sister.

"You knew?" he asks her.

Qambi drops her eyes and nods.

She wishes he knew that she was on his side from day one.

“Did she ever love me?” he asks.

“She loved you, Sikelela. She still does even now, she just allowed peer pressure get into her,” she says.

“Vumo is old enough to understand what’s wrong and right,” he says.

Qambi nods, “I know, I just...”

She takes a deep breath and looks at his eyes.

“Now she’s going to be the reason why they’re separating. You heard how Baba thinks. My mother is going to blame everything on Vumo even though she knows very well how shaky things have been here at home. Vumo won’t have anyone, I don’t know where she will go.”

“What do you mean?” Sikelela frowns.

“She’s pregnant. Do you really want her on the streets?”

“I don’t care, Qambi.”

“All because of the hymen? How can we make up for that?”

He frowns, “Make up for it? She can’t undo the past.”

“Is it worth losing your first child?”

He sighs and shifts his eyes off her for a minute.

“Why are you doing this to me?” he asks.

“I know it feels like a trap but I know my sister wouldn’t lie about something so special,” she says.

“I just want to move on with my life. Thanks for being kind to me and supporting my relationship with your sister. Accept that it’s over now, no more games!”

“Sikelela...” She shuts her eyes, exhales and opens them to him staring at her. There are worry lines pronounced on her face.

“If you want to settle the score you can take my virginity and forgive my sister for giving hers to your brother.”

She’s still a virgin?

Scratch that, she wants to sleep with him in exchange of forgiveness?

“Qambi!” He’s in shock.

“It’s your baby, I don’t want neither of you to make a mistake. You’re a good man, Sikelela.”

“Maybe not good enough for your sister.”

“Can I call you later?” she asks.

He nods hesitantly.

She bids him goodbye and returns back home.

He’s confused. Qambi is Vumo’s sister, she’s older than her, maybe a year younger than Sikelela. She’s always liked Sikelela and supported his relationship with her sister. She’s been their go-between person for years, sometimes even organizing places for them to meet.

He's never looked at her any other way, let alone wished to share a bed with her. She went through something traumatic at a young age, everyone in the village knows that Qambi was sexually abused on her way from school, which now leaves a question mark of how she's claiming to be still a virgin.

"What was she saying?" Cebile asks in the car.

Sikelela frowns, "Huh?"

"Your sister-in-law, what was she saying to you?"

He can't disclose that.

He rubs his nape and ignores her.

"Why did you embarrass MaNtuli like that?" she asks.

His uncle jumps in, "Don't even defend her, Cebile. Did you expect him to pay lobola for someone who opened her legs for other men?"

"She's young, couldn't you see how regretful she was? And what if the baby is his?"- Cebile.

His uncle laughs, "These women are playing you, mshana. You will find another girl. Once a cheater always a cheater!"

"MaGwaka obviously doesn't know that saying," Cebile mumbles.

Sikelela sighs and mentally prepares himself for a grown sibling fight.

"You'll butt out of my life!"

"You will stop poisoning my son as well!"

SIKELELA

CHAPTER 13

LONDEKA HLONGWANE

I've been summoned to MaXulu's kitchen. I already know what's going on, my brother crossed the road just after breakfast and disappeared in that kitchen. Minutes later MaXulu's sisterwives also disappeared in that kitchen.

I can't believe I'm about to be confronted about a mjolo I'm not even doing yet. It was foolish and careless of me to forget my poloneck. I also blame Sgcino for not reminding me. He asked me out, once, and I'm already facing these problems at home.

I'm still in my pyjamas, it's only 10am and in my world that's like pre-dawn. I make my bed lazily and wash my face. I was looking forward coming back home but now that I'm here it's boring. Uncle Mjay's house can be lonely as well, but there's freedom that I don't get here. I'm also safe there, here I can't even go out of the yard without notifying anyone. But at the end of the day this is my home, my heart will always long for this place.

I walk into three widows sipping tea on the reed-mat laid on the floor and Sthembiso working on his laptop on the kitchen stool. His wife must've woken up and went to another shopping spree.

She's a materialistic wife and he loves her like that. The toxic trio tried their best to stop the wedding from happening but my brother made it clear that when he wakes up in the morning and goes to work it's all for his queen. He doesn't care what she does and how much she spends, at the end of the day she's what makes him happy. She's the chosen one.

"She's still wearing pyjamas," MaJiyane exclaims looking at me as I make my way in.

"Exactly what I was telling you about, sisi," – MaXulu, my mother, says.

So I've been a subject of their discussion for a while now? I'm pretty sure they were discussing about my late mornings.

These women shared a dick, they speak about you in third person and gossip about you right in your face.

Zime and I call them the toxic trio.

"Ma, you called me," I say dragging a chair from the table and sitting by the door.

"You don't greet your mothers anymore?" she asks.

We have a family tradition of waking up and going into every house greeting everybody in the morning. I mistakenly forgot this morning; that's case number 1. I've been living with Uncle Mjay, there was no greeting in the morning, we'd dive straight into conversations.

"I'm sorry, I woke up late and MaDlamini was already in the garden

and MaJiyane was talking to someone, I didn't want to disturb."

"But even when you arrived yesterday you didn't greet anyone, we only heard in the morning that you are here," – MaJiyane.

Sthembiso looks up from his laptop.

"Useqomile nje," he says. (She's now dating)

Sgcino needs to pay me for all this trouble his T-shirt has put me through. Now I'm not greeting people because I'm dating him?!

"I thought they went into hiding," MaJiyane says collectively. Another thing here, one girl's mistake equals to all girls' mistake. I love that about my mothers, they shout in bulk. Now my two younger sisters are under the bridge with me.

"Bekuyoqalazwa amadoda ntombi," my mother says. (They went to look for men)

MaDlamini chuckles. She's almost the chilled one, if she didn't have the influence of these two she'd be a sweet mother.

"Tell us about him. When should we expect abakhongi?" she says with a thin smile staring at me.

Abakhongi? I don't even know Sgcino naked yet.

"I'm not dating anyone," I say.

My mother raises her eyebrow, "You're trying to say your brother is a liar?"

She wants him to fight with me. I think they're bored since my father is no longer here. I should call them a bored trio now.

“Yes, he’s lying,” I say.

Sthembiso looks up, “What did you say?”

“He only invited me for lunch, it got hot and I changed into his T-shirt. Nothing much. It’s not that deep!”

My mother looks at MaJiyane, “Did you wear Hlongwane’s T-shirts before you agreed to be his girlfriend?”

Laughter!

“Never! Why would I’ve gone into his house in the first place if I wasn’t going there as a girlfriend?”

“My question exactly!”

They are laughing.

“I’m not dating him yet,” I say.

Sthembiso looks at me, “Yet?”

“I’m 25, girls my age already have babies. Dating is normal at my age. You also dated Sis’ Zime at some point,” I say.

He’s the last person to talk. He knows how it’s like having these women on your back about your love life.

“And I married her. Do you even know this guy’s intentions?” he asks.

“No, but he seems like a good guy.”

“How do good guys look like?” – MaJiyane.

“I think that differs with each person. My kind of a good guy may

not be your kind," I say.

"What is your kind?"

Sigh!

"Tall, handsome and not broke."

"Then why don't you take Mbongeni, your suitor who works for the oil company in Johannesburg?" MaDlamini asks.

I crack my head trying to think back. I can't miss out on dating someone who works in the oil company. Mbongeni???

"Not Mbongeni Mpanza, right?" I look at her with my pupils dilating. She better not!

"Him," she says.

I'm hollering!

"What's wrong with Mbongeni?" Sthembiso asks. He's also suppressing his laugh.

"I said tall, 'handsome' and not broke," I say.

"Is Mbongeni not handsome?" MaDlamini asks her sisterwives.

If Mbongeni is handsome then nobody is ugly in this village.

"I don't see anything wrong with him. He's even better because you'll be dating someone we all know," my mother says.

"And his father has plenty land and cows," – MaJiyane.

They think our generation is still looking for those things in men? Nobody is mentioning biceps or white teeth, just cows and land.

“Thanks, but no thanks!” I say.

“Ubuhle bendoda zinkomo zayo. Mbongeni is beautiful inside, I’ve seen how humble he is,” MaDlamini says.

Unfortunately I don’t go around with a microscope to see people’s inner-beauties, I judge based on what I see on the outside.

Hubo walks in the middle of that Mbongeni argument. He greets and goes to the fridge. When my father became a polygamist he made sure the love foundation was strong enough. All his children are equal in the premises of his house, that includes Thobani.

I haven’t seen Hubo in weeks. We are not close either but we do talk openly when we get a chance.

“Where is Thobani?” I ask him.

“Still asleep, I think,” he says.

“Did you sleep home?” MaJiyane asks him.

“Yes, why?” He sits next to Sthembiso and slices an orange with a pocket knife. He’s everything a parent doesn’t want in a child.

“I think there was a ‘Pheshe’ in your house and I’m surprised because we talked about that,” MaJiyane says.

He’s been sneaking girls in since he was 16. No surprises there, he does everything he’s told not to do.

“There was no Pheshe, I slept alone,” he denies.

“I hope you’re not lying. We are still dealing with the Mshengus, we don’t know what they’re thinking or when they might attack

again. The last thing we'd want is to have a strange girl being caught in the middle of a war inside our premises."

"Ma relax, I didn't bring anyone," he insists.

A Pheshe is a girl your brother or son brings home by dark. You never see her face, just her shadow passing quickly- pheshe!

The attention moves from him back to me. But it's not about Sgcino anymore.

"There's something that happened after you left home," my mother says.

There's always something happening in this family.

"What was it?" I ask.

"You have a brother."

Obviously, there he is on the stool and another one next to him and another one sleeping in his room.

"I know that," I say.

"From another mother, his name is Sikelela. He was here for a few days, so we've already met him. He's a splitting image of your father," she says.

"Why didn't we know anything about him until now?" I'm confused, my father was an honest man. He wouldn't hide a child, he was a polygamist; cheating was part of his identity.

"It's a long story, just know that you have another brother. He

comes after Sthembiso, he's also getting married soon."

"Not anymore," Hubo says.

Everyone looks at him.

"He's not getting married anymore?" Sthembiso asks.

He looks surprised as well.

"Things didn't work out. He's left the girl," Hubo says with a shrug.

"So he canceled the lobola negotiations?" Sthembiso is still in disbelief.

"Yeah, I didn't hear it from him though."

I can't believe I left for a few weeks and came back to new brothers and canceled lobola negotiation scandals.

What a time to be alive!

--

I'm cleaning the kitchen, people keep coming in and out and leaving dirty prints on the floor, that's why I don't want a big family when I grow up. Just two children and one husband, this thing of having 100 people living together is too messy.

My phone rings.

This man is only calling me now. Does he know who he's up against? Mbongeni who works in the oil company. He better pull

up his socks because Mbongeni apparently has inner-beauty as well.

“Good morning,” he says.

I’m starting to like his voice.

“It’s ‘day’ now,” I say with an eyeroll.

“Really? I’m sorry.”

“Whatever. Anyway, how are you?”

“Good now that I’ve heard your voice.”

“Well, I’m not good. I’ve just came out of a T-shirt case hearing with my father’s wives and my brother.”

“My T-shirt?” he asks.

“Yes, they’ve made up theories that I’m dating you and went to your house as a girlfriend.”

He chuckles, “Imagine all this trouble for nothing. Let’s give ourselves a chance.”

He’s such an opportunist!

“Shouldn’t you be consoling me? After all it’s your fault that I forgot my clothes in your house.”

“If you didn’t leave when I kissed you maybe I would’ve remembered to tell you to change.”

“Where are my clothes?” I ask.

“They’re in my wardrobe. When are you coming to fetch them, I

don't really have space."

Wait, is he kicking my clothes out?

"Are you serious?" I ask.

"Yes, I don't have enough space. So when should I expect you? I'm willing to drive there and fetch you."

Sneaky pea!

"You're full of tricks, Sgcinumyalo. Throw them in your bin, I'm not coming there."

"I promise I won't kiss you again."

I roll my eyes and sweep on top of the table with a broom.

"Why must I trust you?" I'm opening the fridge and putting a salt container inside.

"You have my word. Why are you so scared? One kiss and you were out of the door." He's laughing.

"I'm not scared," I say between giggles.

"You shouldn't be. I'm sure it's not that hard to resist me, right?"

"Obviously you're not that hard to resist," I say.

Someone coughs behind me. I almost trip over my toes and kiss the floor.

Damn, Hubo!

I drop the call and look at him nervously.

He's staring at me like he just caught me on top of a man. All my brothers are a bore!

"I'm cleaning," I say before he even asks.

He looks at the open fridge, there's a bottle of oil peeking from inside. The broom is lying on top of the table and dust-pan on the chair.

Wtf is wrong with me?

"Cleaning, huh?" he asks.

Well, it looks like I'm messing up instead of cleaning. But it's all Sgcino's fault, he keeps getting me into trouble.

"Maybe he's actually hard to resist yazi," he says walking to the cupboards.

Damn you, Sgcino!

"How far do I need to drive to kick his ass?" he asks.

I start cleaning the mess I made during the cleaning. Nothing is in its place.

"You expect me to tell you where he lives?" He's full of jokes. I don't take his threats for granted, I know he's capable of beating people for no reason, it's a hobby to him.

"I can find out on my own. Is it someone I know?" he asks.

"Definitely no. Your mothers were suggesting Mbongeni Mpanza as the perfect suitor," I tell him.

"The only one I know?"

I nod, "Imagine!"

"There's nothing wrong with him though. And it will be easy for us to watch and control him."

Control him? They actually want to control my love life? I thought he was the sane one.

"Forget about him, I might bring a different man. Anyway, have you met the Sikelela brother?" I ask.

"Yeah, I have," he says.

I expected him to be excited. He loves commotion and disorder. A new brother out of nowhere would pique his interest.

"How is he?" I ask.

"He's everything your father was."

My father reincarnated? I think I'm excited.

"I can't wait to meet him. When is he coming to visit again?" I beam.

He sighs heavily.

"I don't know, we don't talk anymore. We fought over a girl," he says.

He's already fighting with a new brother? Hubo needs deliverance from Pastor Lukau.

"His girl or your girl?" I ask.

"His girl. But I didn't know she belonged to anyone and I didn't

know Sikelela when it happened. I guess it's just one of those unfortunate incidents that ruins people's lives."

I know Hubo, he's never apologetic to anyone, for anything. This must've hit his conscience really hard.

"Did you apologize to him?" I ask.

"Yeah but clearly he needs space. He really loved her, I heard she's pregnant and saying it's his baby. Her sister went crazy on me as if I raped her."

This is bigger and dramatic than I thought.

"I'm sure the baby is not his. Once a cheater, always a cheater," I say.

"Well, it's not mine either. I just hate that I'm caught in the middle and her sister thinks I had malicious intentions by sleeping with her," he says.

Wait, why is the sister involving herself?

"Is she insulting you?" I ask.

"Yoh mfethu, I've never even met her. She's been flooding my messages with insults and threats. I don't fight with girls, so I just read and keep quiet."

I think I need directions...

"Give me her number," I say.

He looks at me and frowns.

"Why?"

“If sisters are getting involved then I’m getting into it as well. I will answer her questions on your behalf.”

“No, Londeka. Sikelela might change his mind and go on with the lobola negotiations, and if her sister is really pregnant you’ll be the aunt and that means we’d need to have a healthy relationship with them.”

For the first time in his life he’s saying no to violence.

“Fine!” No, not fine.

I had already mentally prepared a fuck-you speech for the sister.

“I want Sikelela’s number, he must know about his senior sister,” I say.

“Senior?” He chuckles and retrieves his phone from the pocket.

I take Sikelela’s number and save it in my phone. Then I call him right away.

It rings a few times before he picks up.

“Heeeeeeeey,” I’m over the moon.

“Who are you?” He sounds cold AF.

“Londeka. Where do you live? I want to come and see you, I just heard now that I have another brother.”

“I’m at work,” he says hesitantly.

“When do you get paid?”

“Huh?”

“When do you get paid? I want to visit when you have money.”

He chuckles; the ice is slowly melting.

“You can come any day, I’m not always broke.”

Sounds like a real Hlongwane! I’m definitely visiting him, I’ll go with my secret friend, Mela.

“Where did you get my number?” he asks.

“From Hubo,” I say.

“Where is he?”

“There, drinking someone’s Coke straight from the bottle.”

“Tell him to call me,” he says.

I’m confused.

“I thought you two weren’t on speaking terms.”

I hear him takes a heavy breath.

“Just tell him that.”

I guess he’s not that talkative, just like me.

He’s my twin!

SIKELELA

Chapter 14

Blood is thicker than water; him and Hubo have linked up after the whole drama. He's never had a sibling, letting this one unfortunate incident take that experience away from him would've been dumb. Also, he needs his advice regarding what Qambi proposed.

Hubo arrives shortly after he gets back from work. In the small yard he's found space to park his car, hopefully there won't be trouble with Sikelela's landlord because he's here to turn it up.

Sikelela comes out of his room still in his security uniform. He said nothing about the party, but Hubo is here with a bag of charcoal and a couple butchery shopping bags. And alcohol, sigh!

"Hubo, what's this?" he asks with a frown. He's coming from work, obviously he's tired and all he wanted was just a conversation with his brother.

"I want to celebrate life in your presence; ngizodeka itafula phambi kwezitha zami." (I'm here to lay the table in front of my enemies.)

He suspIRES, "Who is your enemy?"

"The one who wanted to kill me because of the mistake I made before I even met him."

"Ndoda, I'm over that. I have more serious things to worry about

than someone's pussy." He's obviously lying, that's the wound he'd never heal from. Vumo is out of his life yet she still has so much hold over him.

"I like that, we don't cry over women. We keep it moving, there are many fishes in the sea. Anyway, where do you set the braai-stand here?" Hubo asks scanning the yard with his eyes. He's looking vigorous and lively in his navy slacks, black loafers and mandarin-collared shirt. He's relishable to look at, for the ladies, hence Vumo found herself in his bed as well.

Sikelela releases a deep breath and says, "I don't know, maybe we can set up in front of my room, I've never hosted a braai before, I was busy saving up for the wedding."

Hubo looks at him, he's going through something and knowing that he played a part in his pain plunges into his heart like a sword.

"I need to change these shoes," he says. He dressed like this because Sguqa was dragging him to a meeting with certain politicians to talk about the road issue that's been talked about for decades.

They take everything inside the room and keep the meat in an empty bucket. Then they sit on the bed and look at each other, then they exhale.

"What a fucked-up situation!" Hubo says.

"I don't know why it had to be you, out of every man in this world," Sikelela frets with the corners of his eyebrows angled up.

“Her sister wants me dead, I’ve never received so much hate from a woman before, let alone the one I’ve never met. But enough about me, what’s your plan moving forward?”

“That’s why you are here. Qambi, the one who wants you dead, wants me to sleep with her to avenge myself for what her sister did with you and then forgive and forget,” he says.

Hubo is jaw-slacked. If such opportunity presented itself to him God knows he would’ve taken it with both his hands and feet. But Sikelela is not like him, he’s a man of principle and sex means something different to him.

“I’m sure you declined, right?” he says.

Sikelela clears his throat, that’s what he should’ve done, but...

“I didn’t, I’m not sure why.”

Hubo is taken back. That crazy woman who’s been sending him insults shouldn’t come anywhere near his brother’s penis, and Vumo too. “Are you going to raise another man’s child with a woman that you loved and have been so faithful to?” he asks.

“I don’t know if my heart can handle that. I still love her, that’s the gospel truth, and I don’t think I will love another girl the way I loved her anytime soon. But without trust, there’s no concrete foundation of love. I don’t know how she can ever mend that with a living proof- a baby.”

“Maybe you should close this chapter, pretend they never existed until you believe your own lies and move on,” Hubo says.

He nods in anguish. "Maybe I should try that. Where is my sister?"

"Which one? There are three of them," Hubo asks.

"The one I spoke to over the phone," he says.

He kicks his shoes off, throws socks on the floor and pull Sikelela's sandals under the bed.

"Londeka is home and head-over-heels over some idiot," he says.

"You know him?" Sikelela asks.

"No, I don't," he says.

"Then how do you know that he's an idiot?"

"Anyone who fucks my sister is an idiot. I think we should find him and check if he's good enough for our sister."

"I'm not bored, Hubo," he snorts derisively. He hasn't met Londeka yet and now he has to fight her boyfriend!

"But you will come with me so that you can protect me if things go south," – Hubo.

"Oh, the Great Hlongwane is scared!" Sikelela tilts his head back and chuckles.

"You're older than me, you should take beatings on my behalf. Let's set up the braai-stand outside."

"Are you not leaving?" Sikelela asks with a frown.

"No, I'm sleeping here." He's standing in front of the table and looking at the music CDs. There's one bed, someone will have to

sleep on the floor and it won't be him because he's a special guest.

"I'm working tomorrow morning, don't think you're going to party here," Sikelela says.

"You need to live Sikelela."

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Sgcino Zulu

Mela barges into his office. He's been avoiding her endless questions and hiding behind work. But now it's time to go home, she found him at the right time, there's no excuse for him not to give her attention. They share a mother's surname, she's also dating one of his close friends. She's been one of those people who's accepted and supported him this far.

"I always hear about people changing once they get into new relationships, but I never thought you'd be one of them," she complains with her arms folded, adopting a fake cheesed-off face.

"I wish that was true, but we are not in a relationship yet, I'm still texting like a fool- declaring my love," he says.

She wanted to talk about that, she quickly puts her purse on his desk and curiously looks at him.

"But she's into you, I can see that. One thing I'm curious about though is your condition. Do you think she will understand?"

He swallows back hard. He's fallen in love again, one thing he wants to have this time is normalcy, something he knows very well he can't have.

"If she loves me, she will understand." There's no one he's ever been romantically linked with who has understood, not even his late wife, Fezeka. But this time he has hope, Londeka looks brave.

"Shouldn't you tell her now though?" - Mela.

"And look like a fool? No Mela, I don't enjoy being labeled." His gaze drops to the floor, he inhales sharply and looks at Mela again. He doesn't want to talk about this now.

"But if she loves you she's going to try and understand who you are. It's not like you harm people or bring bad spirits after you happened to switch," she says.

A loud mouth! That's one thing he doesn't like about Mela, she never stops talking. She knows how much he's tried to hide his zombie-personality from the world. Back home they know, but here only his close friends know about it.

"Come on, Sgcino. You can't start a relationship with dishonesty," - Mela.

"Okay, so what do you want me to say? 'Hey Londeka I love you but sometimes I talk to ghosts. And while we are on that, I killed my wife.' Is that what you want me to say? Huh?" His forehead furrows, tears distort his vision but he quickly steels up.

"Sgcino, I care about you, I was just advising you but if you don't think it's time for that yet, I respect your decision," Mela says

regretfully.

He sighs, maybe he's a bit harsh, Mela is not lying.

"I'm scared, I just want to have a normal life," he says.

"I know, I hope she gives the answer soon."

"Hopefully."

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He needs to fill the car so that in the morning he won't have any delays before going to work. As he finishes exchanging cash with the petrol attendant two men approach his car. One is a security guard, he's still in his uniform probably coming from work. The other one is in fitted jeans and a black hoodie that's pulled over his forehead. They don't look like criminals, even though them checking the registration of his car is unsettling, they can't possible rob him in a garage.

He pulls off the hoodie, the second one, and he looks at him with a wide fake grin.

"Mageba," he says.

They know him? That's uncomfortable.

"Ya," – He sounds unfriendly, but who would be friendly in a situation like this?

"I'm Mahubo Hlongwane," the hoodie guy says.

Hlongwane? He shifts his eyes to the one in a security uniform,

and damn, the resemblance of Londeka is salient.

His throat is suddenly dry. They know he's pursuing a love interest with their sister, Londeka told him about the interrogation, and he's heard about how averse they are to peace.

"We are not here to get the cows." It seems like this Mahubo is going to do all the talking. The other one hasn't said anything, but he still looks aggressive regardless.

"So what do we call you?" You already know who's asking.

Sgcino takes a deep breath, "I'm Sgcinumyalo, I think that's what you should call me."

"I'm too hungry to pronounce that, I'll need two mutton-pies and a can of Monster after saying your name."

Stupid in love or naturally stupid, whichever it is, he finds himself fishing his wallet and passing R100 to them. It's called ukucubuza (softening your in-laws with money.) Hubo is impressed with the R100, but not too impressed to the point of forgetting why he followed this man here against Sikelela's advice.

"Why are you calling my sister?" he asks.

"Well, I'm a man and she's a beautiful woman," Sgcino says.

Hubo takes a close look at his face. "You look older than her."

"Age is just a number," he says.

Hubo chuckles, "And death is just a big sleep, if I find out that you hurt her I will kill you."

That's...LOL, they really don't know who he is.

But he nods, "I understand."

"Thanks for the money, hopefully there's more where it came from."

They finally leave his window. Mela was right about them.

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Londeka

Sgcino is calling me. I let it ring and only pick up when he calls for the second time. Sometimes I answer and pretend to be in deep sleep so that I can sound a bit sexy.

"Ummm hey," – It's one of those fake sexy voices of mine.

"Are you sleeping?"

No, I'm standing in the kitchen.

"Yeah, but you've woken me up," I say.

"Sorry MaHlongwane, I should've called earlier but I was still recovering from the fright your brothers gave me."

Whaaat? I jump, my elbow push the pot on the table and sends it to the floor with its content.

"Is that a pot? I thought you were sleeping," he asks.

I roll my eyes; whatever!

“You said my brothers gave you a fright, which ones and how do they know you?” I ask.

“I don’t know, I think they tracked my car. But it’s nothing, I bought Mahubo pies because my name is too long for him to pronounce in an empty stomach,” he says.

I don’t need any confirmation, when he says that pie story I know Mahubo did it, that’s just like him.

“I’m sorry, he’s not a bad person, people just don’t understand his jokes.” He’s my brother, of course I will paint a good picture of him, but deep down I know my brothers are what people say they are.

“Why don’t you make his threat worthy?” he asks.

“Meaning?” I know exactly what he means.

“Give me a chance, I know I’m ugly but believe me, my heart is beautiful,” he says.

I always find it boastful when good-looking people call themselves ugly, like they want you to correct them and tell them what their mirrors have already told them.

“You’re not ugly,” I say because I wanted to be a motivational speaker growing up.

“If I’m not ugly then why haven’t I received my response from MaHlongwane?”

“Okay fine Sgcino, when are we going on a date as a couple?”

There's a minute of silence, then his voice cracks in;

"Wait...we are a couple?" he asks.

"You have five seconds to figure it out," I say.

"I just need clarity because..."

I count; "One...two..."

"Okay sthandwa sami, Saturday. I promise you, you're not going to regret this," he says.

"I hope not because I'm scared of heartbreaks."

"Don't worry, your heart is safe with me."

I don't trust men, but this one seems different and mature. I'm not sure about the pot and fish and potatoes on the floor, but one thing I'm sure of is that I, Londeka Hlongwane, am no longer single.

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I slept like a baby, being in relationship feels great from day one. Mela told me she was around, I decided to meet up with her for drinks and share the news. It's not breaking news because she already knew I feel about him.

I'm having a Gimlet, she's on some Holy-Mary season and just drinking juice.

"Where is Sthembiso?"

This is always the first thing she asks me. I don't think it's healthy to crush on a married man like this while you have your own boyfriend.

"He's home with his wife," I emphasize the last part. I don't know where Sthembiso is though.

She rolls her eyes, "You could've just said he's home. So what's this glow with you? Even your eyes have a spark, what's up?"

"I would like to have my name removed from Singleville," I say.

"Yasss, you go girl!" She raises her glass and we toast to my new relationship, a successful one I pray.

"Tell me more about him, I feel like I don't know much about him yet." Trust me to get into a relationship and get to know about the person later.

"He's old-school, there's a lot of 1954 shit you're going to go through," she says.

I know he comes from the rural areas, just like myself, but he seemed a bit classy and civilized- if that's the word.

"Brief me, assomblief," I say taking a sip from my cocktail.

"I think as time goes on you will have to declare your love for him publicly, the Zulu way. And there will be gifts-exchanging ceremonies for the parents to get to know one another. You know his wife is late, I think he's looking for stability, he's never been the adventurous type, so lobola negotiations may happen in due time."

I don't know why I'm overwhelmed by this because I come from Mashoba and that's exactly how things are done. Maybe because I've always excluded myself from such traditional things, they waste money and sometimes relationships don't even work out. Imagine breaking up with someone after you've sent sleeping blankets, grocery and all kinds of gifts.

"He's generous though, he believes in taking care of his woman and taking control," she says.

"I'm an alpha female, I hope we don't bump heads along the way," I say.

She laughs, "H-for hectic, but I think you guys will work out."

Our food comes, I'm going to eat enough here so that I don't touch the samp I left my mother cooking at home. I'm spoiling myself with mac and cheese and pork ribs. We don't eat pork at home, I don't know who made the rule, but I think all of us, children, eat it when we are gone out.

Mela is eating only a leafy green salad with avocado. I certainly didn't leave home to come and eat avocado in a restaurant.

"Ummm wait," I swallow first. "I forgot to tell you that Hubo took Sikelela, our other brother, and went to threaten Sgcino. I don't even know how he found him."

"Sgcino told me about it last night, don't worry about him, he can handle the blows," she says.

"I just feel like him being the enemy of peace proves what people always say about us, the Hlongwanes. Baba was a man of

principles, he wouldn't have approved of this chaos that's currently happening here in the village."

"Everyone is responsible, my family too played a part in the chaos. I hope this peacefulness lasts because I'm tired of living in fear."

"I think everyone is tired, but it brought me one good thing; Sgcino. If I wasn't in hiding our paths wouldn't have crossed."

She rolls her eyes and smiles, "I'm going to have Sgcino for lunch and dinner today. Let's talk about something else, have you ever heard of a ghost-whisperer?"

Seriously? I'm eating my ribs and she wants to talk about ghosts.

"The movie?" I ask.

"No, real people who can see and talk with ghosts. In an African perspective it's a supernatural gift, but western science may define it as delusional disorder where a person see and hear things that don't exist and believe they're true," she says.

"That's some spooky shit, I've never heard of such," I say.

"It's not common, but I know someone who had that condition. It had him for hours while they were on the road at night with his wife, he eventually pulled up at the side of the road where he claimed a person had died in a car crash and didn't find peace, while he was there something scared the wife and she drove off without him. A few meters away she had a car accident and she passed away."

I don't like ghost stories, but this one sounds far-fetched, I'm not

scared- maybe because I'm tipsy too.

"What did he do when his wife died because of his spooky ways?"
I ask.

Worry lines etch on her face before she blows out a deep sigh.

"He was shattered and obviously blaming himself. His family wanted him to be initiated to become a sangoma but that didn't work out," she says.

"Where is he now?"

"Huh?"

I repeat the question, "Where is he?"

"He's still alive, he's attended therapy and currently on antidepressants because sometimes he becomes too anxious and paranoid. He always besprinkle his car with rough salt everytime he drives at night," she says.

"I hope my path never cross with his." I'm praying to God, not judging him.

"Can I have a sip of your cocktail?" she asks.

"Madam, I thought you were on a journey to sobriety," I say laughing.

"I need a drink, trust me," she says.

Well, welcome back to the team babe!

“Londeka?” the voice comes behind our table and we quickly turn our heads. We are done and splitting the bill.

It’s my brother, Sthembiso. They don’t know of my friendship with a Mshengu.

“Hey,” I say.

This is going to be awkward, he’s already looking at Mela with so much contempt.

“What are you doing here?” he asks me.

“Having lunch with Mela,” I say.

“Is she not a daughter of a man who killed your father?” he asks.

Mela doesn’t even know how to react, he’s her family’s enemy and her biggest crush. He’s not in a good mood today, I don’t like the way he’s looking at her because Mela only says good things about him regardless of what has happened.

“She’s a good person and she hasn’t done anything wrong to us,” I defend her.

“I don’t care, you can befriend any girl in the world, just not this bobblehead.”

He’s out of line. I can call her names because she’s my friend and we can always fight it out, but he doesn’t have the right to call an innocent girl a bobblehead.

“That’s rude, Sthembiso. You’re the last person I expect to disrespect a woman,” I say.

“It’s fine babe, how much are we tipping the waitress?” She’s hurt.

“No, he has to apologize,” I say and look at Sthembiso fiercely.

He snaps his brows, “If you want to do comedy go to Comedy Central.”

“She’s my friend, bhuti!” I can feel tears welling up, I quickly adopt a sigh and composure.

“Get up Londeka Blossom Hlongwane.”

This is why I’m not cool with him, why the fuck is he addressing me by that name? He retrieves his wallet and fishes his credit card.

“How much is the bill?” he asks.

We were still splitting. He snatches the bill and runs his eyes over it and then signals for the waitress to give him the speed-point.

Mela picks her purse and says her goodbye and leaves.

I feel like a failure of a friend, I didn’t stand up for her enough and now her day has been ruined.

“Londeka are you crazy? What if her brothers came here and harmed you? You can share the table with anyone, but not your enemy.”

I have a lot to say but I don’t want to be summoned to family meetings and have my father’s three bored wives on my back for being disrespectful.

I will check up on Mela later.

(If you still haven't recieved Loving Beyond The Temple hala at me
on Whatsapp: 0637108652)

SIKELELA

Chapter 15

SGUQA

He walks in with his lower lip latched between his teeth, there are horizontal lines etched on his forehead which means one thing; someone angered him.

Zime looks at him as he takes his shoes off without saying a word to her and throwing himself on the bed. She last saw him around mid-day, where is her kiss?

“Sthembiso,” she says softly climbing on the bed to lie next to him.

“It’s Londeka,” he reveals before she asks. They’re not the closest siblings, both of them get along better with their half-siblings from other mothers than with each other.

“What did she do?” Zime asks with worry. This man has been her best friend for years, while many people kiss frogs before they find their prince-charming, when she found a man he was the one. He never tried to change her, he loves her for who he is, not many women find that. She hates seeing him sad like this.

“I walked into her having lunch and alcohol with a Mshengu girl,” he says.

“A Mshengu as in thee Mshengus?” Her wide gaze meets his, he pulls her to his arm and squeezes her onto his chest. A Mshengu

name can't be spit with a Hlongwane in one sentence; it's water and oil.

"I don't know what that bobblehead is up to. They grew up in the same village and they didn't become friends. Why is she befriending Londeka now?" He's convinced something is up.

"Londeka needs to be careful, I don't trust those people," Zime says.

"She's stupid, she'll only realize that when she sees them pointing a gun between her eyes and it will be serving her right," he says.

Zime's mouth opens loosely, her eyes widen. He can't talk like that about his sister.

"She's young, I'm sure she didn't think about any of that, she just saw a beautiful girl and befriended her," she says in defense.

He scoffs, "Beautiful? Mxm."

"Come on, I don't like how your relationship with Londeka is. You're closer to everyone but her. I'm not saying your other siblings don't have your back, but the first person you'll have when the world closes up on you is the one you shared a womb with," she says.

His eye narrows, "What about you?"

"If I'm not around, obviously. You have me as long as I live," she says and takes a deep sigh. "However, you need to get closer to your sister. If I had a sibling, trust me I'd treat them like a piece of diamond."

“You’re making it sound like I don’t love her,” he says.

“Loving someone and not showing them is the same as not loving her. I know how much you love, Sthembiso. You love deep and daringly. Being hard on her is not going to bear perfection.”

“I’m not hard on her, I just want her to be strong and independent,” he says.

“Keeping your distance is not going to make her independent and strong, your father is no more, you’re now the point of reference for her regarding a male figure. So please, make an effort,” she says.

He inhales sharply and nods.

“I hear you,” he says.

“Hearing and understanding is different.”

“Okay Mrs Hlongwane, I understand you.” He lifts her face to his, their lips lock into a steamy kiss that leads his hands to her butt. She’s not wearing anything under the skirt, his fingers are sliding into her butt crack.

She shifts and chuckles, “You haven’t eaten.”

“I’m going to eat you,” he says and pulls her for another kiss. The last time he asked for a baby he got ignored, hopefully today if he tries again they’ll get somewhere.

He lifts her to lie on top of his chest and wraps his arms around her waist. His erection is poking up at her, she adjusts her position not to hurt him.

“Do you remember my request?” he asks.

She knows; she giggles and buries her face on his chest. His lips stretch into a smile, he lifts her to face him.

“What are you scared of?” he asks.

“I’m not scared,” she denies.

“Then why don’t you want me to become a father?” He doesn’t want to put pressure on her, but there are people putting pressure on him; he’s over 35 without a child.

“I don’t have a mother, Sthembiso. I’ve never had a figure of a mother and I probably never will. What if I become a bad mother and there’s no one to help me?”

“That won’t happen, I’m here, so is my family,” he says.

She inhales softly, “Your family don’t like me. I know if you happen to die I will be sent back home before your body even decompose in the soil. And if I happen to die they will be happy and start looking for another wife for you before my coffin even goes down.” They stay together, she only goes to the main homestead when there’s a special occasion and she always makes sure she doesn’t step on anyone’s toes. No matter what she does she will never be good enough for his mothers, he knows that too.

“Do you need anyone else to love you?” he asks.

She shakes her head.

“Good, because no matter what anyone says or thinks about you, I love you and you love me too,” he says.

Tears distort her vision and streaks down her eyes. She smiles through them and kisses his lips.

“I want to carry your children, I know you’re going to be a good father,” she says.

He’s blown away. A faint smile appears on his face, his hands reach to her cheeks and wipe the tears.

“Really, baby?”

She smiles, “Yes, I’m down for it.”

“Thank you, mkami. It means a lot, you’re going to be a great mom. Let’s start now.” Now he’s pushing it.

“Now? You haven’t even eaten and it’s not like I will get pregnant today.” She’s laughing and climbing off the bed.

He’s left with his erection and stupid grin on the bed. His eyes are on her, while other people fall in love once and live the rest of their lives creating memories to honor that love, he’s falling in love each and everyday with his wife. Theirs is not a normal love story, before she even agreed to go out with him he already had told his father about her becoming a Hlongwane wife. She became someone he wanted to spend the rest of his life with the first time he set his eyes on her. She was jogging in the afternoon and he had a flat tyre on his way to Darnall Sugar Mill. Like a lady, she stopped and asked if he was getting any help. Help was on the way but he said no, so she stood with him and called her cousin. What attracted him first was her upturned small eyes and high cheek bones. Her olive skin was perspiring, nonetheless she was

the best he'd ever seen and dreamy to look at.

She still takes his breath away.

"Come here," he calls her back to bed.

She sighs heavily and walks back to him. He always does this, there's nothing he wants to do except kissing her and making her confess that she loves him.

He tucks his hand around her neck and brings her down to his face. His lips brush hers tenderly, he shuts his eyes and inhales her breath and deepens the kiss. His tongue swirls inside her mouth, she grabs his waist and moans amorously.

He's breathing heavily, he pulls back and stares at her. His eyes exudes love, protection, safety, patience and that element she always sees in his eyes. 'I got you' assurance.

"I love Sthembiso," she says.

He holds her hand and squeezes it. That's enough for him; hearing those words is everything.

"I love you too, I will eat here in bed, I hope you don't mind." He knows how she feels about that, he has a knowing smile on his face and a sexy eye squint.

He's cute, she can make an exception for today.

"Ungajwayeli kodwa," she says walking out.

He laughs, "Thank you."

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SIKELELA

He's home, his mother asked him to come. There's no more enthusiasm of coming home; now it always feels like he's coming to nothing. Life has changed so miserably. He misses making long night calls and walking through the village at night to go and surprise her with a visit. Watching her helping herself with whichever snacks he brought her; she was always grateful. He always put her first, sometimes he'd eat vegetables and Koo baked beans the whole month to afford buying her everything other girls had. He knew the situation of her mother's marriage, her father didn't help them at times and he had to give her money.

"Nxxx!" He drops the spoon with his jaws clenched.

Cebile raises her eyebrow, "Is my food that bad?"

"No, I'm just not hungry," he says.

"Since when you're not hungry for spinach and isigwaqane. Is my age-mate already giving you troubles?"

He doesn't answer that. He's not in a relationship with anyone and he never will.

"When did you last talk to Vumo?"

That name...he can't breathe!

“About what?” His voice cracks low.

“She’s carrying a baby that could be yours,” Cebile says.

“Ma do you know how painful what you’re saying is? Do you know how painful it is to me to hear her name and not think about someone I love, but remind myself of the betrayal instead?”

Cebile dries her hands with a dish-cloth and pulls a chair and sits.

“I know how a heartbreak feels, your father left me, and just like you, there was nothing wrong that I did. I still hate him.”

“Yet you expect me to love Vumo,” he says.

“Because Vumo is young, sometimes she doesn’t know what she’s doing. But your father already had a child and a wife, he was old enough to know wrong from right,” she says.

“So you’re never going to allow his wives to come here and pay what’s due?”

“No, they could’ve done all that when you emptily looked into my eyes and asked if your father was ever going to come and defend you against Dlomo. When nobody defended you and you ended up going over Dlomo’s house and fought a grown man at the age of 16 because he wouldn’t stop bullying you. They could’ve come when you started scratching your ears and refused to speak to me or eat my food because I couldn’t afford what your classmates wore. When their husband was still alive and taking care of all their children, including the non-biological ones.”

He’s staring at her, he can see how deep her pain goes.

Sometimes he prays for her to find love again, maybe she'd let go of all this anger. But then again he would have to address that person as a father.

"Did you love him?" he asks.

She takes a deep breath and nods.

"It was wrong, he was married but I loved him."

"Before things went wrong, how was he?" he asks.

She smiles, the gorgeous queen is back, there's a spark in her eyes. This is taking her back to those hey-days.

"He had an intense aura, just like you, and a deep voice that was always kept low. To charm girls, I think. He popped his fingers when he was nervous and chewed the culm of grass when he was angry. He didn't laugh much but when he did it was heartily." Watching her speak about him you'd swear she doesn't hate him, but she's just in her heart for a moment, in no time she will snap back.

"He loved Sthembiso, he was the center of his world. I guess he loved his kids, except the one he made with me." Her senses are back. She hates that man!

"I do look like him, why do you think he hated me?" This is the question he wishes he had a chance to ask Mkhonto, maybe he would've found closure.

"Eat your food," Cebile says with a deep sigh.

She doesn't have the answer, if she did she would've told him a

long time ago.

Silence falls into the room, he picks the spoon and eats his food.

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He's lying in the bed going through his old messages. Today he has to let go of the memories; he has to delete everything that connects him to the Ntulis. Even Qambi, she's always been good to him, she was the first Ntuli to accept him but now he has to say goodbye. Hubo was right, he won't be able to handle the web he'd be inserting himself into if he agrees to what she suggested the last time he saw her.

He erases all their messages, however some lives rent-free in his head and forgetting them may take forever. He sends one last message to Qambi thanking her for everything and wishing her the best in life.

Then he scrolls down to Vumo's, his finger taps the call button and it rings. They have left the village, he doesn't know where they are and it's good that way. At least he won't see her around and he won't hear about her.

"Sikelela," she answers in a shallow voice.

"Hi," he says and heaves a silent breath. Why did he do this? It's a torture, he's triggering things he's trying to get over.

"Are you there?" she asks after a long moment of silence.

He exhales audibly, "Yes, I just wanted to say goodbye and good

luck.”

“Why?” Her voice breaks.

“I will be changing my number, I have deleted everything and got rid of all the gifts. I hope you do the same too.”

“Do you think you’ll ever forgive me?”

“No,” he says.

There’s a moment of silence.

He takes a deep breath, “I will never forget the good times we had together either. Loving you has been the biggest highlight of my love until now. I’m not sure where life will take me right now but you, Vumo, gave me hope to behold for the longest time of my life where everything else was dark. And you saved me from myself, you taught me how to love a woman and love right. Thank you for that, I will find ways of embracing the scars you’ve left me with and maybe love again.”

Sniffs.

She’s crying. His heart breaks into pieces, this is the END of them, he never imagined them ending like this.

“I’m sorry, Sikelela,” she says.

“It’s okay, good luck with every journey you embark on in the future. This is me saying goodbye, my first love.”

She’s sobbing loudly.

He inhales sharply and ends the call.

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SGUQA

He wants to have a conversation with his mothers before going to his house. It's not settling well with him that nothing has been done to acknowledge Sikelela to date. His mother is angry, who wouldn't be? But that doesn't mean they should not try anything. He's come home, they've seen him, everyone knows who he is except for the girls who haven't met him yet.

MaXulu cooked steamed bread and chicken stew. The moment she saw her son stepping inside the yard she yelled for Londeka to get the plate ready. Her son has lost so much weight, she can literally count his ribs under that T-shirt from a distance. He's being starved by that lazybones he calls a wife.

"Ma, I just ate in my house," he says.

MaXulu puts the plate in front of him and shoves the fork in his hand.

"You ate what? Those noodles she always cooks," she scoffs.

He eats because he loves steamed bread and his mother's stew and he doesn't want to argue about his wife today.

MaDlamini walks in with a plate of sweet-potatoes and madumbe. She heard the word and quickly arranged him something to eat. If

they don't take care of him as their mothers Zime will starve him to death.

"Thank you, Ma," he says.

He's not going to eat all of this and that will lead into them packing the food for him in a Tupperware container for him to eat tomorrow. Zime will be offended, welcome to his life!

"I actually came here to talk about the Dlamuka issue. Sikelela has acknowledged us as his family, it's now time for us to fight for him and show that we care and we want him to be a Hlongwane," he says.

"But his mother is the key, we can't go over her word," MaXulu says.

"I can go to her and try to talk to her, maybe we can agree on something," he says.

"When do you plan to do that?"

There's a gunshot...

Another one follows shortly, then it's silent again.

"That wasn't far," he says getting off the chair.

MaXulu is already hiding under the table.

As he sprints out of the door he hears a car driving off. Hubo runs out of his rondavel armed with his gun and a cleaver.

"Were they in your house, bafo?"

He doesn't know. He can't answer. He can't breathe.

Zime is in the house alone.

SIKELELA

Chapter 16

SGUQA

Hubo is behind him, as he gets closer to the door he loses his strength and almost falls on the ground. The front door is open, the kitchen light is still on. He's dragging himself to the bedroom hoping his instincts are wrong.

The bedroom door is open, the first thing he sees is her phone lying on the floor with cracks on the screen. She's on the bed lying on her stomach covered in a blood-soaked duvet.

Hubo gets in, his eyes run to the bed and he sees his sister-in-law lying with a bleeding wound on her head.

She's dead. Sguqa didn't make it to the bed, he's on his knees with his face buried in his hands. Hubo is the only sane one here, the next move has to come from him and it has to be mature. He calls Thobani and then the police, then he goes to Sguqa and lifts up. He drags the chair, makes him sit on it and puts a glass of sugar-water in front of him. They've been to the Mshengus to attack and fought many other people in the past, but they have never touched a woman, never!

Thobani arrives with their mothers, sisters and a few neighbors.

Sthembiso hasn't said anything, he hasn't looked at anyone, but everyone knows what he's going through right now. Londeka is crying the loudest, this has gone too far, innocent people are dying.

The police arrive and start asking questions. Yes, they're asking questions instead of driving the van to the Mshengus and arresting everyone they find in the yard. The forensic team do their job, Zime Hlongwane has been declared dead after two gunshot wounds in the head.

The officer turns to Hubo and looks at the firearm in his hand.

"Can I see the license for that?"

"Is the license going to help you find the Mshengus and raise my sister-in-law?"

His mother pulls his arm, he looks back at her and gets the look.

He leaves the crime scene- bedroom- and goes outside. He's shortly joined by Thobani who has a kitchen knife hidden behind his waist.

"Are we waiting for the police to leave?" he asks.

"We are waiting for Sguqa to tell us what he wants us to do and then we will make it happen," Hubo says.

"Do you think they wanted Sis' Zime or they made a mistake because Sguqa wasn't home?" Thobani never knows what's going on until he's told. At times like this nobody has time to think for

him.

“Are we safe?” he asks.

Hubo takes a deep breath, “Tomfools got here and shot Sguqa’s wife dead. Yes, we are very much safe brother.”

“I’m going to call malume,” Thobani says quickly excusing himself before getting more clapbacks.

Hubo retrieves his phone from the pocket and scrolls down for Sikelela’s number. His blood is boiling, if he had things his own way he would’ve gone to the Mshengus as Zime’s body leaves, but he has to respect Sguqa’s wishes – whatever they are.

Sikelela picks up in a very low distressing tone.

“Hubo, unjani?”

“Not good, they just killed Sis’ Zime.”

“Who? The Mshengus?” He sounds alarmed.

“There’s no one else who’d want Sguqa to feel such pain except them,” Hubo says.

“But a woman? They’re cowards, why didn’t they face him man-to-man instead of killing a defenseless woman?”

“Maybe they want us to start killing their women too, which isn’t a problem at all.”

“Where is Sguqa?”

“He’s inside the house, he hasn’t spoken to anyone.”

“Send my condolences to him when you get the chance. Let me know early when the funeral is so that I can inform my boss.”

“Okay bafo, the police are leaving now, I have to go inside the house.”

“Don’t do anything stupid. Sguqa doesn’t need you to stress him right now, if there’s anything I can help with let me know.”

“Okay, I will do that.” He drops the call, takes a deep sigh and goes back inside the house.

Their mothers have started cleaning the bedroom. Sguqa is sitting in the other bedroom with a couple of village men who came armed with cudgels and cleavers. He’s still in a state of shock, he can do anything but live without Zime.

Hubo sits next to him, everyone is waiting for his word. Revenge can be carried out at any given time; its an eye for an eye. They always respond to the Mshengus with the language they both understand. But this time around things are different, they took it too far.

“We can go without you,” Hubo says. He was born ready for war.

“I don’t want you to hurt anyone,” Sguqa says.

Hubo’s brows furrow. People have to get hurt, a lot of them.

“You’re going to let them get away with it?” he asks.

“No, I only want Busizwe’s head.” Busizwe is the eldest son of Mshengu, he’s the one behind everything that his family does.

“He’s always with his cousins and brothers, we can’t get him without going through them,” Hubo says.

“I will get him.” He sounds sure of himself.

Hubo just nods. If it was up to him Busizwe’s head would’ve been chopped after they’ve killed everything that has a Mshengu blood running through its veins, their dogs and cats even.

“They should’ve killed me, not my wife.”

“Sorry bafo,” Hubo says fidgeting with his fingers. He knows how much his brother loved his wife, he can’t think of a single word that can comfort his heart at this moment.

“But they have killed me anyway. Maybe I shouldn’t have moved out, she would’ve been safe at home than here.”

“Don’t blame yourself, you did what you needed to do for your marriage to be harmonious and you made her happy until the last day. She’s proud of you,” Hubo says.

He shakes his head, “Proud that she caught bullets because of me? I fetched her from EMthunzini, I married her and changed her surname to this. This, Mahubo! I brought her here to die before we even make our name and children.”

MaXulu walks in. It would be hypocritical of her to start crying today whereas she’s never appreciated Zime since she became a

part of her son's life. But she's sorry, her son is in pain.

"Please give me her aunt's number," she says.

Sguqa passes his phone to Hubo. Hubo searches for Zime's aunt's number and copies it to MaXulu's phone.

"Should I ask Londeka to bring something to drink?" MaXulu asks.

"Yes," Hubo replies.

She looks at Sguqa, "Do you need anything?"

"I only need my wife, MaXulu. But you people mistreated her, I had to move out and live here with her alone and now she's dead." Yes, his mothers also played a role in this. They out-casted Zime and now she's caught bullets for the same people who never wanted her.

"This is what you wanted. Go to your sisters, throw a party and rejoice," he says.

"You were always going to move out of the main house. Don't blame us for what the Mshengus did. I never wished death on Zime regardless of how I felt about her."

Sguqa stands with his eyebrows snapped.

"Felt about her? The only person you were supposed to feel anything for is dead, my father. You had no business to feel anything for my wife, all you had to do was to be kind."

"How is it my fault that someone got here and shot your wife? Huh, Sthembiso? How am I responsible for the war that you are a part of?"

One man, Kubheka, stands and pulls Sguqa down. He has every right to express his pain, but respecting his wife's soul is more important.

"Calm down, let's not hold her back, she needs to rest in peace," Kubheka says.

"Bafo, we will talk about this when the time is right," Hubo says patting his shoulder. They can't fight each other and the enemy all at once. Yes, there's so much to resolve as far as Sguqa and Zime's marriage is concerned.

A drop tear rolls down his cheek, he takes a deep breath and buries his face in his hands.

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LONDEKA HLONGWANE

My brother is a mess. I knew the Mshengus were not done, but I never thought they would return to kill a woman. They know who they're fighting with, not that I'm wishing death on my brothers, but this one is a senseless murder. If it was someone else I would've cried but I would've known they weren't saints either. Zime was a saint, maybe not a saint that may fit everyone's definition but she didn't bother anyone. She lived with her husband, wore her shorts and drank her wine indoors.

My phone rings again. It's Sgcino, he's calling for the fifth time now. I take a heavy breath, compose myself and answer.

"What did I do wrong?" he asks.

"Nothing." My voice breaks. I can still smell her blood from the bedroom.

"You don't sound okay," he says.

"I'm not. They killed my brother's wife; they shot her in the head," I say.

"Who killed your brother's wife?" he asks.

"The Mshengus," I say.

"Mela's brothers?"

"Yes." I shut my eyes, a few drop of tears escape and roll down my cheeks. Mela doesn't know what has happened, she was texting me a few minutes ago telling me she's out with her boyfriend. She's my friend, I love her, but how do I overlook everything her family has done to mine?

"Is it safe for you to be there?" he asks.

"No, but I can't leave until the funeral," I tell him.

"Londeka, you can't die, I just found you. There's no need for you to gamble with your life just to follow mourning traditions."

"Sgcino, please!"

"I wish I can take you away and protect you until everything is over. I'm not ready to receive a call about you being dead."

"I'm not going to die, okay? We are now on guard and staying alert," I say.

I hear a sigh.

"Saturday is canceled, I guess. Please answer your phone if I'm calling you, if you can't send a message." Typical man!

"Yes sir," I say.

"Also tell me if you need something, even if you just want to talk and express your pain."

"Thank you, Sgcino." I'm yet to familiarize myself with calling him petnames.

His call leaves me feeling a little better. I even realize that I'm actually hungry, Ma saw her son and forgot that I hadn't eaten and gave him all the stew. Here, boys are treated different from girls.

I need to find my way around Zime's kitchen and fix something fresh because I'm not brave enough to eat the food she cooked before she died.

Ma walks in, I'm surprised to see her and her sisters this supportive today. They're doing everything right, I'm wondering how they really feel now that she's dead. She's out of their son's life, but the question remains; how is he going to live without her?

"Why are you cooking because there's food in the refrigerator?" she asks me.

"I don't like macaroni," I say.

“So what are you cooking because I doubt she ever bought real food?” My mother though!

“If Sthembiso walks in and hears you make such ridiculing comments he’s going to be angry,” I say.

“That’s not ridiculing, it’s the truth. He always came home for food. But what can I say, the money went into this.” She points at the wine cellar.

“Okay, can I cook in peace?” Sthembiso hardly comes home if it’s not work related, brother related or if he wants to discuss family issues. I don’t remember him coming home because he was hungry. Him and Zime had a good marriage, they were both happy.

Speaking of him, he’s walking in. Ma walks out, they don’t even look at each other. I heard about the disagreement they had earlier. I don’t even have the courage to look at him. I can’t imagine how it feels like to lose not only the person you were in love with, but also came home to everyday.

“There’s food,” he says.

Why is he standing in the middle of the kitchen at this time of the night? He should be with Hubo and Thobani in the bedroom.

“I want something else, not macaroni.” I find courage to turn and face him. Not my closest person, but right now I want to kill the people who made my brother look this broken.

“How are you feeling?” It’s a stupid question, it’s clear from the

swollen eyelids and hopelessness in his eyes.

"I don't know," he says.

Yeah, I'm the last person he'd open up to in this world

"Are you hungry?" I ask.

He shuts his eyes and exhales deeply. I'm pain in the arse.

"Sorry," I apologize and turn back to the potatoes I was peeling.

"Call your friend."

Did I hear that right?

I turn and look at him.

"Call your friend and get her location," he says.

"Which friend?" My heart is racing. He can't be thinking about who just crossed my mind. He can't!

"The light-skinned Mshengu girl," he says.

"But Mela didn't do anything wrong, she's not even here today."
My knees are getting weak, I need to pull a chair and sit.

"Did my wife do anything wrong?"

"That question should directed to her brothers. Please bhuti, I'm begging you, don't hurt her. She's against all of this, she doesn't have to get..."

"Was Zime not your sister?"

I swallow hard, "She was my sister."

“Yet you’re choosing the enemy over her soul.”

How am I choosing...urgh!

“Sthembiso, I can’t,” I say.

“Can’t or won’t?” he asks.

“What do you want me to say? I’m not a killer, if I give you Mela’s location you will kill her and her death will forever be in my conscience. I don’t want to end up like you.”

He steps closer to me, I push the chair back and stand. He stands in front of my face. I’ve never seen him looking like this; it’s scary.

“Give me her number,” he says.

“No.” My eyelids fail to lock back tears. Why can’t he understand things from my perspective? How is me giving him Mela’s location different from taking a gun and shooting her myself?

“She’s my friend, please.”

“Zime is my wife too, but they killed her.”

“Are you going to kill her?” My voice trembles. I know there’s a good possibility that he will, but I’m praying for him to remember how Zime felt about him becoming a typical Hlongwane man.

“No, I will not kill her,” he says.

“How do I believe that? You’re angry Sthembiso, you’re not thinking straight,” I say.

He extends his hand and opens his palm for the phone. I sob louder. He doesn’t care, he’s never cared for my feelings.

My hand is shaking as I take the phone out of my pocket and hand it over to him. It feels like I'm handing over my friend's life, which isn't too far from the truth.

I thought he'd copy the number, but he's typing a text using my phone and sending it to Mela. I'm silently praying for her not to respond, but a minute later there's a beep.

"There you go," he brings it back after forwarding the address to his number. "Don't do something that will make me question your loyalty," he says.

"I'm loyal to my family, but..."

"No 'but', continue with your pots." He turns and walks towards the door.

"Please promise me you won't hurt her," I beg.

No answer. He walks out and leaves me in tears. My phone is still in my hand, I want to tell her to run but nobody told Zime to run, my loyalty will be questioned.

Even if he doesn't do anything to her, I've lost a friend.

SIKELELA

CHAPTER 17

Melamina Mshengu

I hold a grudge against my family. My whole family. A part of me believes that if I belonged to a different clan, or a different village, or country, things would've been different. Maybe that's why I badly wanted to be with Sthembiso, I knew he was the type that settles down easily and marries, that would've been my ticket out of the Mshengu name and everything that comes with it. I just knew from the way he carried himself in the village, he's always been different. I was doing primary school when he matriculated, I had my eyes on him since the day he walked into the hall of our school and beat up the boy who had pinched Londeka's ear. He was all I wanted, a protector. He didn't marry me though, he went to Stanger and came back with a needlesized slayqueen that he wifed. I was heartbroken, at 23 I still had a crush on him and he didn't even know that I existed.

Now you can imagine the flood of emotions I went through when he called me a bobblehead. I think that's what they call those tiny lightskinned barbie-dolls with loose heads. The description fits me but I think my new least favourite word is bobblehead. I still don't hate him though, it's the word he said that I hate, I hold nothing against him, I never will.

Londeka is texting me again. I wonder why she's still up at this time. It's now past eleven, I should be getting out of here as well, tomorrow I have an early appointment with my psychologist.

****Mela are you still at the club****- text message.

I roll my eyes and text her back. I know it's midweek, but can she chill? My friendship with her is one of the most shocking experiences I've had in this life. It wasn't meant to happen, we've never had anything in common, not even mutual friends. Beside finding a good job and making friends who are now like family to me, I think she's the best thing to happen to my life.

She texts again, now more worried that my boyfriend has left and I'm still here drinking. I promise her that I'm getting my last cocktail and leaving. Now she's typing and canceling, I have to call her and put her at ease.

Someone snatches my phone. I turn around ready to slap the alcohol out of the drunk only to be welcomed by the face I've dirtily dreamed of so many times.

He looks more hostile than he was when he walked into me having lunch with his sister.

"Ummm...hi," I'm stuttering. I don't know how to react to the sight of him not loving or even liking me.

He grabs my arm and pulls me up, I feel his fingers digging into

my bare skin and squashing my bone.

“Sthembiso,” my whisper is shattering and accompanied by a few drops of tears.

He pulls me and walks towards the exit door with me. I don’t know what’s going on, how he’s holding my arm speaks violence but my heart is giving him a chance to explain himself when we are outside. I’m wearing heels, which he gives no regard to, he drags me towards the white Fortuner that I’ve always dreamed of occupying and getting shagged in.

“Sthembiso,” I whisper again.

“Get inside.” He’s not begging, now alarm bells ring in my head. I quickly snap out of the crush zone and freeze in the reality of him being the biggest enemy of my family.

Now I don’t know what to pray for between my safety from his reckless driving and what may lie ahead of me. My phone is with him, I keep hearing beeping texts flooding in. Londeka knew something; her texts had a lot of panic and investigation in them. I shut my eyes at the possibility of her selling me to her brother for something I never took part of. I was never siding with my family in the feud, I wanted it to end more than anyone.

It’s dark where we are, I only see that it’s a house when he switches on the light. Well, inside it’s more like a hen-coop with an old dirty bed. Words are stuck in my throat, my eyes are burning

with tears, I'm shaking in my boots.

"Sthembiso," I whisper with my hands on my face trying to build a bridge between flooding tears and my chest.

He locks the gigantic padlock and pushes the key into the pocket of his long coat. My eyes land on a protruding weapon on his waist. It's a gun, I'm finally going to pay for the crimes of people who've never give shit about me.

"Call my name once again and you will see what I'm capable of." His voice sounds hoarse, I lift my eyes to his in the light and notice how swollen they are.

"Why am I here?" My voice croaks out, annoying him to the core.

He takes my phone out of his pocket and brings the screen to life. It's locked, if he wants to do something he will need my fingerprint to unlock.

He doesn't ask me to unlock, instead he puts the phone away and looks at me. The look sends shivers down my spine, I ball my hands into fists despite the moisture. I need to stay calm, I'm shit scared but I have to stand and give him whatever it is that he wants.

"Sthe..." He steps closer and grabs my arm, I groan in pain and ask for forgiveness. I still don't know what I did, why I'm locked in this old house with him and his gun.

"My name, bitch!" he says and spits on my face. I fall down on my

kneels, he aggressively lifts me up and pulls me to his face. The only difference between him and Bab'omncane, my father's younger brother, is that he's not licking his lips and squeezing my nipples. He's actually crying. He's hurting me, twisting my arm and clenching his jaws with tears dropping down to his cheeks. I still don't know what is it that I did. But he just said the exact words that my uncle said; "My name, bitch." The context in which it's been said is different, however the feeling is the same. Every fantasy I built up, dreaming of this man as the knight in my shining armor, comes crumbling down. I'm crying, not because he's twisting my arm but because he's taken me back to the 16 year-old me. That girl who was repeatedly sexually violated under the family roof, the girl nobody believed, 'the bitch.'

"Call your brother," he finally hisses out. His hand retrieves the phone from his pocket, he forces it into my hand and pushes me.

I fall down on my butt. Now I have an idea what's happening, I'm a bait for him to get Busizwe.

"Now!" he roars.

My body shakes. My thumb presses the button, I put in my fingerprint and the phone unlocks. Then it clicks, I don't have Busizwe's number because I don't talk to him until there's a need.

"I don't have it," I'm able to say without sounding like a cat with a broken esophagus.

"You don't have it?" It's a threat more than it's a question.

“Sthembiso what did I do?” That, me calling his name, makes him charge towards me and grabs me up by arm. He pulls my chin up, gripping tightly on my jaws, it feels like they are about to dismantle.

There’s warm water between my legs, I let out a shrill scream and he quickly covers my mouth with his hand.

“I don’t want to hurt you, I want your brother,” he says.

I don’t know how to say it in a way that he will believe. “I swear I don’t have his number, you can check my phone.”

He fixes his eyes on mine. He hates me, in fact I don’t think there’s anything or anyone he hates like me at this moment.

“You can kill me but it’s not worth it,” I say.

“Don’t tell me what to do.” This time his voice and deadly look don’t do anything to me. I pay less attention to the physical pain in the arm he’s squeezing.

“Just kill me,” I’m not daring him, I’m begging him.

He lets out a chuckle and lowers himself down to the bed.

“I don’t kill women, me and your brothers are different,” he says.

I have a lot to say, I can teach him more about the word ‘kill’ because he lacks knowledge. He’s killed me, he took a scissor and cut the last string that connected my head to my heart and body.

His phone rings, he takes a single glance and drops the call. Then he sighs deeply, I don't know what Busizwe has done this time but I'm willing to be the lamb of sacrifice.

"Kill me, if that's going to make you equal," I say.

He bumps his head with his hand in frustration and stands in front of my face. He's never belonged to me, him being my protector was a wild and stupid fantasy.

"Where's your wife?" Maybe this question will knock him back to reality, he looks so lost and...

My cheek stings. My right eye tears up instantly, I send my hand over my cheek while trying to grasp what just happened.

"Unlock this phone and call your mother or anyone that's going to get Busizwe on the line," he instructs and sits down again.

"No," I say.

He looks up and frowns.

"No?"

"Yes, that's what I said. I'm not going to call anyone."

"I don't mind keeping you here without any food and water. I will lock you here, go home, bury my wife and come back to show your family your dead body."

Bury his wife? I cannot ask him to elaborate, I have earned my first slap for mentioning her. I hope Busizwe was not involved because that would take matters to a different height.

Wait, I'm stupid. Busizwe did kill his wife, if she's dead, and that's why I'm here.

"I loved my wife," he says.

I've stopped crying, I have my hand over the cheek he slapped and staring at him.

"I don't know how I'm going to live without her. She didn't deserve to die, her only sin was marrying the son of a man who was hated for his status." So indeed she's dead, I have prayed for it to happen, just randomly. I pray for a lot of things and some don't make any sense, knowing God's IQ level I always think He will filter things out and only answer the important ones. But here I am, the girl I've always been jealous of because she had a man I fantasized about is dead and my rapist, my uncle, is still living his life like nothing ever happened.

"I have nothing to lose, your brother has killed the only reason my heart kept beating. The love of my life, my smile-keeper, my Zime. Today she's not sleeping in our bed because of your family."

"Then kill me," I say again.

"I'd be happy to do it, but it's not you that I want, it's your brother," he says.

"Then let me go," I say in a low whisper. He looks up, our eyes lock for a second and he tears his away.

His phone rings again. This time he answers, the person on the

other side is doing all the talking and all he does is sigh now and then.

The call finally ends with an 'okay' from him, then he stands.

"What is your name?" he asks me.

I'm not sure if he really doesn't know it or he's just spiting me.

"Melamina," I say.

He pulls out his gun, there's an urge for me to close my eyes and die without seeing the hate on his face. But I don't, I keep them open until the front-sight is on my browridge.

"Twice," he says. "They shot my wife twice and killed her on our bed."

I don't say anything, I finally shut my eyes and wait to take my last breath.

"Did you plan this?"

I don't know what he's talking about.

"Was your friendship with my sister formed to help your brothers get my wife?"

I want to answer but I don't know where my voice is and I don't know if saying anything is worthy now. I just want him to kill me, maybe I will find peace then.

"Melamina," he calls my name.

I open my eyes and look at the gun on my face.

“Answer the question,” he says.

“Yes,” I want him to end it right now, instantly. I thought my answer would motivate him to pull the trigger but it doesn’t.

He lowers the gun and pushes it back in his waist. I’m crying again, why do people kill you emotionally and mentally and then think by saving your flesh they’re doing you a grande favor?

“Why don’t you kill me?”

He doesn’t answer, he goes to the door and unlocks it. He doesn’t tell me to follow him but leaves the door open. I don’t know where I am, I cannot stay behind and not follow him even though I don’t know what’s going to happen to me, the night is still young.

He opens the passenger door for me, I get my moist ass inside and buckles up. He gets behind the wheel and starts the car. We are on the road racing again, I’m not sure he’s even looking at the road signs. I realize when he joins the gravel road that we are in Mashoba heading towards the south of the village. If he’s taking me to his home I know with no doubt that Hubo will not think twice before killing me.

He crosses the bridge that leads to the Shandus, there’s a bush not a yard away from it. When he pulls up I’m convinced that he’s going to shoot me and dump my body there.

“Get out,” he says.

I don’t move, he turns and looks at me with hostility.

"I don't have time, they're waiting for me at home," he says.

Deep breath!

I open the door and climb out. He asks me to close the door of his car and I do so without hesitation. The car drives off leaving me standing in the dark with soaked thighs and crickets and other night insects buzzing all around me.

I curl up in the hedge of grass and hug my knees. I'm not going home, I don't want anyone to start lecturing me and blaming me about what another person has done to me again. I will sit here and freeze to death. If not, a wild animal is going to come out and do what I've always wanted to do; kill me.

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SIKELELA

It's the early hours of morning, when one of his colleagues offered to take up his shift he saw it fit to come home and see what has happened. Sthembiso didn't do anything, he's not responsible for what Mkhonto did, when he found out about him he welcomed him with open arms to the family. They're brothers with no bad blood between them.

He only texted Hubo when he got the lift from Durban, but he's probably still asleep because they'd been waiting for Sthembiso

to come home the whole night. They said he left the house after the police took Zime's body and he didn't tell anyone where he was going. Everyone was worried but he eventually came home.

The truck that lifted him from Durban is heading to Eshowe, but the Indian driver was kind enough to take the Hlabathini road and drop him off at the off-ramp to Mashoba. He's continuing by foot, something Cebile would never approve of. If the Mshengus can kill a woman for revenge why would they spare him if they see him on the road? They still remember his face and they probably know of his identity by now. But he will deal with them if that situation comes, he's never been afraid of anyone.

There's a water-truck coming his way, he quickly crosses the one-way bridge. A loud hoot starts blazing and blocking his ears. Is the driver mad, he's not even on the road?

The truck's tyres screech as it swerves to the side of the road with a blazing hooter. Only then he notices a woman lying on the road, either dead or injured. The driver sprints out of the truck and runs towards her. Sikelela is running too.

"Is she alive?" That's the first thing he asks, the girl is not moving. She looks like is in her mid-twenties, even with her eyes closed she looks like an angel. Her yellow skin looks flawless, like peaches and cream, except for dark fading marks around her wrists.

“She’s still alive. She ran straight to the truck with her arms open, it was too late for me to hit the brake, ” the driver says in a foreign accent. He’s in panic, fumbling his pockets for a cellphone.

He’s waiting for help with the driver, his phone rings. It’s Hubo, finally he’s awake.

“Where are you?”

“I’m next to the bridge waiting for help, there’s a girl who was hit by the truck,” he says.

“The Mashoba bridge?” Hubo asks in awe.

“Yes,” he says.

“Are you stupid? The Mshengus are going to come to the scene and find you there.”

“I did think about that but...”

“No but, I’m coming to pick you up.”

“You’re not my parent, Hubo.”

“Fuck you, you are not a paramedic, leave the scene help will come whether you’re there or not.”

How annoying can this boy be?!

He turns to the driver, “I have to go, please take my number and update me on her condition.”

SIKELELA

CHAPTER 18

LONDEKA

When I see him I know it's him. Even though we are meeting under bad circumstances, I'm happy to finally see him. He's a young version of Mkhonto, I'm therefore a spitting image of him. When he sees me he laughs, I laugh too, we ridiculously look so alike and it's such a bad thing because I'm a girl.

"Finally," I say.

He extends his hand for a shake but I hug him instead. Hubo said he's working, I didn't expect to see him so early in the morning. I don't know how he made it from Durban to here in such a short space of time

"You're Londeka," he says and looks at me with his eyebrow raised for confirmation.

"The one and only. What did you bring from Durban?" I ask.

"I just took a lift and came, it was unprepared. But next time I will surely bring you something nice," he says.

A huge smile spreads on my face. For a moment I've forgotten about what Sthembiso did, even though he says he didn't hurt Mela I'm still not happy with the way things happened.

"So we look alike?" he says with a low sigh.

“Sadly yes, but at least I did manage to get a boyfriend.”

He laughs and squeezes me to his shoulder. Everything about him reminds me of my father, even the way the corners of his eyes crinkle up when he laughs.

“Guys, we have enough strange things happening around. Sikelela laughing is the last scary thing I want to witness today.” That’s Hubo walking through the door.

“I do laugh, just not with you,” Sikelela says.

“Well it doesn’t suit you, you should stop.”

“Fuck off.” He’s still holding me to his shoulder, he’s not that taller from me. I notice how him and Hubo are so different yet they gel so well together. I see a bit of Sthembiso in him, he’s not a loud person yet you cannot shy away from the darkness lingering from his eyes. He’s his father’s son.

“The girl you saw hit by truck is a Mshengu,” Hubo says.

I uncoil from his embrace and look at Hubo curiously. I heard about the accident but I didn’t pay much attention because it happened down the bridge.

“Imagine what would’ve happened if they found you at the scene,” Hubo goes on.

“Has she gotten help?” There’s a caring side to Sikelela.

“Yes, she’s been rushed to the hospital. They say she threw herself in front of the moving truck, did you see it?”

“Yes, I mean no,” he sounds disturbed or hurt by the whole thing. I

don't know where he stands with the Mshengus, the beef he had with them was different.

"Which girl is that?" I ask.

"Mela," Hubo says.

It takes a minute for it to make sense. Mela, my friend, or should I say ex-friend. What does he mean by saying Mela threw herself in front of the moving truck? What was she doing in Mashoba in the wee hours of morning?

"Are you sure?" I ask.

"Yes," he carelessly scans orange juice into the jug of water and adds sugar. "Sguqa must've tortured her well, she opted for suicide afterwards."

"She looked..." Sikelela says and stops before stating how she looked. I don't know what's going on with him, but I know what I have to do. I know where I stand in my brother's life.

He's sitting with MaXulu and MaJiyane in the lounge where the mattress is laid. I want to spare Zime some respect but emotions are high and above me.

"What did you do to her?" I ask him.

"Yey wena, where is your respect? Why is your voice so high, can't you see that your brother is mourning?" I knew MaXulu was going to answer. I'm used to everyone interfering and taking everyone's side other than mine before even hearing me out.

“I’m talking to him, not you.” I’m outspoken and sometimes I speak out of turn, but I’ve always acknowledged my elders, until now. I’m not going to let these women let Sthembiso’s feelings matter more than mine.

“Get out,” he says in that calm and demeaning tone of his he always uses with me.

“What did you do to Mela? She wouldn’t just try to kill herself for no reason,” I ask.

MaJiyane looks at MaXulu with her eyebrow raised.

“Is she talking about that Mshengu yellow tikline?”

“I don’t even care, MaJiyane. What annoys me is that she’s raising her voice at her brother while he’s mourning. How insensitive are these children?”

“Ma, please,” I raise my hand and look at Sthembiso. He doesn’t even look remorseful, fuck me for thinking he was the better one.

“So you had to use me to get your revenge against an innocent defenseless girl?” I ask.

“I let your friend go even after she admitted that she played a part in planning my wife’s murder. Yet you’re here spewing rubbish and disrespecting your sister.”

“My sister?” My voice trembles but I’m not that girl who cries and gives people satisfaction. “Zime was not my sister and you are not my brother. I’ve had strangers caring about me more than you ever did. You’re capable of loving everyone else except me. Did I

steal your biscuit or something?”

MaXulu stands, I know she’s about to throw hands or call Hubo to come and do it on his behalf.

“Awuna-dankie Londeka, you’re ungrateful! At 25 you’re unemployed and living off him, yet you’re making such accusations. Get out.”

“I’m going to get out and leave, hopefully never set my foot here again. But not before I address him.” In the meantime her and her sisterwife can go jump the nearest cliff.

“You’ve never paid for shit. I’m living off my father’s legacy. Check your phone and see how less me and you ever talk. Do you know why? Because you hate me and only you know the reason. But what confuses me is why you have a problem with other people loving me. You want Mela out of my life without even knowing her, you couldn’t wait to hurt her for loving me and you made sure she was the first person to pay for Zime’s death. Which is still a mystery by the way, nobody saw the Mshengus killing her.”

“It’s not a mystery, she confessed,” MaJiyane chirps in.

“Because he tortured her, Mela and I didn’t even talk about Zime unless if it was about the crush she had on Sthembiso. I hope she’s seen him for who he is now, she deserves better.” I hope she’s going to be okay, I want to apologize to her and let her know that Sthembiso cornered me to text her, I never wanted her to be in danger.

“So she had a crush on my son?” – MaXulu.

I'm not here for that. There are voices coming close, I should wrap this up and go pack my bags.

"You're dead to me, so RIP to you and your wife." I turn and walk out. Maybe that wasn't the most sensitive thing to say but why should I keep caring about someone who doesn't give shit about me?

I never thought I'd be leaving home with so much emotions and anger. I never thought my brother would be the reason why I don't want to be part of this family anymore. And I never thought I'd be put in the middle of the war by someone I shared a womb with. The Mshengus will find out that I set Mela up and they'll bay for my blood. I'm not running from them, if they get me they get me, I just want to be far away from MaXulu and her favourite child.

I load my bags in the boot of my car and go back for my important files and my father's pictures. I don't know when the funeral is but I won't be here. May Zime's soul rest in peace and all those who were involved be brought to justice.

"Hhayibo, where are the bags going?" That would be Mkhonto Lite.

I turn with a sigh, "I'm leaving."

He frowns, worry stretches in his pupils.

"Is there something wrong?" The pinch of care in his voice makes

me want to confess. Well, almost.

“Long story,” I say.

“Are you okay though?”

I force a smile and nod.

“I will call you,” I say.

“Okay, drive safely.”

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My flat is cold. Or is it my heart that is cold? I don't know, something is missing and I know that is home. My uncle, Mjay, has been calling me endlessly, I know he will want me to go to his house and I don't want to be where MaXulu and Sthembiso come in as they please. I want to be far from them.

I dial my Sgcino's number, I know he's mad at me, he warned me about not answering his calls. I wasn't in a good mental space the last two days.

“Hello,” his voice is cold as the walls of this bedroom.

“Hey Sgcino, how are you?”

“Good,” his one-word answer says a lot. I have to apologize, phewww!

“I'm sorry about yesterday and the other day,” I say.

“Londeka we are not teenagers, you said you love me and I expect

you to carry yourself like someone's girlfriend. Don't answer your phone if you don't want to speak to me, that's fine. But tell me where we stand, I deserve at least that." He's angry.

"I'm not home, my brother and I had a fight. Well, pretty much him and his mothers. I don't know when I'm going back, or if I will ever go back," I say.

"Hhayi-bo sthandwa sami, this sounds serious. What happened?" He now sounds alarmed than angry.

"I'm sure you've heard about Mela, I got involved and things got nasty. I'm not even okay to get into details, I just want to see you," I say.

"Today?" He sounds hesitant.

I thought he desperately wanted to see me.

"Yes, unless if you have other plans," I say.

"I can pick you up after work, around 5pm."

"Alright, cool. I will see you then."

"I love you and thank you for calling, I thought you changed your mind about me."

"Well, we are still dating," I say.

I know that's not enough, I should be using the L word too.

"I'm happy to hear that, I can't wait to see you."

Time flies, I still have a series to watch on Netflix and it's already 4pm. I should get ready and pack my overnight bag.

I didn't realize my cosmetics were running out, I have to cut the toothpaste and shake the roll-on until my wrist breaks. What a great way to represent myself in the first sleep-over!

I put on my tracksuit and check if he still remembers. He laughs at me and tells me to tell the security to let him in, he's just five minutes away. Maybe I will have a peaceful night for once, I haven't slept since Zime was killed. Neither MaXulu nor Sthembiso have called to find out where I am and it's good that way.

There's a knock at the door. I check myself on the mirror once again and reapply the lipstick and then open. He's still in his formal shirt and fitted jeans. His head looks like a potato; recently shaved and bald. His cologne engulfs me before his hug.

"How are you?" he asks with his arms wrapped around me.

"Good." I'm not lying, I'm feeling good now that he's here. He lifts my chin with his finger and kisses both my cheeks. The butterflies in my tummy prove how long it has been since I was last shown such affection.

"Are you ready?"

I nod, "Yes."

"Then let's go."

He picks my bag from the couch and I follow with my phone and keys.

“You look amazing by the way,” he says.

I’m in tracksuits, there’s nothing dreamy about them.

“Thank you,” I say.

The ride is filled with silence, which is unlike him. I don’t know if he’s nervous or there’s something else that’s bothering him, eitherway I’m enjoying the silence. I stare outside the window and count my troubles as we get caught up in the peak hour traffic.

I only snap out when the car stops moving and realize that we are in the garage of his house.

“We are here,” he says with a flash of a smile.

“Great, I’m hungry.” Oops, first sleep-over moghel!

“I asked someone to cook,” he doesn’t seem to mind. At least he’s mature, if it was those Mashoba boys there was going to be a ‘broke girls’ slander tomorrow morning advising boys against hungry girls.

We get inside the house, it looks like there’s a set-up for two, the atmosphere is warm and romantic. But today I’m just not in the mood for the Romeo and Juliet, I just want to cuddle with him in bed and forget about all my problems.

“Are you okay?” He looks jumpy.

“Yeah, I’m just cold, I want to be in bed.”

“Oh, okay. We can eat in bed then.”

Great! I pick my bag and make my way towards the bedroom.

“You know where it is?” His voice has a pinch of mockery.

“This is not a mansion,” I say.

Damn, that was mean. But I don’t want to make it worse by apologizing, I’m hoping he took no offense.

I drop my bag on the floor and climb on the bed. It’s neatly-made, comfortable and big enough. I lay my head on the pillow and pull the duvet to my neck.

I wonder how many women have been here. In fact let me tour the bedroom, it’s not that cold.

He clears his throat at the door, I close the wardrobe and turn around.

“Found anything to hold against me?” he asks.

I roll my eyes, “Who said I was looking for something to hold against you?” Wasn’t I though? Anyway I did find a packet of condoms and some were missing. Oh, and a packet of rough salt. But he doesn’t owe me any explanation for those, at least not now.

He walks in and gently pulls me back to the bed and sits me down next to him.

“Londeka, I have to tell you something,” he says.

I don’t like people who do this, they always drop a bombshell.

“Please don’t tell me something scary,” I say.

He chuckles, “What is scary to you?”

“The world is weird now. There are ghost-whisperers and many other spooky things I’ve heard of.”

His arm leaves my waist. I’m waiting for him to say whatever it is that he’s been hiding.

“So what’s up?” I ask.

His eyes are running everywhere except my face. He mustn’t dare tell me there’s another woman.

“Sgcinumyalo what are you hiding?” I ask.

“I have to go somewhere tomorrow early in the morning, so I might leave you in bed and see you around lunch time if you’d be still here,” he says.

Men are...they’re men. Complicated and unpredictable. I almost thought there was another woman in his life.

“It’s fine, I think I will leave in the morning too, I’m not here to vat’ n sit,” I say.

“Then I will cancel, I don’t want you to leave in my absence.”

Our eyes lock, I don’t see that mischievous man who’s always trying to make me agree to everything he says. Today he looks like a nervous little boy who has a girl over for the first time.

I kiss him, unexpectedly. I grab his neck and pull him closer and continue kissing him. I can feel his uneasiness but I'm not a man, I cannot judge, I don't know how it feels like having a girl over for the first time.

I link my forehead onto his and lock our stares.

"Are you scared of me?" I ask him gently.

He takes a deep breath.

"I wasn't judging your house, I'm just not in a good mental state. Your house is beautiful and better than any house I've been to," I say.

"It's not that Londeka."

"Then what is it?"

"It's me and the things I go through. I'm not sure if you will stick around and that thought is scary. The thought of you not being around after giving me so much hope."

"Am I hard to trust?" I ask.

"It's not really you, it's me. I'm scared of two things in life; the dark and losing the people I love," he says.

I'm not sure what he means by the dark.

"What dark?" I ask.

"The absence of light."

Oh, I get it. I remember the first day I met him I found him sitting in the kitchen because he was scared of being outside alone and I

thought it was a joke.

"It's called nyctophobia," I say.

I want to see relief in his eyes but there's none. I don't like seeing him like this, I didn't come here to trigger his fears, I just wanted to be with him.

SIKELELA

CHAPTER 19

LONDEKA

I will hold you tight throughout the night- some men literally mean that. Everytime I woke up his arms were tightly wrapped around me, he'd feel me whenever I tried to remove myself from his embrace and mumble his disapproval. But now he's gone, he's not in bed or bathroom, I don't know where he is. It's only ten past five, a cold day it promises to be, and this man decided to leave me alone.

I don't know what he wakes up and do in the mornings, maybe getting out of bed at five is one of his routines, I just have to wait.

My alone time in his bed takes me back to the time when my father was still alive. I didn't feel any gap in my relationship with my brother and mother. I was okay with them loving one another and choosing each other over and over again. I had my father in my corner, always. Maybe I'm selfish because the parent who loved me more is no more and his mother is still there.

Him and Sthembiso always had their disagreements as 'men', hence their relationship wasn't the tightest. I thought my father's passing would bring me and MaXulu closer but it didn't. I know he's disappointed in how things are turning out, he taught us unity and holding each other's hands through tough times. And

Sthembiso has held everyone's hand except mine.

I excuse Thobani because he's a child and Hubo because he's not always around. But when Hubo is around he makes sure that he cracks a few jokes and asks me to call him if anyone is troubling me. I know that's how he loves, by wanting to fight your battles. Violence is his love language. I guess I'm angry at Sthembiso because I know he knows how to love. He loves Sane and Azile, he spends time with them and takes random drives with them. Their face light up whenever they see him because he's their big brother. Yet he's never flashed a smile at me, he only turns my world upside down when his is shattered. Yes you've lost your wife, but why should I lose a friend as well?

Footsteps disturb my train of thoughts. I close my eyes and pretend to be asleep, I don't want him to think I came to be depressed in his house. He walks in and passes to the bathroom.

He doesn't take long, I hear him coming back and standing next to the bed. I slept in my underwear, which he didn't mind because he was on ice yesterday.

He gets in bed and pulls the duvet that I had solely wrapped myself in. I still don't move, he shifts closer until his icy-cold body grinds against mine. My eyes open, a gasp escapes my mouth, his body is fuckin' cold.

"Sorry, I took a cold shower," he's lying. I didn't hear water running and he only went to the bathroom for a minute.

“Where?” I ask.

“Here, you were asleep.”

Now he’s annoying me by this senseless lie but I can’t confront him because I’ve been pretending to be asleep as well. I’m not better than him in this lying industry.

“I’m cold,” he’s actually gritting his teeth and shivering. My girlfriend instincts overshadow every other feeling, I wrap my arms around him and press his body against mine to transfer the warmth. But it looks like his body is receiving more than that, there’s an organ between his legs that’s getting joy from this.

He’s trying to hide it, I’m stifling my laugh.

“What’s wrong?” His question reeks guilt, I can’t help but laugh openly.

“Uhlekani?” he asks with a chuckle.

“I just remembered a joke from last Christmas,” I say.

He teasingly squeezes my nose and chuckles.

“When are we going to talk about sex?” he asks.

“Talk?” I frown slightly. Where I come from people make sex, they don’t talk about it.

“What is your take on it? How long do you wait before sexually engaging with a man? What are your boundaries in bed and all that,” he says.

Honestly, I’ve never had an interview before intimacy, once I get

aroused I let my body take over, only with the right person though.

“I don’t have any waiting period, this time.” How horny did that sound though! “I don’t do anal, that’s a boundary. And I don’t see sex more than a fun deed between two adults,” I say.

He nods, “Simple enough.”

“What about you? Any boundaries, waiting period and all that nonsense,” I ask.

He raises his eyebrow at the word ‘nonsense. I keep my stare on him until he breaks a chuckle and slightly shakes his head.

“For me there are levels of intimacy and it’s more than just physical urges and bliss. There’s sexual energy that enhances the bond and breaks physical boundaries during an orgasm and produce merging physical and spiritual connections. Which then leads to the spiritual level, there are high vibrational energies and low vibrational energies that get exchanged in the heated moments.” It’s clear that I’m not going to get laid today, his theories are piling up and confusing me.

“If you sleep with someone you have low vibrational energies with you will feel either frustrated, remorseful or spiritual down the next day.” He can see that I’m not comfortable with how deep he’s going with it. He pecks my cheek and rubs my back.

“But I’m energetically aligned with you and I do need to introduce a bit of the Zulus to your system,” he says.

That’s not romantic but why am I smiling? There’s a lot we still need to learn about each other, I know he has a past that he’s not

ready to open up about yet.

“So you do want to have sex with me?” I ask. He needs to sum it up. I deserve to know, his views on sex and what it means are complicated.

“I do, I want to do everything with you and I want you to be happy,” he says.

“I’m happy,” it sounds like I’m defending myself, which wasn’t an intention.

“I have a good sense of energy, you cannot fool me,” he says with a gentle look on his face and a ghost of a smile.

“What does that mean?”

“I know you’re not happy with how things are between you and your family, and that’s why you are here. I know how hard it is to be at odds with people you care about, when I lost my wife everyone kept distance including my own family.”

He still refers to her as his wife, as he should, right? I hope one day he will be comfortable enough to let me in his past with her. I have a lot of questions; how did she die, what’s his family expectations and where does he stand with her family? I know how things are done in the rural traditional communities.

“I haven’t had it easy in this life, Londeka. I always have to fight for acceptance and constantly pray that I don’t wake up one day and find another person dead because of me.” Another person? He holds me the same way he was holding me throughout the night; tightly. He has these deep fears that I don’t understand, there’s

more to him than what meets the eye.

“I’m not going to break your heart,” he says.

I guess he just wants to change the topic. When he’s ready he will talk, I don’t want to push.

“Everyone says that and do otherwise,” I say.

“I’m not everyone, I’m Sgcinumyalo.” He kisses my nose tip and links his hand into mine. His erection presses against me. It’s a whole package; hard, thick and long. I have the urge to grab it out of his boxers and play with it. He lowers his eyes and licks his lips. I can do it better than him; I’m craving a kiss and more.

He pecks my lips and trails soft kisses down to my neck. His breaths are heavy and aroused, he softly bites the side of my neck and exhales deeply. His breath blows warmly against my flesh, I feel moisture between my legs.

“Sgcino,” my voice croaks out.

“Londeka,” he calls me back in a hoarse whisper.

Our eyes lock, he’s aroused just like me, his eyes are smaller and moist. He licks his lower lip, I release a sharp breath between my teeth.

He groans and softly bites my earlobe.

“I want to fuck you so badly but I respect that you’re still mourning your sister-in-law’s death.”

So nothing is going to happen, I don’t know how I feel about that.

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He's not living in a men's hostel, he drives a nice car and dresses up nicely. He speaks fluent English and goes to clubs with his colleagues. That's why I forgot that he's Sgcino from Izinsundu, he will wake up in the morning and prepares a full meal for breakfast.

I'm still staring at the plate of steaming hot rice and beef stew. I believe the rice is staring back at me as well, like 'morning gorgeous.'

"You said you don't like bread," he says guiltily.

Yes, I did say that, but...

"Don't you have cornflakes?"

"No," he says.

"Jungle-Oats?"

"I have Morvite."

I internally scream, Jesus Christ!

Or was it loud?

"What do you want to eat? Spar is down the road, I can walk there and get ready when I come back." He sounds a bit frustrated. He's already postponed the first meeting he had, they say when you're in Rome you do what Romans do, I should eat this rice and stop complaining. A whining girlfriend is not cute anyway.

“Don’t worry, I will eat this. Just not now, my intestines are still asleep,” I say.

“Okay, I’m going to leave my card so that you can go and buy whatever it is that you’re going to need while I’m not here.”

You guessed right, I’m not leaving today. My flat is lonely, I don’t want to go there yet. He has WiFi, I will be able to apply for jobs while I’m here.

“Can I go bath now?” he asks.

“Yes, son,” I say.

He chuckles and pecks my cheek and takes off to the bathroom.

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He said he’d pop in to check me around lunchtime but that didn’t happen, instead he sent a text telling me he had another thing coming up and will be home late. I don’t know why I left my place, I’m just here housekeeping and drowning in my sorrows.

I’m tempted to cook but there’s a voice of my female ancestor that keeps asking where are the cows. I end up ordering pizza and making a cup of coffee and coming back to Netflix. This is what unemployment does to people, I’m tired of being a couch-potato and depending on my family. That, more than anything, drains my energy.

There’s someone at the door. Did security just let the delivery guy

in? If so, deliveries are instant this side.

I go to the door and open. It's an old woman wearing a seshoeshoe dress and a young woman with box-braids. She's older than me, judging by her looks. She's dressed in a body-con dress flaunting her hips and round butt. You can tell she's one of those rural girls with class and style.

"Sanibona," I greet with a frown.

The old woman lets herself in and slightly pushes me out of the way. The young woman follows in.

Okay...

"Didn't you hear us knocking?" the old woman thunders.

I'm about to answer when she picks the cup of coffee I was drinking from and looks at me in total displeasure.

"This is what you do when Mfano is not around?"

Who is Mfano and why is she shouting at me?

"Look at the dust on the walls, does he pay you to drink his coffee and watch these naked people on TV?" She doesn't give me a chance to respond, she dumps her bags on the floor and orders me to take them to the guest-room.

"Excuse me, who are you and why do you think I'm working here?" I'm annoyed but keeping a calm face.

"Thatha izikhwama ntombazane and make us tea, mameshane!" She sits on the couch and asks the young woman to get the remote.

She's old for me to argue with, I want a chance to call Sgcino and ask for an explanation, that's why I'm picking these bags and ignoring their burning stares.

I get inside the guest room and shut the door behind me.

I furiously scroll down to his number and call.

It rings to voicemail. I try again, still, no answer.

If this isn't sorted out immediately I'm going to kill someone, my mood can go from zero to prison. They mustn't dare me!

After contemplating whether to go wait in the main bedroom or take an Uber to my place, I finally come out of the guest-room. He's here...that's a relief.

"I've been trying to call you," I say.

He's popping his finger joints, looking nervous and uncomfortable.

"I left my phone in the car, sorry," he says.

I don't like how the braid-woman is blushing, what's the reason vele?

I look at him and narrow my eyes. Introduction time, boo!

He clears his throat, "This is my mother, MaNgcobo. And this is Vuyo, my sister-in-law."

"Do you see how beautiful Vuyo is? She's glowing like a star," MaNgcobo chirps in with a huge grin. I don't see any glow and I don't like how Sgcino has suddenly lost his voice and can't keep

eye-contact with me.

“Our tea, ntombazane,” MaNgcobo says and throws a look at me again.

I look at Sgcino, if he doesn't talk now I won't be responsible for what I say.

“Let's go to the kitchen,” he says.

So he's not going to tell them who I am? Yes it's still early for his mother to know that we are dating, but the least he can do is clear the air and tell them that I'm not his maid.

I stand against the counter and fold my arms and keep my stare on him. He looks more nervous.

“She's my wife's sister,” he says.

I already worked that out, I just want to know what's cooking with her being here and him not being able to tell them I'm not his maid.

“I didn't know they were coming, I'm sorry,” he says.

“No, I don't mind that they're here. But why are you letting your mother think I'm your maid?” I ask.

“I will sort it out, just give me a day or two.” Wow!

“Why is the sister here?”

“I don't know. This is my first time seeing her this year, it's not like I'm close to her or something.”

“If there’s anything I should know you better tell me now. I’m here because I’m running away from family drama, ungangifaki nje kwenye,” I say.

He nods, “I understand. Can I ask you a favor?”

I raise my eyebrow.

“Please give me a moment to talk to MaNgcobo,” he says.

“You want me to leave?” I ask.

He exhales heavily and nods uneasily.

“Okay, no problem. Please get my bag, I don’t want to take more orders as your maid,” I say.

He rubs his forehead, I don’t look at his eyes, I don’t have any pity because a part of me believes that he’s hiding something.

Something about Vuyo being brought here by his mother doesn’t settle well with me, and he seems uncomfortable with me and her in the same room.

They’re chatting and laughing in the lounge. I don’t like MaNgcobo’s attitude, even if I was a maid how she spoke to me is unacceptable. I don’t like people who look down on those they believe are inferior to them.

Sgcino comes back with my bag. I doubt he packed all my stuff, he’s probably going to hide some.

“I would like to drive you but...”

“But Vuyo and your mother are here. Don’t worry, I have requested an Uber,” I say.

“Londeka,” he steps closer and engulfs me in a hug. “I love you, all I’m asking is time to clarify things and talk to my mother. I want to do things right, uyangizwa angithi?”

“Yeah, I hear you,” I say.

“Please answer your phone, I will see you soon.”

I nod and turn to the door, I roll my eyes as soon as I’m out of sight. If this relationship doesn’t work out I’m going to get seawater and bath.

SIKELELA

CHAPTER 20

The Hlongwanes are not the most-liked family in Mashoba but people came out for the funeral. There are police keeping an eye as the funeral proceeds. Nobody has been arrested yet, but the war between the Mshengus and Hlongwanes is brewing again. By the look of things, things are far from over. Revenge from the Hlongwanes won't be nice.

She's smiling in her picture. It was taken on the beach sand, it must've been early in marriage, she was still making sure the ring appears in every picture. Sthembiso is sitting at the front, first chair before the coffin. Next to him is Thobani and his uncle. Hubo is with the men at the cemetery with other Hlongwane elders.

Sikelela chose to stand at the back, between the crowd of people, hoping nobody would notice him. This time Cebile approved of him coming for the funeral, she showed sympathy when she heard the news.

Sane and Azile take to the front to say goodbye to their sister. They have prepared a song and a video-slideshow of her pictures. She lived her life to the fullest, there's no doubt that she was a happy woman. Most of her pictures were taken during trips; Dubai marina yacht, Venice, Pyramids of Giza and Namibian red sand

dunes. She looks happy and free in all of them.

Londeka should be with the little sisters saying goodbye to Zime but she left and never came back. Sikelela has been wanting to call her, but he's not even an official part of this family to involve himself in such matters. There's nothing like perfect family, it's really eyebrow-raising that she wouldn't attend her only brother's wife's funeral.

The guy who's her cousin is directing the program. He asks someone who will speak on behalf of Zime's mother-in-laws.

For a moment there's no movement. It doesn't look Mkhonto's wives were prepared for this.

Finally, MaDlamini stands and sings; uJesu Uyamangalisa.

She stands at the front with her eyes shut and arms raised and sings her heart out. After what felt like a whole album of one song, she cuts the song and wipes tears in her eyes.

"It's hard, bazalwane. What happened to Sthembiso is something nobody wishes for her son. It hurts deeply." She blinks rapidly until tears come out and wipes them. People express their sympathy in low mumbles.

"We loved umakoti. From the day she walked into these premises she was a child. I was Ma to her, as well as MaJiyane and MaXulu. Everytime we saw her she was smiling, she was a highly-spirited person. Nobody can say him or her ever heard 'nxa' from umakoti. We still expected more from her; grandchildren and great-

grandchildren. But nobody can say no if God has said yes. It was her time, God wanted his angel back and all we have to do now is cherish the memories we had with her and wish her a peaceful rest.”

She sheds more tears before returning to her seat.

Azile starts another song, she has an angelic voice. She resembles a bit of Hubo but she’s lighter with a huge black afro that’s tied in space buns.

Zime’s aunt takes to the front accompanied by a low hymn. She’s that woman who’s been demanding beers that were sent to men in the cemetery. She could be around her mid-forties, she’s just aging faster. You know once an African aunt wears a curly wig, draws those thin one-line eyebrows and wears loop-earrings, tables are about to scatter. She’s chewing a gum, that alone is done with violence.

They pass the mic to her, she speaks inaudibly- there are technical difficulties with the system crew.

She yells at them; “This thing is not talking.”

Thobani goes to them to assist them fix whatever they have to fix, two minutes later they ask her to test if it’s working.

“One...two...one...two.” Good to go! “My niece was never happy,”

she says.

Gasps!

“Sthembiso took my niece and brought her here to suffer till the last day. Don’t let those pictures they showed on that thing fool you, people. Money cannot buy happiness, it only brings temporary bliss. After those expensive trips she’d come to that house over the road where she took her last breath and quarantine inside with a bottle of alcohol because nobody wanted to breathe the same air as her. She lived there alone, even on the day that she died she was alone. The Hlongwanes killed my sister’s child, that’s the truth.”

This is not good, Sthembiso already feels guilt and worthless. Zime didn’t live alone, he was with her almost everyday, it was just that unfortunate moment that ended in blood.

“But she didn’t listen when I warned her about marrying a man she hardly knew. Everything was hush-hush, kanti it was a rush for her to come and become the lamb of sacrifice for the Hlongwane sins.”

His uncle takes him out of the tent. He has his hand over his face, he’s not handling these rantings well. Thobani hurries behind them. One of the women the aunt came with goes to her and whispers. It looks like she was reprimanding her, she starts a song afterwards and asks everyone to stand and clap hands.

The drama is finally over. There’s a local choir singing as they

wait for Sthembiso's last words and for him to exclusively view the body before it's taken to the cemetery.

"Sikelela, you're home," someone says.

He thought he was invisible where he is, who is this now? He turns his eyes and it's an old-wrinkled woman he's never seen before.

"You look exactly like your grandfather," she's now standing right next to him and directly staring at his face.

"Do I know you gogo?" he asks as polite as he can be.

"I'm MaZondo, your father was like a son to me. He tried his best to protect you but I guess your blood was always going to call you home," she says.

Before Sikelela can say something a young girl appears and calls her 'Khulu'. And just like that the old woman has been pulled away on some; 'MaDlamini needs your advice.'

He's left more confused than before. His father didn't want him, with everything that he owned he never bothered even sending him a pair of school shoes. He wasn't a bad father, he knew how to love and take care of his children, look at how his other children turned out. His problem was with Sikelela, him only.

Thobani is reading a letter, they're back inside the tent and it's dead quiet. People want to hear everything Sthembiso has to say so that they can tell those who didn't make it to the funeral

without leaving a single detail out.

Thobani;

“A lot has been said to me this week. Old friends, relatives, colleagues, my siblings who are around and my elders. They all said one thing; ‘stay strong Sthembiso’. Those who are familiar with the Bible have attached different verses and assured me that God is still God. They say ‘zifihle phansi kwegazi’ and all I want is to be hidden in my wife’s arms. I want to come home to you wearing whatever you’re comfortable in with your magazines scattered in front of you and a glass of red wine. I wanted you to bury me first, after we’ve achieved all our goals, not this. I feel so lost without you, I don’t fit in this world anymore.”

“I wanted to give you the best in this world and I hope I tried. You taught me a lot, I have so much to thank you for Zime. I have no regrets, if I could I’d love you over and over again. Ngikuthanda ufulathele, ukhala, uhleka noma usulele ingunaphakade. Now that I can only love you in spirit I have to keep telling myself- ‘mzimba asithwalane siye phambili noma kunzima.’ I will miss your perfume, your playful spirit, your sophisticated taste in fashion and how you loved me. Our love story will always be the biggest highlight of my life, how you loved and cared for me will always get me dizzy. Your laughter will always ring in my ears, your beautiful face and sweet smile will forever be a zooming picture in my head. Fare thee well, sthandwa senhliziyo yami. Ube yidlozi elihle, my Miss Universe. Tell the angels about the kind of love we shared, maybe they will allow you to come to my dreams every now and then. Sleep your big sleep, my angel. I will always love

you.”

He really loved her. Some wounds heal, but it might take long for this one to heal. His uncle takes him to the front, there are elders opening the coffin for him. Due to injuries he’s the only one allowed to view the body.

He’s been strong, until this moment.

He only glances once and struggles to breathe. He’s been having a series of panic attacks this week.

“He’s following her,” someone says and quarter of the people who were inside the tent run out.

Azile and Sane aren’t making things easy with their screams.

“He’s fine,” his uncle announces.

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SIKELELA

He has to leave, he will walk to Hlabathini, by 9pm he will surely be close to home. But first he needs to see Sguqa and gives him words of comfort. Everyone is in the main Hlongwane homestead, he left with Thobani shortly after the funeral and said he needed some time alone.

It’s been over two hours, surely he’s had the privacy he wanted. Hubo is drunk, luckily there are uncles and cousins keeping him in

check.

“Sikelela where are you going?” Where did MaJiyane come from?
He was sure nobody was seeing him.

“To Sthembiso,” he says.

“You can’t cross the road alone, ask Hubo to go with you.”

So it would be safe to be accompanied by a drunk?

“I will be fine, Ma,” he says.

MaJiyane shakes her head, “You’re stubborn like your father.”

That he doesn’t know.

“Your mother hasn’t changed her mind?” she asks.

This is not something he wants to talk about now.

“I haven’t talked to her,” he says dismissively.

“If you get a chance please do, you need to be cleansed and properly welcomed home.”

“I will, thank you.”

Finally, he can leave.

Thobani is standing outside with a cigarette between his fingers.
When he sees Sikelela approaching he throws it down and stomps his foot on it.

“Don’t burn your foot,” Sikelela says.

He chuckles uncomfortably and looks away.

“Where’s Sguqa?” – Sikelela.

“He’s inside,” Thobani says.

He walks in, Thobani releases a heavy breath behind. Even though he’s still the last boy of the family, he always will be, but now he’s a grown man. He’s 21, and just like Sikelela he has many questions that he cannot ask anyone. Well, he can ask his mother, but he doesn’t want to come across as ungrateful. He’s a Hlongwane; Mkhonto- his Pops- raised him and made him who he is today. He knows that his biological father was a scumbag that couldn’t buy him a bar of soap. He has no memory of him and it shouldn’t bother him because his Pops paid and slaughtered to join him with the Hlongwane ancestors when he married his mother.

But it wouldn’t hurt seeing the face of a man whose sperm created him. Just his face and a minute to ask him a few questions

Sikelela finds Sguqa lying on the couch staring at the picture. When Sguqa sees him he quickly puts it face-down, sits up and makes space for him.

“How are you feeling now?” Sikelela asks.

He doesn’t respond, is it not obvious?

Sikelela sits and blows out a sigh. He’s never been good with

words.

“She loved you till death, I believe that was part of her vows and promises to you. She stayed true to her words. Not everyone gets to experience that kind of love in this life.”

“I guess so,” he reaches to the glass of Scottish Leader and takes a sip.

“I noticed that Londeka didn’t come to the funeral,” Sikelela says. That has been bothering him as well.

“It’s okay, she didn’t have to come if she didn’t want to.”

“Is she okay where she is? She looked unhappy when she left,” Sikelela asks.

He takes a deep breath and another sip.

“I’ve been through a lot in life bafo. Yes, I’m human and sometimes I make mistakes especially when I’m not thinking straight. But that doesn’t mean I have to nurse Londeka’s feelings,” he says.

Sikelela nods slowly.

“I’m not going to run after an ungrateful 25 year-old spoilt brat who thinks everything revolves around her. I don’t like her attitude, I hate people who diminish everything you’ve done for them and say you’ve never done anything when the narrative suits them. That’s why we don’t get along, she’s just an ungrateful person. Baba was okay with her demanding and throwing tantrums, I’m not her father, I don’t tolerate ungratefulness and disrespect. I

don't like bullies with big mouths, the fact that I don't know how to throw words around like her doesn't mean I'm the bad one."

"I wasn't pointing fingers, I'm just worried about her. I'm sure you also don't want to lose a sister, streets aren't safe out there," Sikelela says.

"If she's in the place I bought for her using my own money that she downplays as her father's now, trust me she's safe. Hubo will look for her and beg her to come home. Once again she will be telling everyone that I don't love her, she won't be accountable for anything. Not even missing my wife's funeral because I ill-treated a friend of hers whose brothers killed my wife."

"You ill-treated her?" That question sounded firm.

Mela's picture hasn't left his head. He's been waiting for the truck driver to update him but it seems like he forgot.

Sguqa exhales heavily, "Yeah, I almost stooped down to her brothers' level. And I got physical with her, I almost killed her, I regret it. I'm dealing with all that and my wife's death, I don't have space for sister's drama."

"She attempted suicide, I really hope you didn't do anything extreme because that would leave a permanent scar in her," – Sikelela.

"I hope so too." He looks thoughtful.

Sikelela frowns, "You hope?"

"She wanted me to kill her, I didn't do it. I just didn't think she'd try

to do it herself. I thought she was just being feisty.”

“How does she talk?” Sikelela asks.

“Soft. I don’t know if that’s how she is or it’s because she was scared. I’m trying to get pictures of that day out of my mind. A young girl kneeling down and asking me for forgiveness, peeing on herself and trembling because of me. I’m not that person, Zime didn’t marry a vicious man.”

“Maybe you’re not different as you want to be. Now not only do you bring men down to their knees Sguqa, young defenseless girls too,” Sikelela says.

“Wow, thank you, I feel much better.”

Fuck, why is he catching feelings? All this is new to him, feeling this way about someone you’ve never talked to is strange. He wants to see Mela.

“Sorry, I know you don’t need that today,” he says.

“Or any other day,” Sguqa says and takes a sip from his whiskey. It’s impossible for anything to be mended with the Mshengus now, he’s going to strike, Hubo has been pestering him. But there’s just one small matter of Mela, what if the next time he pushes her to suicide she succeeds?

“Ndoda, I said I’m leaving,” Sikelela shakes his shoulder.

He frowns, “Huh? Where are you going at this time?”

“Home,” – Sikelela.

“No, you can’t leave. It’s late and not safe.”

He chuckles and stands, "I will be fine, I'm a grown man."

SIKELELA

CHAPTER 21

LONDEKA

I open the door after a persistent knock, I'm still in my pyjamas I just woke up and finished washing my face. I thought it's a security guard or one of the cleaners, but it's the man I last saw two days ago. He hasn't called nor texted me, I don't know why he's here.

I close the door after he's walked in and turn to him.

"Sgcino how long..." I don't finish the sentence, he pins me against the door and grabs my neck. His lips crash on mine, he's kissing me aggressively, like he has somewhere to be.

I kiss him back, I will be mad afterwards. His hands are cold, he just slide them under my top grabbing my boobs.

I need to breathe...

"Baby, no." He tucks my face into his hands and holds my cheeks tightly and parts my lips with his tongue. The kiss gets wet, his other hands has dropped to my behind. Everything he does is catching me off-guard. He pushes me down to the floor and lies on top of me with his lips locked into mine. His energy is too much, I'm not comfortable with my back against cold tiles.

"Sgcino wait," I beg.

He's licking my neck, it's turning me on but I also want us to talk.

He sucks the side of my neck. Lord, I hope he's not giving me a hickey.

"Sgcino," I crack into whisper.

"Ngifuna wena Londeka. It's you that I want." His voice vibrates in a low demand.

"Alright, let's get up and talk," I say.

He doesn't move, he's still licking my neck. I'm letting out low moans that motivate him to rub his erect front against me and softly bites my flesh.

"Aah baby, stop!"

He stops, swallows next to my ear and exhales heavily.

"What's wrong with you?" I ask with a soft chuckle.

I know I may come across as feisty but his high energy is scaring me, it's only seven in the morning.

"I'm in love with you, that's what wrong," he says.

"How is that wrong?" I'm still on the floor, he's not moving off or lifting his head from my neck. His breaths breeze warmly on my flesh.

"Because you're going to leave me."

I don't like insecure people, he's the one who hasn't been calling, how am I the one who's going to leave this relationship first.

"I killed my wife, Londeka."

What was that?

I push his chest off, he doesn't fight, he rolls to the side and lies on his back with his erect shaft pointing upwards.

"Sgcino, did you say something?" I ask.

"The families want me to take Vuyo as my wife but I don't want to. I shared a bed with her because my mother insisted that she comes to my bedroom, but I didn't touch her."

I'm...I need water.

No, double shots of single malt whiskey but I don't have it.

I'm on my feet adjusting my top, I need to get myself a drink before I hear this. He doesn't stop me, I go to the fridge and pull out a can of whatever soda it is. I can't read the name, all my eyes see is Vuyo...Vuyo...Vuyo.

I will need a chair, I drag one and return to where he is, on the floor by the door.

"Did you know this before approaching me?" I ask taking a sip from my can. It tastes like Fanta Orange.

"Kind of, but I didn't know they'd put that plan in motion because I didn't show any interest when it first came up," he says.

"So you shared a bed with her and didn't fuck her?" If so then he deserves a standing ovation. I just don't have that kind of trust for male species, two days with a woman in your bed!

"Yes, I do have self-control. And besides, I didn't want her to get her hopes up only to be disappointed in the end. I told her about

you and asked her to continue with her life and reach out to me if she needs any help," he says.

"And what kind of help would that be, mnumzane?" It's not jealousy, who would be comfortable with something like this.

"Any kind of help." He's set himself up, that woman is going to be standing on his shoulders for the rest of his life because he's making decisions out of guilt.

"Tell me about your wife," I say.

He shuts his eyes and inhales a sharp breath. I don't see him as a murderer, I don't want to wrap my head around the idea of him being one.

"On the 6th of December 2017, we were going home coming from her cousin's birthday. I was driving, I heard someone crying at the side of the road, it was around 11pm. I stopped the car and got out to help. It was a girl who had passed away, she got a car accident and her family only fetched her body and left her spirit there. She wanted to go home, I sat down and talked with her. She still had blood on her body, her forefathers didn't recognize her, she wanted to be cleansed and..."

I faint.

Not really, I just drop from the chair, I don't know what happened, I just lost balance and landed flat on my butt.

He gets up from the floor and comes to lift me up. I let out a loud scream, he can't touch me. Something about him is not normal, I should've known.

I stand a distance away from him.

He exhales deeply and continues, "She got scared, it was her first time seeing me in that intense position. She sped off and crashed the car, and she lost her life."

I don't comment, I'm staring at him remembering the man Mela told me about, it was him. Shwele ngrozi, what have I gotten myself into? This is the man who talks to dead people and carry rough salt with him. Remember how he came back with a shivering body that day when I was in his house, he was coming from his friends.

Lord, his hands that touch ghosts touched me. His mouth that speaks to dead people just kissed me!

"I'd do anything for you to accept me and my flaws. If I had control over it I'd stop and be normal, but I can't run away from it, believe me I've tried but they always find me." He's rubbing his forehead; looking nervous and hurt.

Sorry, but I'm not getting any closer to him.

"Please say something," his voice cracks into a low whisper.

I clear my throat, "Do you want tea?"

He shuts his eyes and sighs heavily.

"How do you like your tea, with rough salt?" Sorry, I don't know how he deals with them but the last thing I need is ghosts coming to my place. Hence I want him to go, before they smell him and come here.

“I know it’s unfair to ask someone who’s scared of you to stay with you, but I really love you, Londeka. I really want to have a chance to show you how I feel about you, just one fair chance. Don’t see me as a stranger, it’s me.”

I’m...I...I need to throw this can in the bin, the one down the road.

“Excuse me for a minute,” I say walking to the door. As soon as I step out I release a huge breath.

I need to call Mela and...Okay I can’t, Sthembiso destroyed that friendship. I can’t share this with anyone else because of confidentiality issues.

I throw the can and take a short walk down the road. My head can’t wrap itself around what I just discovered. Why me? Why couldn’t he fall in love with other ghost friends? And how the hell am I going to break up with him when I’ve also fallen in love with him?

I find myself in a coffee shop, eyes ogle me as I enter in my pyjamas. I need a cup of coffee...

Damn, I don’t have any money with me.

“Do you need help?” It’s a white guy with blonde hair staring at me.

“No, I’m okay.” I walk past him and feel him turning to follow me. I stop and give him a glare.

“You can join me on the table,” he says.

“No, thank you.” I don’t know who works with the Mshengus and

I'm not anyone's charity case. If it's not about the land then it's not worth my energy.

He smiles and puts his hands up in surrender. I study his face one more time for future purposes and walk away.

I'm thinking about the embarrassment of walking into a coffee-shop in pyjamas and get a coffee offer from a generous white guy who probably thought I was homeless.

I only remember about the ghost-friend when I'm opening the door. He hasn't moved from where I left him standing, he's staring into space and doesn't even blink to look at me walking back in.

I feel a twinge of pain in my heart, I could've handled it better, without making him feel worse than he already feels about his condition or whatever it is.

"Let's go to the bedroom," I say.

He looks at me, he looks dejected. I lead him to the bedroom, my heart is palpitating wildly, maybe I was better in the dark than knowing this. I cannot look at him the same way, not after finding out about this.

He closes the door, I turn with my eyes popped out. He sees the fear in my eyes and opens it.

I don't sit, I stand by the window and he remains standing next to the bed.

"I'm scared, Sgcino," I say.

He nods, "I can see."

"You should've told me this before proposing love. It's unfair that you're telling me now when any decision that I make is going to hurt both of us."

"I wanted to tell you, but each time I thought about it a picture of this moment would cross my mind. I knew I stood fifty percent chance of losing you."

"Were you born this way?"

He sits on the bed with a heavy breath.

"From the age of 6, my mother called them my imaginary friends and said I'd outgrow it when I enter teenagehood. I didn't outgrow it, I carried the curse to my early twenties and started running ghosts' errands at 33 after my failed initiation of becoming a sangoma. I just did whatever they asked me to do, it lessened the guilt I carried with me."

"Do you transition when talking to them or it's just the normal you?" I ask.

"I transition and only remember important details when I switch back to Sgcino. That's the only reason why I'm still sane," he says.

Sane, right?

"So if a dead person approaches you there's a good possibility that you won't know who I am and what I mean to you?"

He nods, "Yeah."

"Have you been in any serious relationship after your wife's

death?"

"No,"

"Oh, so it's me after her?"

He buries his face in his hands and sighs.

"I don't want to die, Sgcino," I say.

"I don't hurt people." He sounds wounded, his voice trembles. I want to believe him, but his wife died and he couldn't even protect her because of the state he was in. How do I trust that I won't have the same fate?

"I don't know what's going to happen between us, like is it possible to date someone and only see him during the day? Because that's the only time I'd feel safe around you."

"I don't know." He lies on his back with his hands over his face. I feel bad, I wish I can miraculously be brave enough to get myself into this situation but I'm not.

"I need a cup of coffee. Do you want one?" I ask.

He doesn't respond, I walk out and head to the kitchen.

I feel overwhelmed, this condition of his and Vuyo's matter. It's all too much to deal with at this tender stage of a relationship. He hasn't even given me my first orgasm and I have to accept this baggage he comes with. This should be our honeymoon phase.

The door opens, whoever that is wants my lungs because I have only one slice of patience left in me this morning.

“It’s like you knew I was coming.” He walks in and grabs the cup of coffee I was making for Sgcino. I don’t know what he’s doing here, so early in the morning.

Sgcino is here, he won’t be happy to see him. I hope whatever it is that he’s here for is brief because you never know which reaction to expect from Hubo.

“Where did you sleep?” I ask him.

He’s going through my fridge looking for something to eat like a hunter who hasn’t eaten in weeks.

“I was around,” he says and takes a noisy sip.

“Since when do you drink coffee?”

He stops me with his finger and sits down with a slice of black forest I bought a few days ago.

“Why you didn’t come to the funeral?” He’s here for that, I knew he was silent about it because he wanted to confront me in person.

“I don’t like how Sthembiso and Ma and Mamncane treated me when I expressed my concern about how he involved me and Mela in seeking revenge for Zime’s death.”

“I don’t know what is going between you two, I’m just here as an older brother.” I secretly roll my eyes, he’s not even three years older than me.

“We don’t drop each other at our lowest. Sometimes you just need

to put differences aside and be there when someone needs you.”

“Did he need me though? Let’s be honest, he wouldn’t even have acknowledged that I was there.”

“You don’t want to see things from his perspective, which is also the same problem with him. I want you to come home today, I will be the mediator while you two talk. We cannot afford to be divided at times like these.”

“Urgh Hubo, I don’t have time to run after him. I don’t have to beg him for anything, I’m fine with how things are.”

“It wasn’t a request, dear sister. I will come and fetch you later,” he says with a chuckle.

I’m really not up for this but I have to agree to make him leave before Sgcino comes out of that room.

“Okay,” I say.

“Good, I need to take a nap.”

No, no, no! A nap, where?

“I haven’t cleaned yet,” I say.

“Then get me a blanket, I will sleep on the couch.” He lifts his eyes and frowns. Oh, fuck!

“Are you alone here? You were making two cups of coffee.”

“Umh, one was for my imaginary friend.”

“Did you sleep drunk?” Why is he standing pho?

“Hubo wait,” I jump off the chair and stand in front of him.

He raises his eyebrow.

This is my flat for fuck’ sake!

“I have a guest in the bedroom,” I say.

“Who? The one with snaggletooth?”

Oh wow, I have never judged his gazillion girlfriends. Sgcino’s teeth aren’t shaped normally, so what?

He laughs, “If you’re offended I will call him Maziny’ engwenya-crocodile teeth.”

He’s a fool, I know he will call him that.

“No, I’m not offended. I love his teeth.”

“Good, go and tell him I need a cold-drink.”

“No!” Is he crazy?

“Mazi...”

Jeez!

“Okay, I will tell him.” Bloody fool.

He laughs and sits down on the chair.

He’s still lying in bed on his back staring at the ceiling. For a moment I had forgotten about the misery looming over our relationship.

I don't tell him about Hubo's cold-drink, I take money from my purse and walk out.

"How much is that?" he asks.

"R50," I say.

"Doesn't he work?"

Don't you work?

"Be grateful," I say.

"No, he should be grateful he's with my sister, that chance is gold," he says and stands up with the note folded in his palm.

I'm left smiling and shaking my head. He's a different breed, I can't believe we share blood.

Now back to the troubled paradise...

I sit next to him. It's the closest we've been since he told me the truth about himself.

He lifts his rheumy eyes to me,

"Are we over?"

"No, I just don't know how we are going to move forward with your family wanting Vuyo for you and this whole night and ghosts thing," I say.

"Londeka, do you love me?"

"Yes, I do," I say with no hesitation.

I do love him and if I rob myself of this chance I'll always wonder how my life would've turned out.

"Can you touch me?" he asks.

Deep breath!

I lower my face down to him and kiss his lips for a minute and then plant a peck on his forehead.

He holds my hand and brings it to his lips.

I think we are going to figure it out.

SIKELELA

CHAPTER 22

MELAMINA MSHENGU

Ma said Busizwe was on his way to see me. It would be my first time seeing him after the accident, that's what everybody calls it. Ma fights anyone who defines it as a suicide attempt because her daughter would never want to kill herself. I don't know why Busizwe is coming, he probably has something to say. He's the eldest, there are three other boys between us and then me, last born. We've never had any strong bond, he was away when most things happened fulfilling his duties as the eldest son, but even when he came back he didn't do anything. So I feel the same about him as everyone else.

Strangely I'd rather forgive Sthembiso over him because I know what drove him. I saw his tears, I know he was hurting and I was the unlucky one as usual, I stood at the receiving end.

Busizwe is a big man, he can fight any battle and win it. He's stood against the Hlongwanes unshaken. He turned 36 this year, the age gap between us is too wide for me to say anything to him.

He walks in with a Spar shopping bag wearing black Brentwood, brown loafers and a white polo T-shirt. He's getting married soon, I don't understand how it felt okay for him to kill someone's wife. That was cruel and inhuman. Before he sits he pulls down the T-

shirt and I know he has a gun in his waist, like always.

“How are you?” He speaks formally and assertively.

“I’m good,” I say.

“When are they releasing you?”

“I don’t know yet.”

He looks around and pulls the file on top of the bedside cabinet and flips through the pages.

“You’re not hungry? I brought you snacks and that flour-wrap thing everyone eats.” He’s talking about shwarma, I love it but I’m still full.

“Thank you,” I say.

He closes the file and looks at me with a low sigh. I don’t think he understood anything written in there. He was condoned through most of his lower grades, got in high school by luck and dropped out after repeating Grade 10 three times.

“They say you ran to the truck?” I don’t know if he’s annoyed or sympathetic, I can’t read his tone.

I don’t respond, he knows the truth, they all do but they’d rather swipe it under the carpet.

“What were you doing at the bridge that morning?” he asks.

“Sthembiso dropped me off.”

He raises his eyebrow, “Who is that?”

“Sguqa Hlongwane, he wanted you and I didn’t have your number so he ended up letting me go.”

“So he’s the reason why you almost killed yourself. What did he do to you?”

“Did you kill his wife?” I don’t have the privilege to question my brothers but this particular situation has involved me, I might as well know the truth.

“I don’t touch women, MaMshengu. If I wanted to kill a female Hlongwane why wouldn’t I have gone after his sisters and mothers, a daughter-in-law is not even blood related to them?”

Only they understand why they hate each other so much. He’s after the Hlongwane blood and they are after ours.

“Who killed her then?” I ask.

“That’s their job to find out, you have to focus on recovering. Sguqa will pay for what he did to you.”

Only because he’s a Hlongwane. Sthembiso triggered the nest of pain the Mshengus laid eggs on. Those eggs have hatched into this broken woman, I don’t want anyone to use me as an excuse to fight battles that are only known to them.

“It’s too late for you to fight for me,” I say.

“No, it’s not, I will get Sguqa.”

“I don’t need you to be my hero,” I say before my mind can filter it out.

He looks a bit shocked, I don’t talk back, I’m not that person.

“I needed you to be my hero at 16 and you weren’t. Now I’m grown, I can handle my own shit. You didn’t want to take revenge against a man who turned me into his sex-slave under your father’s roof because he was your uncle and he helped your father put food on the table. Now you want to take revenge against someone who didn’t even do half of what your uncle did to me because you want to fulfil your killing urge. Do not, not for my name!”

“You need to watch your mouth, who are you talking to with that tone?”

“Or what?” I challenge him with a stare.

He drops his eyes, his chest bounces as he takes a sharp breath.

“Why, Busizwe?” I’m an emotional person, I always have tears on standby.

“I wasn’t home.”

That’s a lame excuse and he fuckin’ knows it!

“I wrote you a letter and slipped it under your pillow, I told you everything in that letter and you woke up the next morning not even sparing me a glance.” He was in Joburg, I waited fuckin’ three months for Easter holidays to come so that I can bare my chest to him. And he came home and did what everyone did; pretend like nothing happened.

“You’ve never responded to this day,” I say.

I don’t see a big man that I always take him to be, he’s just a young boy. A coward of note.

“I didn’t understand what you wrote, the doctor in Joburg told me that I suffer from something called double-deficit dyslexia. I asked him, babomncane, to read it for me because I saw his name in the letter, I didn’t know he was the subject of the matter, and he told something that didn’t make sense.” I don’t want to hear any excuse! How did he read road signs in Joburg, bottom line is; he never responded to my letter or said anything.

“You were 26, old enough to read and write a response. But you let him abuse me, you let him destroy my life.” I only have this one chance to talk to him like this. There’s a lot of things I have kept to myself, bottled and slowly eating me up.

“Was it worth it?” I ask.

“When I learned the truth I kicked him out, that was all I could do at that time.” What does he mean ‘all he could do’, he was an adult.

I’m crying again.

“It eats me up everyday, MaMshengu. I could’ve done more but my hands were tied because Baba was the head of the house and him and Ma already made a decision to...” He can’t say it.

I say it for him; “To forgive him and sweep everything under the carpet. At 16, fuckin’ 16, I was told that an old man touching my private part and sneaking his fingers inside me is not a big deal, that I should stop talking about it. You were my last hope, Busizwe. Last hope!”

“Everyone of us has a story to tell. I’m sorry I couldn’t protect

you.”

Mxm! I turn and sleep facing the other side.

“Please forgive me,” he says.

He’s not sorry. Busizwe is not sorry, he’s only apologizing because I brought it up.

“You don’t know what I’ve been through because of this. I understand you are more angry at me because I’m the oldest and I take that, but it was complicated and I just...” I’m not listening to him. He realizes that and releases a low sigh.

“Being me has been the hardest, MaMshengu. It wasn’t just you, but you’re allowed to bleed, just don’t kill yourself.”

I don’t respond. A minute passes, I feel his hand on my shoulder and shake it off.

Another sigh.

He gets off the chair and packs the goodies he brought inside the cabinet and leaves.

I’ve never had a confrontation with my eldest brother like this. I don’t know what he went through but nothing excuses the fact that he didn’t acknowledge the letter I wrote him and pretended as if nothing happened. Now the question is why do I still have a home in Mashoba? Why am I associating myself with people who don’t have my best interest at heart, people who’d choose a coin over me?

Those footsteps again!

I close my eyes, I don't want to look at him, I have nothing more to say or listen to. A heavy figure stands next to my bed, my nose is hit by a different smell. A unique woody and musky smell that I've never smelled in my life.

My heartbeat palpitates wildly but I don't open my eyes. I'm in the hospital, it's safe, right?

I hear him moving around the bed, stepping softly on the floor. I'm about to wet my pants. My heart is pounding with tremor.

I hear a shallow breath and something being put on top of the cabinet next to me. I hold my breath, someone has to come in, a nurse or something.

"Hey," he says in a low whisper. I've never heard this voice in my life. The urge to open my eyes grows but my fear is even deeper. I stay collected, with my breaths kept soft and hands shaking.

"Umuhle," he says in that low vibrating whisper. I feel his eyes closer to me and my chest is about to burst open.

"I hope one day you'll open your eyes and see me, because I can't wait to see you. You're stronger than whatever you're going through, uzoba right." I don't know why I'm finding comfort in his words. I want to open my eyes and see him but my dominant instinct tells me it's okay this way.

“I found your bracelet,” he says and inhales sharply. He moves off a braid that has fallen on my face.

I’m sensing all his movements, him leaning down to my face and wanting to touch my face and controlling his fingers abruptly.

My nerves have settled, when I hear him walking out I slightly open my eyes and peep at him.

I don’t know him. His skin is a deep shade of cacao, lifting my gaze and drawing me in. I get a partial glance at his face as he turns the corner leading to the exit passage. He looks like someone I know, I just can’t figure out who. He’s wearing black, his short-sleeved shirt has shoulder boards indicating that he’s a security guard. I don’t think he works here, in this hospital.

There’s a gift-bag on my bedside cabinet. I take it and look inside. The pearl-beaded bracelet I got as my birthday gift from my colleagues, I think I lost it at the scene, he brought it. So this person is from Mashoba, that’s the only thing that makes sense, he arrived at the scene after the accident and found my bracelet.

But I know most people there and him, I’ve never met him.

Who is he? Oh yes, Londeka.

He looked like Londeka, I’m not mistaken. I know all the Hlongwanes except the one brother they just found out about. Londeka is the spitting image of her father, which makes this

person her father's image too. Now my question is why was someone who's looking like Hlongwane here?

Does he have a death wish?

There's a card as well, with a horrible handwriting.

****GET WELL SOON, BEAUTIFUL STRANGER****

I'm not sure what he wants from me but this is flattering. Well, flattering until I remember that I have a boyfriend I'm not in love with and an enemy I've been in love with since primary school. I have committed myself into relationships physically, never emotionally. My life has has no balance.

Sthembiso has my phone wherever he is, and I'm here with his finger marks on my arm. I don't think he even cares, he's still mourning his wife and planning revenge.

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HUBO

Family is everything. To him that's the only thing he'd die for. He's not happy with how things are between Sthembiso and Londeka, they can't be divided now. His father made sure they all grew up as one. Londeka is his sister as much as Azile is, and Thobani is his brother regardless of blood. You touch one of them he strikes. Despite of everything that's going on, he just wants his siblings

united. Londeka and Sthembiso shared a womb, surely they can talk about this and move past it. Their father is dead, nobody is going to look after them if they don't look out for each other.

He drives straight to Sthembiso's house with her because if he starts at the main homestead Londeka will appear in high court before the magistrate one. MaXulu has been waiting for her to come home and explain herself. What she did ashamed the family, absent from her sister-in-law's funeral, really?

Sthembiso's house is cold without Zime. In just a week everything looks lifeless. Even the outside light is not working and Sthembiso hasn't even bothered fixing it.

There's no inviting aroma, passing the kitchen you're only welcomed by food containers from MaXulu's kitchen with left-overs.

Londeka is still on her phone chatting, probably to her boyfriend. Hubo still can't get over the fact that Sgcino is over 35 and dating his "ten" year-old sister, but she clapped back at him for calling him a sugardaddy. Apparently he's only one decade older than her and that's no trainsmash.

"We have to check that place out next week when I'm off work," he says.

"You're always off work and the only reason you want to go back to that coffee-shop is because of that white girl who's not even

your type,” Londeka says. She doesn’t take any of his love interests serious, nobody does.

He laughs, only if she knew that he’s snacked a few redheads and the coffee-shop manager will be on the list soon.

They walk into the lounge where Sthembiso is seated with his cold beer and silenced movie that he’s staring at. Hubo informed him about this meeting that’s about to take place and he didn’t have a problem ironing things out with Londeka only if she comes to his house.

Hubo greets and sits on the two-seater couch, Londeka joins him and puts her purse next to her.

“See this beautiful rug, you need it for those cold tiles in your lounge,” he teases her.

Londeka chuckles, “Maybe I need bifocals.”

Sthembiso lifts his eyes from the TV to Hubo. He looks infuriated.

“Get out of my house!” he blusters angrily.

Hubo frowns, “Bafo, what did we...?”

He stands furiously and points them to the door.

Hubo is confused but he stands because it’s an order from the house owner.

“See, this is why I don’t like her. She throws shade like that and then act like I’m the bad guy,” Sthembiso says.

Hubo looks at Londeka with a frown. He doesn't get it.

"But that was a joke," he says.

"Well, I don't find those jokes funny. I don't like her stinking attitude and the mean things she subtly says calculatingly."

"What did I say? You have a problem with everything I say and do, and that's something I can't control," Londeka says getting off the couch and picking her purse.

"I don't have a problem with you, I have a problem with your attitude and ungratefulness. You're messy, disorganized and very spoiled."

"Oh, really? You are channeling your anger towards the wrong person, you had problems with dad and I'm just the closest thing to him that you can lash out at. Fix your life, grow a spine like he said and stop lifting dumbbells and abusing your body to fight your demons. You look ridiculous, Hulk Hogan."

Hubo pulls her to stand behind him, before anything aggressive happens. This is not how he wanted this meeting to go but at this point there's no instant solution he can come up with except leaving with Londeka.

"At least I'm not mean to people around me, I don't hurt people and fold my arms like nothing happened. Your heart is darker than your face and that's something foundation and concealer can't fix." He holds the door open and points them out.

Hubo holds her hand, releases a sigh and walks out with her. This is not just a sibling disagreement, it's war. Even if their father was

alive he wouldn't have been able to resolve it because he would've taken Londeka's side and MaXulu would've jumped to Sthembiso's without thinking twice. Maybe a neutral person like their uncle, Mjay, because at this point this is above Hubo.

SIKELELA

CHAPTER 23

SIKELELA

He snapped a picture, which he can admit was creepy. And now he can't stop staring at it, his lower lip keeps quivering to suppress the smile from spreading out. He knows there's a good possibility of her hating him and not even hearing him out. He killed her father in cold blood and deliberately, but he's got a reason for it. It's scary, yet it's a beautiful feeling he hasn't felt in a long time.

His phone rings and disturbs his fantasy world. It's Hubo, this may take long, he decreases the heat on the stove before answering.

"I'm in England," Hubo says with ecstasy.

He clicks his tongue, "There's England now in South Coast?"

"No, England actually came to me. Do you remember that white girl I told you about from the coffee-shop?"

"Not the one with good legs from last week?" Sikelela asks with a pinch of mockery.

"Your memory is more active than your sex life. No dummy, I told you about a girl who manages a coffee-shop from Londeka's building."

"Oh sorry, I forgot. Is she the England?" He remembered, she's all Hubo has been talking about this week, he just wanted to rub his

rough corners.

“Mfo kaBaba ngidlela ezitshen’ ezifayo namhlanje,” Hubo beams.

“Uzolala ubhodl u’bobotie’?”

They both break into laughter. Sleeping around makes him happy, Sikelela has learnt to embrace that about him. He’s a bit irresponsible, but that’s for Sthembiso to worry about, right? He lets him get away with things.

“Enjoy and keep it safe. I have to continue cooking, before my white in-law thinks I’m the enemy of progress,” he says.

“You need to find a woman to cook for you,” Hubo suggests.

He chuckles, “I have hands to cook for myself, and besides, I don’t think the woman I’m falling in love with is the type that worms her way to a man’s heart through his stomach. She didn’t look like that type.”

There’s a shuffling movement, Hubo is finding a good position to continue this phone call. It has gotten interesting, too late for Sikelela to take it back.

“Do I know her?” he asks curiously.

“Yes, you do. But I won’t tell you yet because you’ll switch from being a man-whore to a preacher in a second. All I can say is, I shouldn’t be falling in love with her, it’s a disaster waiting to happen.” He’s brave enough to say this. He knows what he’s done to her family and how his brothers feel about her family.

Hubo blows out an audible sigh, “I know I’ve been complaining

about your dry sex-life, but I really don't want you to fall in love. At least not so early, get to know people, have fun and enjoy yourself before opening your heart and locking someone in it." Here comes Hubo the preacher!

"I'm not you, Hubo lethu. That's not me, I fall in love before having fun, it's just who I am," he says.

"All I'm saying is guard your heart. The deeper you fall in love the harder it will be to move forward should things not work out," Hubo says. How hopeless does he sound. Yes things may not work out, but there's something called positivity, surely he's heard of it.

"Having my heart broken by someone I loved doesn't mean I don't have to love again. You know when I saw her the second time, I felt things I haven't felt in a long time. A part of me that I thought had died when Vumo betrayed me. It's still there waiting to be filled."

"Oh Lord, why can't you be normal?!" Hubo sighs.

"I'm normal Hubo, just not your normal," he says.

There's a female voice in Hubo's background, must be the coffee-girl.

"I have to go bafo, don't worry I will find out who she is very soon," he says.

"Don't you dare stalk me, I will kill you." Sikelela is now threatening a dead line, Hubo has ended the call.

Now he has to be cautious, not only look out for the Mshengus but his brother as well, they can't find out about his feelings for Mela yet. She doesn't even know him, even though that's about to change, he doesn't want her to be scared.

His phone beeps, it's a bank notification, his salary is in. This month he doesn't have a lot of expenses; just rent, grocery and transport money. He can buy something and send it to the hospital, nothing big but nothing of low value either.

He sits and browse through the internet, his baked beans and tomatoes is cooking on the stove.

Something catches his eye from American Swiss. It's 18ct gold pendant with gemstones worth R2 560.

He needs to pay this store a visit.

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STHEMBISO "SGUQA"

His uncle's Toyota RAV4 parks in front of his house. He didn't call to say he was coming, Sguqa is getting ready for work struggling to put together an outfit for the meeting he's having later with the investors of the new mall that's partnering with their hardware.

"I caught you on time," his uncle, Mjay, says walking in.

This day already started on a bad note; he releases a shallow breath and asks him to take a seat.

"It's actually not a good time," he says.

"I see you're going to work, but what I'm here for is important. Can't someone stand in for you? It's still early for you to stress about work," Mjay asks.

"Hubo is not home, so..." He shrugs.

"Call him and tell him to go to work."

"No, it's fine. I don't want to stay here anyway, I have to be busy," he says.

Sthembiso can be stubborn, his uncle knows this. He cracks the subject that brought him to Mashoba early in the morning. "I spoke to Hubo and Londeka. What is going on?"

"Malume, I hope you're not here to talk to me about Londeka. Please, not today!"

"How do you expect me to sit and fold my arms while you don't get along with your sister?"

"I just buried my wife. Can I be left alone to deal with pain that actually matters?"

"A relationship with your sister don't matter?" Mjay raises his eyebrow.

"Right now, no. She hasn't showed me any sympathy for losing my wife, so I don't care to solve anything."

"Is there something I don't know, maybe? You weren't close growing up but you didn't hate each other." This hurts Mjay, he doesn't have kids of his own, he takes these two as his and all he

wants is a healthy relationship between them. Every other Hlongwane child gets alone except them; this is a curse.

"I don't hate anyone," Sthembiso argues.

"If that's the case then come to my house this coming weekend and hatch this thing out. Tell her how you feel and listen to what she has to say."

He sighs, "I don't mean to disrespect you Malume, but I have other things going on mentally and emotionally. The last thing on my mind is begging people to step into my shoes and understand me. Trust me, I'm okay with Londeka thinking I don't have a spine, that I have issues and I look ridiculous. I'm okay with her not coming to my wife's funeral, you know why? Because the last thing I want is keeping up with a fake relationship."

"How can a relationship with your sister be fake?"

"If we fix things now it would be fake. When Mkhonto was around she never bothered, she created this gap between us and I bonded with those who were available for me. He's dead now, I'm not going to become his clone."

This is not going anywhere; Mjay sighs.

"Why do you call him by name? He was your father," he asks.

"Excuse me, I'm just frustrated about the meeting you're delaying me from," Sthembiso says.

Mjay slightly shakes his head,

"Have you eaten?"

“I’m going to have something on the way.”

“Did you eat last night?” Why is he persistent with his questions?

“I will eat, Malume.” He’s getting annoyed.

“Sthembiso you can’t sleep without dinner, wake up and go lift those heavy dumbbells in the gym and go to work without eating anything.”

He fixes his tie and exhales deeply with no response.

“When was your last panic attack?” Mjay asks.

“This morning when I woke up and remembered that she’s dead and not in our bed. But I know how to deal with them now,” he says.

“I’m worried about you Sthembiso, I don’t want to lie, but I trust you. You’ve always been responsible, this pain will pass and you’ll be whole again.”

His uncle has his back. His mother as well, but they’ve had their lows in the past, she wanted to control his life. That’s when he learnt to never emotionally depend on anyone except Zime. One thing about putting people first is that, along the way, you’re teaching them that you come second.

He escaped the claws of her mother in his marriage but now it looks like he’s gone ten steps back. He’s lost his other half, he cannot function.

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SGCINO ZULU

She doesn't care, why would she?

Sgcino walks in, she's still standing in front of the mirror trying to wrap her head with a scarf. Sthembiso's last words won't leave her head; is her heart really dark?

"Are we going to leave?" He's taking her somewhere, one of his favorite spots in Burnedale Farm but she's not showing much interest. He arrived about fifteen minutes ago and she's still dressing up.

She throws the scarf on the bed and looks at him with a shallow sigh.

"Can we cancel? I'm sorry, I just don't feel good," she says.

"I have booked, Londeka. I made too many preparations, you can't just back out." They should be getting to know each other better, cuddling indoors is good but not enough. They need to go out, learn more about each other's interests and so forth.

"I'm sorry, I don't want to go out. You can go with someone else." She sits on the bed and unbuttons her shirt. She's really canceling; unfair.

He sits next to her, puts his face between his hands and sighs in frustration.

"Can we talk about whatever is eating you?" he asks.

"I don't feel like going out Sgcino, that's all."

“Okay,” he nods.

They sit in silence. He didn’t expect this, over the phone she was excited about the trip.

“Are you scared to go out with me?” Nothing makes sense right now.

“This is not about you. I just don’t feel good,” she says in a firm voice.

“But that just sounds like...”

She interjects, “Do you think I have a dark heart?”

“No, what makes you think that?” He frowns.

“Sthembiso said my heart is darker than my face. I’m asking myself what is it that I did to him?”

“Maybe he said it out of anger.”

“Things people say when they’re angry are usually a reflection of their true thoughts.”

“Come on, I’m sure he’s going to apologize. You’re beautiful, in and out.” He holds her hand and pulls her closer. Now he understands the sudden change of mind, the fight with her brother is still crushing her soul.

“Let’s go to my house,” he says.

She yawns, “Sgcino!”

“You can’t refuse everything I ask, don’t be dark-hearted.”

She gives him a look.

He chuckles, "So are you coming?"

"As long you bring me back before the sunset," she says.

Why does that hurt him so bad? She's still scared, he gets that, but can their relationship be normal? Or at least pretend so.

Getting in his house they've both forgotten about the subtle snubs they gave each other in her place. He's holding her hand and pulling her towards the backyard. The view is good, so is the sun shining on her espresso brown skin.

"Do you know that I'm a good photographer?" he asks standing in front of her sitting on the outdoor wicker-chair.

"You with a profile picture of your zoomed face?" She breaks a chuckle slightly shaking her head.

"It's a hidden talent, I have a lot of them, stick around babe." He winks and takes off the scarf around her head. Her hair has grown into short-hair that can be brushed by a bristle-brush but she only washes, sprays it and leaves it in coils. Her jawline is rounded with subtle angles, he's staring at her admiringly.

"What are you wearing under your shirt and pants?" he asks.

She slightly frowns; was she brought here for sex? He can't be thinking about sex in the backyard. Yes she likes spontaneity, but not something like that during the day.

He strokes her cheek, "Relax, I just want to take pictures of you."

Hot air blows her face, heating her cheeks up.

That was almost weird.

“Umh, I’m not wearing matching underwear,” she says in embarrassment.

“Okay, you can take only the shirt off and pose half-naked.” Really, who is this man?

He leaves her stunned and goes inside the house to fetch the camera. His photographing thing seems serious.

He’s carrying a wet cloth and a bottle of water. He asks her to sit still and wipes her face with a wet cloth. This keeps getting interesting...

“Okay, natural face,” he says to himself and sets his camera.

“Can you pose?”

That’s an insult. She’s a girl, obviously she can...umh pardon.

“For selfies only,” she says clearing her throat.

He grabs the bottle of water and asks her to lift her chin up and close her eyes.

“AAwww!” she screeches as cold water splashes on her face.

He quickly stops her hand before she wipes it off.

“Just blink and leave water drops on your face,” he says.

He stands a few feet away with the camera; she’s wearing

combat boots, Cargo high-rise pants and only a halter bra on top.

“One leg behind the other. Tilt your head to one side. Move one shoulder closer. And don’t look straight at the camera.”

Instructions flock in from the camera-man.

“Where must I look?” She’s trying to stand still with her leg standing behind the other. This whole thing is not her.

“Run your hand through your hair,” he says impatiently.

What on earth?!

“I don’t have hair,” she says.

“Londeka just put your hand on your head and give me your hip.”

Even Sthembiso was better at yelling when he was teaching her how to drive than this one.

“I’m trying, okay?” she snaps.

He takes more pictures and steps closer to take them close-up.

“Face the sun,” he says.

Yes she’s dark, but facing the sun, really?

By the time he finishes she’s fed up, tired and hungry. Never mind that it has gotten very late.

“You can freshen up, I will make something to eat,” he says.

She takes off to the bathroom for a quick shower. She has to wear her shirt without a bra because Mr Cameraman splashed water on it.

He's done dishing up when she comes out. He's looking at her pictures on his laptop with satisfaction on his face.

"You're a goddess," he compliments and asks her to take a look. She's too hungry for that, she tells him she'll look at them later and digs in her meal.

"When are you going to cook for MaNgcobo?" he asks.

She chokes and looks up with her eyes narrowed.

"Me?" she asks.

"Yes, kanti who is going to be her makoti?"

She chuckles, "Maybe in five years."

"How many kids would we have by then?"

Kids???

"Ummm...are you not eating?" This is getting way too much and uncomfortable.

"Answer the question; how many kids would we have after five years?" He's staring at her.

"I can't tell the future," she shrugs.

"I do, we would have three." He tilts his head and studies her reaction.

"I hope you are wrong," she says.

That response leaves him a sense of uncertainty but he quickly

shakes it off.

"I have missed spending time with you," he says.

Her lips crack into a smile.

"How are you feeling now?" he asks.

"Better, thank you for bringing me here," she says.

He leaves his chair and goes to lift her up. They stand wrapped in each other's arms.

"Mntaka MaXulu, right?" he asks with a gentle smile caressing her jawline with his fingers.

"Yes," she's blushing.

"Uyakuthanda umntaka MaNgcobo." He drops his forehead onto hers and lifts her chin up.

His lips brush gently against hers before he parts them and slowly sucks her lip. Her neck is safely tucked in his hand, his knee is inserted between her legs and pressed against her mound.

"Mmm!" He moans as his tongue tangles with hers and battles for dominance.

He pushes her against the wall, she's breathless, she breaks off the kiss and slightly pushes him back. He tucks his face on her neck and gives her ticklish kitten licks on the neck.

"Sgcino, it's late, I have to go." It's already dark outside, she should've left before the sun set. Now is not the safest time to be around this man.

He releases a deep breath, for a minute he's silent, then he plants a kiss below her earlobe.

"Please sleep over," he begs in a husky voice desperately.

"I can't, I have to see my uncle tomorrow morning," she's lying. Maybe as time goes on she'll be comfortable with him at night.

"I will wake you up early." He's not getting it.

"Come on Sgcino, we can see each other again tomorrow."

Deep sigh!

"Okay, let me get the car keys."

"No, I will request an Uber, don't worry." Her voice is pitched higher than she intended; startled even.

Now he understands, this was bound to be his reality. Their eyes lock, his are moist, she quickly looks away guiltily. He wants to show her that he loves her but it looks like he will have a scanty chance to do it.

"Uhambe kahle," he tries to sound okay.

SIKELELA

CHAPTER 24

LONDEKA

I woke up and hit the road. I needed to clear my mind, a lot has been bothering me lately. I'm still running away from the confrontation at home, I'm trying not to fight with anyone and if being away is going to restore that peace, so be it.

I boil two eggs and eat them with wilted greens. My life seems to have come to a standstill, I'm tired of waking up everyday and sending out my CV. It's like I'm walking around with a shadow of darkness, every door I knock at closes on my face.

There's a message coming through my phone; I'm always expecting something like interview invite. But it's Sgcino;

Whenever I close my eyes I see you. But whenever I open them you're not there, and that makes me realize how much I yearn to have you in my arms every morning. It makes me wish I had hugged you and kissed you longer. You send ripples through me with everything you do, I cannot wait for the day when distance and fear can't come between us. Uyithathile inhliziyo yami Londeka, I hope that stays in your mind and heart, ukuthi ngiyakuthanda babe.

I don't remember the last time I received such a deep love message. I wanted to take things slow after finding out about his condition, I didn't want either him or me to fall deeply in love because I'm still not sure what is the way forward. He doesn't seem to care, he's loving me openly, and that leaves me breathless and with no other option but to fall in love deeper as well.

I send my response, it's kinda shorter than his but it carries my feelings too. I love him, very much. I don't want to lose him, I don't want to break his heart, I want to make him happy. I don't know how I'm going to do that with this fear I have, I hope we will figure something out soon. I want to sleep over my boyfriend's place, I want to go out with him at night and have sex with him. But I can't, for obvious reasons and I don't know how that is going to change.

My phone rings, my heart leaps thinking it's him, but the number indicates a landline.

"Londeka Hlongwane speaking, hello," I answer in a little panic.

"Hello, this is Lee from Skinture Durban. I have good news for you!" he sounds like a bubble man, even screaming on my behalf.

I don't really remember Skinture but I've uploaded my profile and CV in various websites and agencies.

"Really?" I'm both nervous and excited.

“You have been shortlisted.”

Oh, shortlisted, not hired. I’m a bit disappointed.

“The panel would like you to come today at 3pm along with other two contestants,” he says.

“Oh, that great. I’m sorry to sound ignorant, I’ve been applying in different companies. What position am I shortlisted for at Skinture?” I ask.

“The brand ambassador,” he says.

I’m confused. I have never wanted to become an ambassador, and honestly I don’t even know this Skinture brand. But it’s a job, right? I’ve been praying for one, this could be a miracle that I need to grab before they realize they called the wrong person.

“3pm I will be there,” I confirm.

“Thank you, please have a great day ahead,” he ends the call.

I’m standing in the middle of the kitchen trying to understand what’s going on. Google has my answers, I’m sure of it.

As soon as I type Skinture in the search engine different products pop up. From body and hands creams and lotions, serums, toners, sunscreens, anti-aging creams and moisturizers. One thing about them is, they’re hell expensive. Who buys R549 sunscreen?

Apparently they’re made for African skin and they aren’t just a South African brand; their products are found in other African countries and USA as well.

I check previous ambassadors of the brand, and oh man, they're top-listed models and actresses. Who the fuck am I? I never applied for this thing. These people even make public appearances and do TV ads. I can't do that.

I call Hubo, I'm panicking, I'm about to turn down my first job offer.

"Hey babe," he answers.

Who is his babe? He's adding to my problems.

"It's your SISTER," I say.

"Oh fuck, sorry I'm expecting a call. What's popping?"

"I just got a call saying I'm short-listed as Skinture brand ambassador." I'm still in shock.

"Are they going to pay you?" he asks.

"Obviously, yes. But I didn't ask to become one, today was my first day even hearing about the brand" I say.

"Maybe they saw your pictures somewhere. You know you're beautiful, they saw that and..."

I cut him short, my nerves are scattered all over the place; "Hubo these people have had actresses and top models as their ambassadors. I don't think I can do that."

"Why can't you? You have the face, the voice and the body. Take the job if it's going to pay your bills, because I, personally, can't stand your broke ass anymore."

I laugh, "I'm not broke, your 99 girlfriends are."

"On a serious note, please take the job if you get it. Imagine how many girls would throw themselves at me if my sister is the face of Skin-what-what." SMH!

"That all you care about. I'm getting worried about you, when are you going to fall in love?"

"I think everytime I realize that I can't have a certain girl," he says.

I know him when he's joking and when he's not. He masks his sadness but I know him very well, he's my brother.

"Are you in love with your ex?" I ask.

"Something almost like that. I fall in love with people I can't get ngisho sengikhala izinyembezi. But that's how karma works, right? It kicks ass unexpectedly." He's back at being his jolly-self.

"Are you heartbroken?"

"Yes, but it's nothing I can't handle. We are the Hlongwanes, oSangweni; we are strong. Please go there and get the job."

I wish I was optimistic like him. But I'm feeling a bit confident after the phone call.

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2:50pm strikes, I'm already in the building. They gave me a glass of strawberry juice while waiting. I'm not sure what to expect, I just have to be truthful and not try to say things to impress the

panel.

"Hello," someone says.

I turn my head to a walking art. I recognize her face from some familiar TV ads, she's walking on nude stilettos with her sexy legs exposed from a leather short.

"Hi," she greets with her Gucci purse clutched tightly in her manicured hand.

I smile, "Hello,"

"You're here for the interview?" I'm not sure why I hear a bad undertone in that question.

"Of course," I say.

"Oh great! Have you seen the other girl?"

"No,"

She sits and crosses her legs, "I hope it's someone like you, not someone I know. I really need this job."

Is she implying that I'm not a threat? These people need to hurry up, I don't want to sit next to this low budget Beyonce.

There's someone coming in.

Must be the third girl.

"Hello," she says, her eyes meet with Beyonce Lite's and she lets out a scream.

They're hugging; happy to see each other.

"I last saw you in Vegas," the one who just came in says.

"That was ages ago. You look beautiful and congrats, I saw you on the Glamour cover." Beyonce Lite is pretentious, she's a snake, a real black mamba. She was praying not to be joined by a familiar face a minute ago but now she's laughing at this girl's face and pretending to be happy.

They're having their expensive conversation, talking about fashion shows and other brands they're working with. I'm trying not to get intimidated but what do I even know about skincare? I wash my face with Protex and moisturize with Nivea cocoa butter. I have never struggled with my skin even through puberty, that's why I've never paid attention to those intense skincare routines, everything works for my skin.

I thought they'd call us in one by one but they ask us to come in all at once. It's an open boardroom, I almost drop on the floor when I see my picture displayed on the screen at the front along with the two girls'. I look like I'd been standing in the rain; there are drops rolling down my face. If I didn't remember the day Sgcino forced me to do that photoshoot I'd doubt the person I'm seeing is me. The pictures are obviously edited, I don't look that fine and perfect in person.

"Welcome ladies, we are happy you made it in such short notice. That just shows how enthusiastic and passionate you all are about work. But unfortunately only one of you will become

Skinture ambassador.” I recognize his voice; it’s Lee, the one who called me in the morning.

“I will start from you, Sasha K. How do you define beauty?”

Sasha K is the one who came late, the Glamour magazine cover girl. She makes her way to the front, perfectly swaying her hips looking like a professional model. I envy her hair, it's silky and bouncing just above her ass.

“I have been in the beauty industry for three years, I have worked with national and international brands embracing beauty in all forms. Beauty to me means good healthy skin, sexy aura that turns heads and the ability to build the confidence of others by being you. Authenticity and humanity. And Skinture represents all that, it allows women and men of all skin tone access to affordable skin products that...”

I cough; didn’t intend to. But did she just say affordable? I come from a financial stable background but trust me, I’d rather have a packet of braai-pack over their face-wash.

Beyonce Lite passes me a glass of water as Sasha continues to praise Skinture prices.

Next is Beyonce Lite, her real name is Zama Mchunu. I notice she’s feeling less confident now, Sasha K must be a real deal.

“With 1.5 million followers on Instagram I’d say I have the star power. I have enough influence to...”

Wasn't the question what beauty means to you? I silently ask myself.

Everyone is looking at me- did I ask that loud?

"Yes, thank you. I'm explaining that," she says.

Oops, I did say it loud.

"Ummm, so beauty is very broad. To be political correct I'd say everyone is beautiful, but in reality beauty is defined by the physical features and how good your skin looks. I don't think ashy skin is part of beauty, and that's where Skinture comes in, to fix that. Even those who have natural skin can always upgrade with products from Skinture." She struts towards one of the posters and points at the cream and looks at me.

"Let's take you for instance, your skin is dark. You don't need to change and be light, but you can have a clearer tone by using Skinture's radiant skin..." I'd be damned!

"Don't use me as an example, I don't want a clearer tone or whatever you think makes a person beautiful," I say.

"But I'm not saying you're not beautiful, this cream is for every skin tone," she argues.

"But you didn't refer to 'every skin tone', you talked about me and I'm saying stop because you don't know me that way."

"Well if you're passionate about becoming the face of Skinture you'll be open to such things and change," she says.

I look at Lee, he's the one who called me.

“Is that true? I need to know now so that I won’t even waste your time, I already deal with a lot of criticism because of my skin. I’m not going to sacrifice my peace for a coin.”

Why are they looking at each other? If they’re going to use me as those “before” faces and get someone like Beyonce Lite to be an “after” then I’m not going to be part of this.

“We embrace all skin types and promote a healthy skin, that’s all,” Lee says.

I nod with relief.

Beyonce Lite seems to have turned mute.

“Go on,” one of the panelists tells her.

“Ummm as I was saying...” How do I close my ears and not hear this?

My turns finally arrives, I’m recharged, not because I’m more passionate about their products, I’m now going to debate with Beyonce Lite.

“Beauty is a feeling more than it’s a physical appearance. No matter how your skin looks you will never be beautiful if you don’t feel it inside you. It’s something nobody can determine for you. If someone calls you ugly, that’s their perception of you, not your true definition. Only you can define yourself.

Brands like Skinture are created to enhance beauty, not to define it. Feeling good is beauty; skip the filter, feel the confidence.”

Lee stands and claps his hands. Three other panelists are smiling and nodding their heads.

“Yes, skip the filter and feel the confidence, I like that,” Lee cheers.

“That was amazing,” – Sasha says.

I smile and take my seat.

Next round is a bunch of photos. I’m the only person who doesn’t have an agency, who has never professionally done a photoshoot like this one. I’m doing everything Sgcino told me to do the other day, the cameraman is also coaching me.

By the time we finish I’m exhausted to my bones. I just want a warm meal and my bed.

“I will start by thanking you ladies and congratulating you for making this far. This was indeed a tough competition, but our trusted team have decided.”

I’m holding my breath. Today has been too long to just go in vain like that.

“And the new ambassador of Skinture is Londeka Hlongwane!”

I freeze. For the first time in my life I’m not sure what my name is. I feel slim arms embracing me- Sasha. My senses creep back in, I’m Londeka the ambassador.

Everyone congratulates me, I’m happy, this is my first job. But I don’t know what it entails and how my life is going to change from this day onward.

Lee gives me the contract and tells me I need to get back to them as quick as possible. I don't have any professional management or agency, I'll need a lawyer to look through it.

I call everyone that I love to share the news. Even my mother.

"As long as you're not going to become like those naked girls we see on TV," she says upon hearing the job description.

"They're a skincare brand, I may have to show my skin to market the brand at times but I won't agree to full nudity."

"If you're happy and finally going to be independent, I'm happy for you. I'm sure your father is happy for you wherever he is as well, you're carrying his name to places."

I'm smiling like a fool. If my father was still alive the whole world would've known that his daughter is a brand ambassador and he would've thrown me a huge party to celebrate.

"You have to come home so that your brother can burn impepho and ask the ancestors to look out for you and guide you through this new journey."

Here comes the mood-killing part!

"But we are not in good terms. We don't even talk, Ma."

"You have to apologize, he's your brother."

Never! Over my dead body.

"I will call mkhulu from ekhay' elikhulu to come and burn impepho

for me," I say.

"No Londeka, you can't do that."

"Why? Can't mkhulu burn it?"

"He can, he's family, but going above your brother's head and asking extended family members to step into the alter while he's still alive is wrong."

"But I can't have someone who doesn't wish me well talk to my ancestors on my behalf. I will call mkhulu, have a great evening." I drop the call.

Next person to call is the one who created a brand ambassador out of a common girl. I still don't know what went through his mind when he applied for me without informing me. Men will be men, but I'm more than grateful.

They say date a man who doesn't let a single opportunity of greatness pass you, and he's that man for me.

"Hey," he answers in a low voice.

"Mjokwane kaNdaba." I don't praise people but I'd even kneel and lie on the floor for this one.

"Ngabizwa kamnandi kanje, what did I do right?"

"Don't pretend like you don't know. Thank you sthandwa sami, it still feels surreal," I say.

"I'm not sure what you're talking about."

“You sent my pictures to Skinture and they called me. I’m coming from them and I’m now their ambassador.”

“What is Skinture?” Is he being serious right now?

“Skincare products, they had my pictures, the ones you took and my details,” I say.

“Oh, Ntuthuko must’ve done that. But you can continue praising me, it turns me on.”

“I don’t want you to be turned on in my absence.”

He chuckles, “I see, so when are you gracing me with your presence?”

“Saturday,” I say.

“I’m attending a ceremony in Mpofana on Saturday, but you will come with me so that I can show you off.”

“What time?” I ask.

“2pm till late,” he says.

Till late? And we are going to drive back together. I don’t feel like he considers who he is scary.

“Are you going to come?”

I can’t always drop him, at some point I have to take a step forward.

“Yes.” I hope this is not me signing my death warrant.

SIKELELA

CHAPTER 25

SIKELELA

He wants to see her with her eyes open, he's been wanting to since the day he first met her, but he was still not expecting to find her sitting up. He waited until her mother left and then talked to Msizi, the hospital security guard who's his ex-colleague and helping him with his visits.

He's standing in the passage with a foodie-bag and the box of her gift, scared to walk in but also not stupid to just turn back and leave without seeing her.

She's nothing like Vumo, there's nothing to compare except that they're both beautiful in their unique ways. His only weakness in life is falling in love easily and deeply. Maybe because he's trying hard not to become like his father, the man who impregnated his mother and dumped her like a hot potato and never looked back. He wants to find a woman, not just a woman but a wife and mother of his kids. He doesn't have much but he can take care of Mela, even her standards may be a bit higher. He's a hustler and he takes care of his woman; nobody does it for him. He will never be like his father, the man who never took responsibility.

There are footsteps behind him...

"The doctor is seeing her at 4:45pm," the nurse says walking past him. That is to motivate him to hurry in; he collects a heavy breath

and steps inside.

Mela feels his presence and lifts her eyes. They meet with his and he freezes. He's not wearing the work uniform today. He's in Nike trackpant and a black T-shirt that perfectly hugs his muscles. He tried but you can tell a guy from Hlabathini just from the way he breathes. Oh and the baseball cap thing, that's their signature.

She didn't expect to see the stranger who found her bracelet and left her a sweet note. She's suddenly feeling scared, she's never met this person and he keeps coming.

"Who are you?" Her voice comes out in a low whisper, she's trying not to panic but she's shaking like a leaf.

"My name is Sikelela Dlamuka." He's stopped two feet away, unsure whether he's welcome or not.

"What do you want?" she asks.

"I want to see you," he says.

That's it? This is not normal, he also doesn't look that normal with his rare pupils. But he didn't hurt her the last time, right?

"You can sit," she says.

He reluctantly pulls the chair and sits.

"I brought you this," he hands her the foodie-bag and a small black box.

Strange! She swallows hard. What's this now? Hopefully not a

bomb.

“Ummm thank you,” she takes it.

This is his chance to speak, to introduce himself and tell her exactly what this is about. But he’s hypnotized and out of words. He’s just staring at her, like there’s a magnet pulling his eyes to her face.

“Sikelela,” she calls his name softly.

His name has never sounded this beautiful before. He’s staring at her like she’s a creature from a different planet.

“I was crossing the bridge when the accident happened; it was right in front of me. I waited for help with the driver but then my brother asked me to hurry and go home because there was an urgent situation.” He summarized it the best way he could. His gaze is still glued at her.

“You’re a Hlongwane?” she asks.

This is not a question he expected, his eyes drop and he exhales softly.

“I grew up at my uncle’s, in Hlabathini,” he says defensively.

“But you’re a Hlongwane, you look like them,” she says.

He nods with a low sigh, “Yeah, I am.”

“Then why are you here? Don’t you know how complicated things are between my family and the Hlongwanes.”

He leans forward on the chair, everytime their eyes lock he feels

his heart taking a leap. Only Vumo has ever made him feel this way; he's in love again.

"I haven't been able to get you out of my mind since that day I saw you lying unconscious in front of the truck. You've been all I think about, all that I want to see and dream of. You're very beautiful, Melamina."

"But you don't know me, Sikelela." Why is she softening up? The attention feels great but it can't bear anything. It can't lead on to anything. That can't be!

"I want to know you, that's why I'm here. I'm not saying right now, when you're outside and ready to meet with people. I hope to have a chance to discuss what I feel for you with you. I'd be happy to have someone like you in my life or closer to me."

Deep breath!

"I have a boyfriend Sikelela," she confesses.

His eyes drop. What did he expect? That he's the only one seeing this beauty and wanting her to himself. Chances were high but he didn't prepare himself.

He inhales sharply, "I'm not trying to disrespect you or your person. I didn't know you had someone, I just saw an angel in you. Someone I'd like to have in my life, to show love and protect and share my life with. There was no room in my head for other thoughts."

"That's...I don't know what to say. It's a good thing to hear, maybe when I'm out of the hospital we can hang out even though that

would put you in danger and my relationship in jeopardy.” Daring love!

That’s better than nothing, right?

He nods, “Okay.”

“So you brought me a gift and food?” She sounds lighter with a broad smile that lights up his heart. She’s opening the box, as soon as her eyes land on the necklace she gasps and covers her mouth.

“This looks expensive,” she exclaims.

“I intended to buy something beautiful as you are.”

“Wow, thank you.” She’s blushing.

There’s something she does to him everytime she flaps her eyelashes and drops her stare from him nervously. It twitches the vein between his legs.

“You have a beautiful name,” she compliments.

“You have beautiful lips.” Oops, that sounds a bit out of line. He’s not the type that sees women as decoration objects. It’s more than physical attraction.

“I’m sorry,” he says.

She chuckles awkwardly, “No, it’s a compliment, thank you.”

That’s a relief!

“If you ever need a guardian angel I’m here,” he says.

She nods slowly, looking into his eyes and getting drawn by how genuine and deeply he seems to care about her.

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The doctor just saw her, she might be discharged in a few days. That's exciting news but she's not that excited because there's a lot to go back to. A lot of decisions to make.

She turns and sleeps on her side and closes her eyes. She's still trying to digest Sikelela and his love interest. It's quite strange how someone can just fall in love with her like in the movies. She's never experienced that kind of courting, nowadays men ask you out through DMs. A written note, gift and constant visit are a new experience and strangely she's flattered by them.

There's someone coming in. Must be one of the nurses; she keeps her eyes closed. The person stands next to her and clears his throat. Can't be Sikelela again. Her eyes fling open and her heart almost stops beating. Her hands tremble, there's a lump rising up her throat, events of that day are still fresh in her mind. She's got no doubt now that he hates her, is he here to finish her off?

He's staring down at her, his expression is plain with no emotion attached. That as well sets her into a wave of tremor.

He notices and clears his throat again.

“Mela,” his voice is lowered. He’s not here to cause any drama or harm her. Yes he understands the fear on her face and he’s responsible for that.

“Sthembiso, I don’t know anything, I didn’t do anything.” The fear in her voice intensifies. Now she’s crying, just like the other day. How did he overlook the innocence in her eyes? Anyone can advocate that he’s never been violent, he only fights when necessary.

“Please calm down, I’m here to bring your phone.” His voice is draped in guilt and shame.

She’s shaking her head and getting off the bed with a flood of tears covering her face. She still has bandages, chances of her hurting herself are high as she gets off bed with no support.

He blocks her from running; not a good move but he’s got no other choice. What if she trips and falls?

“Mela calm down,” he holds her and pulls her to his chest. His arms wrap around her, not too tight but safely. He’s not here to fight or to cause her any more pain. It will never happen again.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” he assures her.

This is the chest she’s dreamed of laying her head on for so long, but this is not one of those moments. It’s not a dream come true. He just wants her to relax, there’s no feeling attached.

He lets go of her and helps her gets back in bed and then sits where Sikelela seated about two hours ago.

"I'm sorry," he says with a deep sigh.

She doesn't respond.

"I came to bring your phone and to apologize for what I did. I was in pain but that's no excuse, I just want you to know that Londeka didn't sell you out. I cornered her to give me your location, just like I cornered you to confess," he says.

Deep breath!

"Why are you apologizing?" she asks.

"Because I don't want you to hate her, hate me," he says.

There's something going on with him. He's saying all this with his head dropped and hands wrapped behind his neck. Luckily he has a deep voice, she's able to hear him.

"Are you okay?" she asks him.

Regardless of everything that has gone down, he's a man who just lost his wife and he looks like he hasn't slept in weeks.

"Sthembiso," she calls him again.

He doesn't look at her. He doesn't move or say anything. So they're going to sit in silence with her staring at his dropped head until he decides to open his mouth again.

After a short while he lifts his head and finds her staring at him. He rubs his nose and tears his blood-shot eyes away from her. It's been tough, he's been alone and emotionally dying a slow painful death. His family is supportive, they're always there for each other; that's how his father taught them. From the wives to children. But

his case is different, nobody really embraced Zime, people are relieved instead of being hurt by her death. And they expect the same from him, they want him to just move on and pretend like nothing happened. It's been only a few weeks, yes he wakes up and goes to work, but that doesn't mean everything is okay. Nobody seems to understand his pain from his perspective, he's not a son who lost an unwanted wife, he's a man who lost his wife. His whole world, the woman who'd loved him more than anything in life.

"How has it been like?" Mela's soft voice snaps his attention.

He lifts his eyes, trying to look strong as he possibly could. But she's not expecting him to be, the way she looks at him is different from how everyone looks at him when they ask the question. She's not expecting much from him, she sees his pain and won't judge his vulnerability.

"Hard," he manages to say.

Heavy silence falls into the room. He wants to get up and leave, he's done what he came to do. He can't be finding comfort in this young girl, not just any young girl but a Mshengu he recently almost killed.

"Do you sleep?" Why she keeps asking? He doesn't want to bare his chest to her but there's so much care in her soft voice.

"No," he's opening his chest. He's not adjusting to this new life.

"I'm sorry," she croaks in a low whisper.

He lifts his head and looks at her again. Did she just say 'sorry'?

He doesn't ask loud, her face says it all. She's sympathetic.

"Her aunt was right," he says.

She's looking at him, her stare is gentle enough for him to go on. It carries no judgment and no pressure.

"She wasn't loved, I failed to give her a family. I took her from her home and failed her. I did a lot for her, financially. I spent a lot of money sending her to vacations, buying her expensive bags, weaves and clothes. If I noticed that her wines were running short I'd stock for her."

"You're a good man," she's nodding attentively.

Deep breath! He slightly shakes his head.

"Maybe I did all that because I knew she wasn't happy. I knew she was lonely and nobody was really there for her except me. No woman wants to be quarantined in a house day in and out getting judged even for breathing, with no friend around and nobody to call Ma. I failed to create a safe space for her in the course of our marriage. And lastly I failed to protect her."

All she wants to do right now is hug him, but she can't. She's not in physical fit and it would be just awkward.

"What keeps me up at night is the fact that there's a good possibility that she died for my father's sins. Whatever they were. My father had his golden children who were good enough, why had it to be me who paid for his sins with my wife?" He's not expecting answers from her, but it's her who's in front of him right now and witnessing him shedding tears.

“You still believe that my brother did it?” She’s not dismissing or trying to change his mind. She’s just hurt because on the other hand she does believe Busizwe.

“He killed my father and my cousin, why wouldn’t I believe he killed my wife too?”

Deep breath!

Mela shrugs, “I don’t even know what started this war. It makes no sense, your father once worked with my father. I thought they were good.”

“And your uncle,” he says.

This is new information but she’s not interested in hearing about that man.

“I expected him to stop this war before it got out of hand. When Busizwe killed my father I expected him to step in because he was the closest to my father. Even when Si...when your father was killed, your uncle didn’t do anything. Which makes me wonder what’s this big grudge your brother had against my father that he’d want to kill everyone related to him even the daughter-in-law.”

Unfortunately Busizwe doesn’t talk to her about anything. He wouldn’t disclose to her such details. It’s also surprising because he’s killing everyone but the uncle who raped his own sister.

“Your uncle is...” She can’t take this anymore!

“Stop talking about him. Stop calling him my uncle,” she says firmly.

He didn't expect that, maybe it's time for him to leave before he upsets her further.

He stands up and pushes the chair back into its place. Before he walks out he looks at her...

"Why did you try to kill yourself Mela?"

She's not looking at him. Not answering.

"Was it because of me?" he asks.

She slightly shakes her head, "It was because of him."

He's confused.

"Who? Your uncle?"

She nods, "Yes."

More confused.

He's pulling a chair to sit. He's opened up to her and told her the things he hasn't told anyone. It's only fair for her to tell him what happened as well.

But there's someone coming in. Mela's eyes are about to pop out of their sockets. These men can meet anywhere but not here.

Sthembiso's back is turned, but Busizwe knows his enemies from toes to the last strays of their hair.

He's pulled out his gun.

"Busizwe, no!" she yells.

Sthembiso lifts his head, unlike Mela he doesn't panic when he

sees Busizwe with his gun.

“What is this dog doing here MaMshengu? Lenja ifike nini la?” It’s going down! This is not the scene she wants to witness.

“He brought my phone, he’s not doing anything to me, I swear.” She’s shaking. Why is Sthembiso not running or taking out his gun for defense too?

“Yewena Sguqa!” He’s stepping closer and Sthembiso is still sitting on the chair like nobody is about to get shot.

“You want us to play the sister game now, huh? You know what I’m capable of, get out because I don’t want your brain to be scattered in front of my sister.”

Sthembiso finally reacts. He looks at him and clicks his tongue. That’s going to set Busizwe off; Mela is not breathing.

“Look, if it wasn’t for my father I wouldn’t even be having a conversation with someone of 0.5 IQ. I don’t like fighting, especially with dumb people who can’t even spell their names.” Yes, there are no rules in a war but that hurt, not only to Busizwe but Mela as well.

“Go fuck your wife in her grave, nja!” That’s also very low of Busizwe.

Sthembiso is on his feet. Doesn’t he see the gun?

“Help!!!” – Mela screams.

SIKELELA

CHAPTER 26

LONDEKA

I'm heading home later today, I plan to have a little party with my family to celebrate my first job. Well, it's not really a job because I don't wake up and report to a manager, however it's going to pay me and I have to acknowledge my ancestors for granting me such opportunity. I asked MaXulu to call Mkhulu, my grandfather's cousin, and he agreed to come to Mashoba and perform the ceremony for me.

Right now I'm getting ready to go to Ntuthuko's office. Apparently he has an agency and he's signed a lot of models and manages a couple of influencers. Sgcino advised me to go to him regarding the contract, he's been in the industry for quite some time now and knows everything there's to know. Without putting it in words he persuaded me to sign under Ntuthuko's agency as well. I don't have one at the moment, so I will see how it goes. This has also granted me an opportunity to see him for the second time and thank him for putting my face out there. Really, I've never seen social media being a space for me to make money, neither did I ever look at myself in the mirror and saw a hundred thousand rand worthy face. Now I'm not just Londeka from Mashoba, I'm an influencer which means I always have to look presentable. My social media accounts have been cleaned, now I just have to sign the contract before I'm announced to the world, from there it's

going to be promos, ads, public appearances and all.

I put on a rib-racer crop top, high-waisted jeans and red ankle-strap heels. I can now stand next to a giraffe and brush its head, great.

I don't know how I feel about Ntuthuko managing me, I mean he's Sgcino's cousin, which puts me in the family business. Do I really want that? What if Sgcino and I don't work out? There'd be too much awkwardness in the working space; you know what they say about business and pleasure.

I'm met by a kind lady at the door who's carrying a tray of empty tea-cups. She tells me to go right in because Ntuthuko is alone. Great, the quicker I finish here the earlier I will go shopping for my celebration.

Behind his desk is an open floor that looks like a studio. He's a man of art, he's busy on his laptop, there's soft music playing in the background.

"Hey," I greet.

He smiles, "You're late."

How? I never mentioned time of arrival.

"Sorry," I say awkwardly.

"No, it's fine, you're family."

Okay.....

“So how are you, Ms Skinture?”

“I’m both excited and nervous.”

“You’ll be fine. Why nobody persuaded you to come to the industry earlier?” he asks.

“Nobody is familiar with this industry where I come from. I was looking for a real job for the last three years, it was just a matter of time before my family threw me in the hardware or asked me to drive the trucks.”

He laughs, “Truck driver? You would’ve been a sexy one.”

That’s awkward coming from him but I let it slide and smile.

“Where’s your contract? Mfano asked me to look at it for you.”
That name makes Sgcino sounds like a mama’s boy.

“Is he a mama’s boy?” I ask.

He cracks into laughter, a loud one.

I’m waiting for an answer; he keeps laughing. Now I regret why I asked, and how is this so funny?

“Maybe you should test him and find out,” he says finally toning down the laugh.

“Test him how?” I ask.

“There’s only one way to separate mama’s boys from real boys; bedroom,” he winks.

Cough!

I need a sip of water.

“I take it you know everything about him now.” He’s changing the topic, great move!

“I’m not sure, but I know about the thing of speaking to ghosts, his late wife and Vuyo,” I roll my eyes mentioning her name. Saying her name leaves a bitter taste in my mouth.

He chuckles, “I think you know it all then. It’s good to see you still sticking around regardless of it all.”

Well, I wanted to leave but the heart wanted to stay, so here I am. He’s reading through the contract and I’m staring at him. I don’t know which side of Sgcino’s family is he a cousin from. He looks younger than Sgcino, he’s a guy in the media industry. Dyed hair, tight jeans and trails of tattoos.

“Where’s your wife?” I ask noticing the wedding band in his left hand.

“Home,” he says with his eyes glued at the document.

“Doing what there?” I mean, isn’t a wife supposed to be by her husband’s side wherever he goes?

“I’m Ntuthuko Zulu, after I’m done being a manager and founder of House of Elites, I take off these jeans and put my mblaselo on and go home to my family.”

Sounds cute, but why can’t he be one person?

“And the hair?” I’m curious.

He chuckles, “She actually saw the pictures and sent me a long

text reprimanding me. You know women, you're one of them, they love dictating."

His face lights up when he mentions his wife, I'm trying to draw a picture of her in my mind but I just can't get it. I can't guess what his type is. I'd say skinny models with yellow legs, but I doubt his wife looks like that sitting at home waiting for him.

"Why doesn't she stay here with you?" I hope I'm not asking too many questions.

"She stays with my mother. Where are you going to stay kanti wena ntokazi?" He's looking at me with a strange smirk.

"In my place," I say.

"Really? That's very nice."

It is nice; I hope there's no underlying statement in that.

"Everything looks fair, but there's this fine detail I'd like to discuss with them," he says regarding the contract he's been reading through.

"Oh okay," I'm not sure if that's a good or bad thing.

"Just give me a second." He takes his phone and walks out of the room. This gives me time to go through the pictures and magazines lying on his desk. One particular girl catches my eye, she looks like me in a way, even though her tone is deeper than mine. Tall, dark skin and slim legs. Her face is painted, she's wearing leather pant and a piece of skin over her boobs. I love everything about her, she's dark, bold and beautiful.

“That’s Anok Yai, do you love her?”

“She’s beautiful,” I say.

“So are you,” he says.

That’s a good compliment, I guess.

“Are you going to sign me under your agency?” I ask.

He’s staring at me, looking shocked.

“If you won’t need me to get butt-naked, my mother is a drama-queen,” I say.

“As a model?” he asks.

“Anything that I can do and make money. Modeling, working with brands and commercials,” I say.

“I’m down for it! Let’s work and make millions.”

Millions? Isn’t that an exaggeration?

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SGUQA

A ton of weight has been shed off his shoulders. He really needed to see Mela and apologize about what happened. It didn’t end well though, both him and Busizwe ended up getting escorted out of the hospital by security. He could’ve controlled his emotions, Mela didn’t need all that chaos.

He still doesn't know what her uncle did that hurt her so much. He wanted to find out and be a pair of ears the same way she was to him. It's the least he could've done after everything he did to her.

He's in his house warming up the rice that Azile brought. He's back in his mother's skirts as his father used to say. He relies on MaXulu for food because he doesn't have time to cook and he's not that good at it. He fought hard to gain independence and now it feels like he's taken ten steps back. What bothers him more than anything is that nothing solid is coming from the investigators. He's gone to Zime's grave twice to ask her to work with him in bringing her killers to justice. Surely she has the power in the other world, all he needs is a clue. He can't rule out the Mshengus, even though Busizwe is denying it. Zime didn't shoot herself and no stranger dropped from a bus and shot her, someone knows something.

"Sthembiso! Sthembiso!" - that's MaXulu's voice echoing from the door.

He looks at her; she's running to the stove screaming at him. Oh shit, the rice is burning!

"Are you trying to burn the house down?" – MaXulu.

He yawns and stretches his arms. He wasn't asleep, his mind just switched off and he zoned out.

"I was warming up the food," he says.

“More like burning it. You will eat at home.” She’s opening the windows trying to get the smoke out.

“It’s fine, I will eat any fruit and sleep.”

“Your sister is celebrating and thanking the ancestors for her first job. You should come, she came with a lot of food, you don’t have to sleep hungry.”

He already heard about the party from Hubo. He didn’t get an invite and that’s okay because he’s still mourning. The whole family should be, but Zime wasn’t that important, some people are already hosting parties.

“I’m not invited,” he says.

“You’re family, there’s no need for an invite,” MaXulu insists.

“I’m not coming and I don’t say that with any disrespect. I’m sure she left me out because she doesn’t want me there,” he says.

“No, she feels like you don’t love her. That’s why Mkhulu is the one handling it, she’s not sure if you are happy for her or if you won’t sabotage things for her because you two are always fighting and now you don’t even speak to her.”

Sabotage? Londeka gets her first job and all of sudden he’s capable of sabotaging things for her. Both her and MaXulu decided to bring a man from another house to kneel at the alter without informing him or getting his permission. Since when someone comes from another house to burn impepho? A lot of things could go wrong. They already are; he’s lost his wife, the same Londeka who’s now trusting the mkhulus she has no

relationship with has been struggling to get a job since forever, Hubo's life has no direction. Yet they're letting people in and out of the alter where all their ancestors rest.

But he's not Mkhonto, right? He can't tell them what to do, that's why they're doing all this.

"I will be fine Ma, please close the door on your way out." He lies on his back and covers his face with a cushion. This conversation is over.

MaXulu releases a sigh in frustration and leaves.

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LONDEKA

Three mothers, two present brothers and two sisters. I'm sitting at the front explaining them what my job entails. I don't think my mothers understand, they're just happy because I'm happy and won't complain about everything anymore.

"Can Skinture make my skin lighter?" MaJiyane asks.

Everyone looks at her. Dad is no more, why the hell is she wanting to become a yellow-bone?

"No," I say firmly.

"Why do you want to become a yellow-bone Ma?" Thobani asks.

"Because none of you is giving us grandchildren," MaXulu says.

That's not relevant in any way.

"So skin-lightening will bring one?" I ask.

"Who knows?" – MaDlamini.

Three of them share a look and break into laughter.

I wonder what they're up to.

"So tell us about your boyfriend," MaDlamini says looking at me. I feel everyone's eyes on me. How did the topic change so fast?

"He has a snaggletooth," – Hubo.

Unbelievable!

I've never snitched about his girlfriends. He's still sneaking some in at night and I've never told anyone.

"Does he have a car?" Azile asks.

"Yes," I say with an eye roll.

"When is he coming to pay lobola?"

I knew that was coming. I'm about to sign a three year contract with the House of Elites as a model, which means I can't be someone's wife because that would put me at risk of getting pregnant.

"We are not there yet," I say.

"Oh, luselusha?" MaXulu asks.

Her two partners in crime giggle.

“I’m still getting to know him,” I say.

“Kanti umqome ungamazi yini?” MaXulu again.

She knows what I’m trying to say, she just wants to be a comedian to her sisterwives.

Mkhulu walks in and the laughter dies. Thank God!

“Everything is ready, let’s go to the rondavel for a moment.”

We didn’t slaughter anything since we are still mourning for Zime. It’s just a small bucket of umqombothi, snacks and a variety of traditional food dedicated to the ancestors.

He starts by introducing everyone in presence to the ancestors. Sikelela is not here, he’s never been in any of these things, so I get it. But Sthembiso’s absence is felt, I think by everyone. He hasn’t stepped his foot here since I arrived, not even to greet his mothers after work. I haven’t received anything from him, not even a single text of congratulations.

Mkhulu burns impepho for me and chants the Hlongwane names and calls all our forefathers to come and protect me. The alter is such a heavy place to be at, I’m getting emotional thinking about my father. He would’ve been happy for me, I know this celebration would’ve been bigger and better. He would’ve driven me to his colleagues and old friends, put me on his lap as tall as I am and bragged to them about everything. He showed me off, that’s the

kind of a father he was; everyone knew about his princess. Even though it was obvious, it was important for him to mention that I look like him to everyone he met.

Sthembiso's presence always brings comfort, he'd occupy baba's chair and say something serious out of nowhere and everyone would sit still and listen. After mkhulu's departure nothing is normal; there's no word of gratitude from the head of the house, Azile and Sane just start dishing.

"Are you okay?" Hubo asks sitting next to me.

I nod, "Yeah."

MaXulu orders Saneli to cover one plate and take it to Sthembiso. They always dish for him, I don't think he cooks in his house, he might as well just move back in.

"So I met a girl last week," – Hubo.

He always meets them 'last week'.

"And?" My job as his sister is to listen to all his stories of hooking and breaking up.

"So we were talking via Whatsapp and exchanging pictures. I loved everything about her and we planned to meet. You know your brother-ke. I booked in a five-star hotel and all that, then ingane yomfazi dropped a bombshell on me."

When Hubo says a bombshell, it's always a bombshell.

"Ithini ingane yomfazi?" I ask curiously.

“Yathi bhakla! She transgendered to become a female.”

Whoooooooooah!

“Unamanga!” I’m in shock.

“We Londeka! So I called Sikelela asking for brotherly advice, I’m telling him that this person doesn’t have a vagina yet, she’s still raising funds to have one, and Sikelela just says become Caster Semenya bafo- run.”

I’m choking, the rice is about to come out of my nose. I taught Hubo how to gossip and now he just sounds like a graduate of Gossip.

“He says unless if ngifuna ukubrasha isende the whole night,” he says.

I can’t breathe!

“Why are you laughing that side?” MaDlamini asks.

“Old jokes,” Hubo says dismissively and switches back to the conversation.

“Then I had to go back to her and break things up. That’s when I started getting death threats, she was calling me transphobic and uncivilized. I think that was a lesson for me, I’m done being a player. Imagine if she didn’t tell me until we got into the hotel.”

Yeah, that would’ve been a disaster. But I don’t think he’s done being a player, he’s just a bit shaken.

“Is she still sending dead threats?” I ask.

“I have blocked her, but I’m worried because she has my pictures,” he says.

“What kind of pictures?”

“Indecent ones,”

What? Of course I’m going to judge him.

“Look, I was in love and I wanted her to see what she’d be missing if she didn’t come to the hotel.”

“Wow, Hubo! Just wow. You know she can release those on social media and make your indecency trend?”

“I know Londeka. Maybe we need to go to church.”

Wait a minute, buddy!

“Who is ‘we’? I don’t have sins,” I say.

“Come on, you’re also having sex before marriage. Sgcino was in your bed, we both need Jesus, we have to repent,” he says.

“No, I don’t need to repent.” He’s dragging into his problems now. If I go to church it would be just to accompany his sinful-ass. I’m not having sex with Sgcino.

Sane walks back in with the plate she left with still covered.

“Ubhuti uthe uyabonga,” she says.

My heart drops. I didn’t see this coming.

“Why is he not taking the food? He hasn’t eaten since he came

back from work,” MaXulu asks with worry.

I know why he didn’t take the food, everyone knows.

“Because it’s my food,” I say.

Why are they looking at me like that? I’m not lying.

“Firstly he didn’t come to the ceremony and now he’s turning back food. He knows what he’s doing,” I say.

“Maybe he’s not hungry, he did say he’ll have a fruit and sleep. He didn’t think you wanted him here since you called mkhulu to burn impepho so that he doesn’t sabotage your things.”

“Ma, I never said the word ‘sabotage’.” What is she talking about? I never such said such.

“What did you say?” Hubo asks.

“I don’t remember but I know I didn’t say Sthembiso was going to sabotage things and I didn’t ask Ma to go and tell him what I said,” I say.

“I didn’t go to tell him what you said, I went to his house to invite him since you didn’t see the need to, and then I had to explain to him why mkhulu was coming to burn impepho instead of him,” MaXulu says defensively.

“I didn’t invite anyone but everyone is here. If you’re family and you hear that someone in the family is hosting a ceremony you make yourself available, that’s it.” I can’t believe he wanted a special invite!

“Can we all just calm down?” – Hubo.

“Yeah, Sthembiso not eating the food doesn’t mean all of us aren’t eating it. It’s still a celebration, right?” She’s looking at me and expecting me to relax after what she did. Yes, Sthembiso and I are not getting along, but I don’t need someone running to him and telling him everything I’m saying. Now it looks like I’m accusing him of things.

“I’m going to bed,” I stand and take my food to the fridge.

“Londeka!” I don’t know which one is screaming my name.

I’ve been holding tears through the whole ceremony, now I have the opportunity to cry as much as I can. I can mourn my father, Zime and my relationship with my brother.

SIKELELA

CHAPTER 27

SIKELELA

He's home, his mood is lighter than usual. He's watching his mother slicing the pumpkin that 'has lot of sugar', apparently he's going to love it even though he naturally doesn't love pumpkin.

"Do you perhaps have MaNtuli's new number? The old one doesn't go through anymore," – Cebile asks.

She just had to spoil his mood!

"No, I don't have it," he says with a bit of irritation.

"I'm not going to talk about her," she says. "But I just want to know what your plan is. You're approaching 30, this should be the stage where you iron out your life and settle down with someone. Because trust me, you don't want it to be too late."

"You approached your 30s and even passed them without settling down," he shrugs.

"Because your father was an asshole!"

He chuckles. He's heard this his whole life.

"Was he the only man?" he asks.

"He messed me up and killed chances of other men. And I didn't want you to have a stepfather."

“I want a stepfather,” he says unexpectedly.

Cebile freezes, that’s unlike her son. It’s unlike any son to want a man in their mother’s lives.

“My heart was broken too but here I am, a few months later willing to give love another chance. You don’t have to marry anyone, just date and live your life,” Sikelela says.

“You’re going to accept a man you don’t know?” She’s still in disbelief.

“If he likes you and you like him back, I’ll gladly accept him.”

“Wow, okay.” This is something she has to sit down and think about. There’s no one in particular, she’d have to start turning her head to whistles and give out her number.

“Earlier today I got a text from Sguqa,” he says.

“Who? Sthembiso?” That’s who she knows.

Sikelela chuckles, “Yes, him.”

“What was he saying?”

“He wasn’t saying anything in particular, just trying to find comfort, I guess. I don’t think he’s okay yazi.”

“He lost his wife, he can’t be okay,” Cebile says.

“It’s deeper than him losing his wife. You know his mothers didn’t love his wife, right?”

Cebile’s eyes widen, “Why?”

“I don’t know, but they didn’t. So they were living together and only going to the main homestead when necessary. Now that she’s dead it’s like a relief to most people, I don’t think they’re looking at the bigger picture that he actually lost the love of his life and they need to check on him regularly.”

“So Mkhonto’s wives weren’t that different from him?” she says clapping her hands and breaking a chuckle. No wonder they allowed him to be a whore, they all have evil hearts.

“So I asked him to come here later today. Just to breathe different air and get out of the house,” Sikelela says.

Cebile’s eyes pop out, “And you didn’t see the need to let me know?”

“You don’t want him here?” Sikelela raises his eyebrow.

“I have nothing against Sthembiso and I sympathize with him for losing his wife. But you should’ve given me heads-up so that I can prepare nice dinner,” she says.

“He will eat what we eat; he’s no spoilt-brat.”

“I wish I could say that about my son,” Cebile says.

He chuckles, “I’m not a spoilt-brat either, I’m about to eat sliced pumpkin.”

“That you don’t want to eat- say it.”

“Let me leave before I get more accusations.” He gets off the chair and leaves his mother laughing.

This is one of those few moments where they’re mother and son

and not arguing about anything. He's going to the tuck-shop to get airtime, later he'll be hanging out with Sguqa and not Hubo for a change.

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CEBILE

She's seen him around, he's the only child of Mkhonto beside Sikelela that she knows. She met him as a child, he was an adorable little boy, Mkhonto couldn't stop gushing over him, and she fell in love with him too. Her first time bathing a child, dressing him up and putting him in bed was with him. MaXulu probably didn't know, Cebile was just a side-chick. She loved how Mkhonto loved his son; he was the cutest dad ever. Maybe that's why she was okay giving up her virginity to him. There was a side of him that only Sthembiso uncovered. It was sweet, affectionate and protective.

He takes his cap off and greets, shortly before Sikelela offers him a seat. He's grown; fit as a fiddle with brawny arms. He's still that gently-mannered boy though, when their eyes meet for the first time in decades Cebile smiles, he drops his eyes shyly.

"I've seen you around," she says breaking the ice.

He seems shocked, he brushes his head and stutters; "Really? I'm

sorry, I must've...I must've..."

She smiles and waves him off, "You don't remember me, obviously. You were a kid when I met you."

"I do remember you," he says.

Sikelela is shocked just as his mother. Wasn't he little when his father brought him to Cebile?

"You looked like this," he says.

Cebile chuckles, "You mean I haven't aged?"

"Yes, you still look the same. Mkhonto had your picture in his safe," he says.

There's a moment of silence.

Nobody was ready for that, not even Sikelela. He, for one, knows how much his mother loathes that name, now to think he had her picture in his safe the whole time!

"You called him Mkhonto?" Cebile asks, she's trying to ignore the sharp pain that throbbed in her heart when Sthembiso revealed that Mkhonto had her picture.

"No, I called him dad," Sthembiso says.

"Oh, I see."

Awkward!!!

Sikelela clears his throat, "I want to take him to Ezikhrebheni."

"Not before you eat, and please don't come back late. You know

you have enemies,” Cebile warns.

Sthembiso’s brows furrow, he turns his eyes to Sikelela.

“You have enemies?”

Sikelela shrugs, “Not really, just people who can’t accept that I once beat them and I’d do it again should they step on my toes.”

“You’re not beating anyone!” Cebile lashes out.

He chuckles, “I didn’t say I’m going to beat anyone, I said I’d...”

“Whatever you said, it’s not happening. Your uncle ruined you yazi, if it wasn’t for him you’d have something that you excel in that is not violence.”

“Maybe not, he was going to turn this way anyway,” Sthembiso murmurs. He knows the truth now, whether Sikelela was shipped to India and named Suresh Naidoo, he was still going to be Mkhonto’s son.

“Bafo, I will go and put my phone in the charger before...” He looks at his mother, she’s staring right back at him with a sharp look and her hand on the hip. Well, he doesn’t say it but she’s dramatic AF, he walks out laughing.

Cebile shakes her head, “Why is he always smiling these days? I hope it’s not that girlfriend of his who’s said to be two times older than me.”

She grabs their plates and starts dishing. Even though it was short-notice but she managed to cook; pap, creamy spinach, roast potato salad, chakalaka and chicken.

"I know how much you eat," she says dishing Sthembiso's plate a mountain of pap. "Your father would eat and leave half of his food for you to eat after you were done with yours because you eat for Africa."

"He must've been kind back in the days," he says.

Cebile chuckles, "Yeah, I guess. Or maybe he was only kind to you because you were his son. He wasn't kind to other people like myself."

"I don't remember him being kind to me."

"How so?" Cebile frowns.

"It's not something I'd like to talk about," he says.

Cebile hands him the plate and starts dishing Sikelela's. "Maybe things changed, but what I wanted for Sikelela was at least half of the love he gave you. I had never seen a man loving his son like that, a black man!"

Maybe it's his memory that's blurry. "How did he love me?" he asks.

"The first thing your father told me after he told me his name was that he had a son and he was his world. Exactly like that. Then we talked, I got to hear all about you and his feelings for me, which were just bullshit."

Well, he can't comment on that even though he has a different opinion.

"And I think you became everything he wished you to be. You are

in the family business, you got married and built your own house. You look good, you take care of yourself," she adds.

"Maybe that was not good enough, he wanted more and I couldn't give him," he says.

"What makes you think he wanted more?"

"Because we disagreed a lot, I don't know if I was the one too stubborn or it was him, but we drifted apart. I didn't agree with how he did certain things, and that gave me a couple of bad remarks from him." He pauses and takes a sharp breath, "Some things he said were hurtful, it's still hard for me to forgive him. He never said sorry and the things he said came from a certain place, he didn't just create them in those moments."

"What did he say?" She's looking at him like she's going to dig Mkhonto up once she finds out and whip his ass.

Sthembiso exhales heavily, "He's dead, there's no need for me to cry anymore. He said a lot of things and I know I'm none of them. I may have turned out differently from what he envisioned, but I'm happy. Well, at least I was happy."

"I can't imagine what you feel losing someone so close to you. Are the police finding any leads?" she asks.

"Not yet and that's what driving me crazy. Looking back at the timeline of our love story I've realized a lot of things that I did wrong. A lot of times that I failed to protect her. Now it feels like I'm still failing her even in death, on the other hand I have to deal with family drama."

“Is the family at least supportive?” Cebile asks.

“No, but when it comes to me I’m used to it.” He exhales heavily, “And there’s a big issue of me and my sister not getting along. We grew up in one house but we were raised differently.”

“I suppose they were harder on you since you’re a boy and you’re black. Angithi boys are born with the world on their shoulders if they’re black and living in Africa.”

Sthembiso chuckles, maybe that’s true.

“Well, at home it was just me. Others proved themselves once or twice but I had to prove myself everyday. What I did on daily basis was only praised when others did it. That made me strong, I think. Now my expectations are limited when it comes to people; I don’t expect anything from anyone. So I get angry when people, like Londeka, expect more from me without appreciating the little I’ve done for them. They learned that from their father, I guess.”

“How old is she?” Cebile asks.

“Twenty-five, you’ll probably see her on TV, she looks like Sikelela,” he says.

“Oh, Daddy’s photocopy.”

“And favorite,” he adds.

Cebile chuckles, “Lucky for her! At least looking like Mkhonto paid off, unlike Sikelela who’s stuck with his image for life.”

“Did he say anything to you at all?” Cebile was the only other woman his father introduced him too. He loved Cebile, she was

chosen to carry the generational seed of the Hlongwanes. It was a different seed, Mkhonto had been one too, it was more of a curse than a blessing. So he couldn't marry Cebile, he had to keep Sikelela far from the Hlongwanes and everything that had to do with them. He was better a fatherless son than a beast. But it didn't work out as he had hoped, did it?

Cebile shakes her head, "No, he didn't say anything. He saw Sikelela once and bought him a packet of chips and that was the last time we saw him."

Sthembiso nods slowly; he's trying to connect the dots and make sense of it. His father was still young, maybe he could've involved Cebile and explained what was going on. He messed up and unfortunately now he's dead, this cannot be reversed or amended.

"Maybe your sister was his favorite because he knew he had dumped a child that looked exactly like her. A part of him must've felt guilty, Sikelela was just an innocent child yearning for his father, men are dogs," Cebile says.

That makes sense!

"Now that you mention it I do remember the extra things he'd do for Londeka, just her alone. With Thobani I understood because he was the youngest, but even with him the love never measured up to the love he gave Londeka. He always wanted to know where Londeka was, he was obsessed with her whereabouts and we thought it was because she was the only girl before the younger two. But he was actually scared of losing her because she filled a certain void." Obviously he didn't know all this, his father never

told him about Sikelela. MaXulu must've known what was happening because she always jumped in to comfort Sthembiso, she never called out the favoritism.

"I'm sure it must've hit your sister the hardest when he died," Cebile says.

"Yeah, I guess," he shrugs.

Cebile raises her eyebrow, "Hhayi-bo, haven't you asked her how she's doing?"

"No, we don't ask each other that," he says.

"Well, if you don't there will be another man who will ask her and she will find comfort in him for the wrong reasons. I don't have one but I know girl children are more emotional than boys, you described her as someone who had a special attachment to your father. That's not going to automatically fade away because he's dead, if anything it's going to leave a gap and she will go out to try and fill that gap if nobody fills it at home," Cebile says.

He sighs heavily and continues to eat silently. He's never had anyone talking to him the way Cebile does. She talks to him like he's a child, which isn't something any of his mothers ever does. Maybe she still sees him as that little boy. He's comfortable with that, having an elder to talk to, someone who's not taking any side or questioning his decision-making.

Sikelela walks back in, he's been gone for quite a long while. Sthembiso is almost done eating, they'd forgotten about him.

"Am I disturbing?" he asks before entering.

They just look at him.

He walks in, grabs his plate and sits. He knew bringing Sthembiso to his mother who swallowed a radio would help in a way. He's not always a fan of his mother's talkative nature but he knows it can be thereupic.

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VUMO

He's cursing from the gate, today is the day she hates more than the scar behind her neck; Friday. Mthoko is drunk, that's his Friday routine. He's going to remind her how he saved her from the dump, took her in with the bustard she's carrying and made her a better woman. That's not far from the truth, he did all that. Being here is better than where her mother lives with Qambi. A drunk Mthoko is better than her church-going uncle who's turned his own sister into his wife's slave and uses every chance he gets to remind his niece, Qambi, of her past.

He kicks the door open and staggers in.

"You're sleeping, that's all you know."

She keeps quiet. Better days are coming; he's not like this when he's not drunk.

"Uyizala nini lento yakho?" (When are you giving birth to that thing of yours)

“Soon,” she’s still a few months away but this is the right answer.

“Your soon better be sooner, I’m tired of having a girlfriend who look like a whale. You know how much I love you, but I can’t even go out with you because your nose look like a frog.” When he says things like this sometimes she wishes she had aborted the baby right after Sikelela denied it. Maybe Mthoko would’ve loved her more, because as her stomach grows it feels like there’s a drift in their relationship.

“I’m hungry,” he staggers towards the stove and takes off the pot lid. “I hope awufakanga ipoison la, sfebe.”

He pours the stew in rice pot and eats using his hand. Luckily today she dished her food and kept it aside; she knows this bad habit of his.

He’s licking the gravy on his fingers and coming to the bed. She has to share a bed with this person, there’s nowhere she can go.

“Give me a kiss,” he demands lowering his stinking mouth to her. If she refuses chaos will break and the last thing she needs is neighbors coming to her rescue every Friday night.

“I hope you didn’t give anyone my pussy,” he’s smiling and touching her underwear. Mthoko is a troubled, handsome young man making ends-meet. They met shortly after Ntuli kicked them out of the homestead in Hlabathini, she was honest about her condition and he accepted her with all the baggage she came with. His only problem is alcohol, he always apologizes and promises

to do better, only to repeat his behavior on his next pay-day.

“Mthoko you’re touching me with dirty hands,” she whispers trying to stop his gravy-covered hand from touching her cookie.

“These dirty hands feed you, sfebe.”

“I’m talking about the food all over your hand. I cooked with pepper, you’re going to hurt me.”

He frowns and then breaks into laughter.

“Okay, please wipe my hands-ke, be a useful woman for once,” he says.

Heavy sigh!

She grabs a towel and wet it with water and wipes his hand. He grabs her thigh and sneaks his finger in her core. He’s a beast when drunk, also a bit aggressive and loud.

She just has to close her eyes and shut down her emotions and let him do as he pleases. She has a roof over his head, all the necessities she’ll need when she gives birth and she never goes to bed hungry.

That’s the bigger picture.

SIKELELA

CHAPTER 28

LONDEKA

Today I'm taking a leap of faith and travelling with Sgcino to Mpofana. I've never been there before but from what I hear fun will be had. His cousin's bride-to-be is sending gifts to acknowledge that her family received lobola cows; they're burying the trotters' prints- ingqibamasondo. Hearing that the place is a rural village I tried to dress suitably. There's a chance of the car breaking down in the middle of the road, most rural villages of Zululand have no good roads, I wore flat sandals just in case I need to walk by foot.

Today he's the one taking forever to come out of the house, I've been waiting in the car for five minutes and twenty-six seconds, still counting. I wonder what's hard about putting on a trouser, slipping on the T-shirt and lotioning your face. Men only need a minute to get ready.

His phone rings twice, he answers and tells me he's locking the door before I yell. I will count to five...

Thanks to his lucky stars, he's here before I even blink twice. He's carrying a bag of goodies and coolerbox. How far is Mpofana again?

“I don’t want any problems on the road,” he says fastening the seat belt.

“I’m a good passenger,” I say.

His light chuckle doesn’t show much belief. I fasten my own seatbelt as he drives out and mentally prepare myself for his horrible playlist.

I may have underestimated a drive to Mpofana, it was almost two hours on the road. I requested two pee breaks and one for selfies when we passed a herd of donkeys. I’m not an animal person but right now I’m not just Londeka the girl from Mashoba, I’m a social media figure, some things are cool for social updates.

We have finally arrived in Mpofana. It’s a rural village like Mashoba, with better infrastructure and most modernly-built homes.

It looks like we are a bit late, the yard is already overcrowded, women are ululating and dancing in the yard.

Sgcino is acknowledged by a group of young men, they recite a couple of names I don’t know and he gives them salutes. I can feel his energy, his spirit is already with other men, not me. But he can’t just dump me in the yard, I don’t know anyone here, so he walks with me past them.

We bump into a full-figured woman with a mahawk haircut. I can’t

help but notice the disappointment on her face as her eyes land on me.

“Bhuti,” she says to Sgcino with a gentle smile.

“Manto, I’m lucky to bump into you. Can you please take care of my partner? I want to see amadoda outside.” I should’ve known this would be this disorganized, he’s going to be with his cousins and I’ll be hanging out with strangers. I can see behind the woman’s smile, she’s not happy about me at all.

Her eyes travel from my face down to my legs. “Is she...?”

“Yes, she’s my girlfriend,” Sgcino’s answer cuts her short.

She smiles comically and nods.

“Nice to meet you, I’m Manto, his cousin,” she extends her hand.

I shake it and quickly pull back my hand.

“Let’s go to the kitchen,” she says.

I turn my head to Sgcino, he’s staring at me with his eyebrow slightly cocked up.

“Uzosala angithi?” His tone is begging. It doesn’t sound like he would appreciate no for an answer.

Do I have a choice?

“Yeah,” I say with a shrug.

He gives the car keys and his phone to me.

“I will be here in the yard,” he says, plants a soft kiss on my cheek

and leaves.

Deep breath! I turn to Manto, her eyes are flickering with anger but she quickly covers it up with a weak smile.

“Let’s go.”

I follow her, we enter the kitchen, there are several other ladies busy with food preparation.

“This is...” She doesn’t know my name, she looks at me for rescue.

“Londeka Hlongwane,” I say.

“What?!” Someone exclaims.

I’m confused. Is there anything wrong with...gosh, I hope Hubo is not known this side! Sometimes I inherit his enemies.

“The bride is a Ngwane,” another one explains. There’s a light laughter as I release a huge sigh of relief.

“You can’t be in the kitchen, you’re our in-law,” the girl says.

“She can,” Manto says.

Everyone looks at her curiously.

“She’s sleeping with Sgcino, she’s here with him.”

I’m sleeping with Sgcino? Mina?

“She’s Sgcino’s girlfriend?” they ask simultaneously. I think she said ‘sleeping with’ on purpose, just to degrade me.

I hate being a center of attention in situations like this, everyone is staring at me and I don't know whether to explain myself or let Madam-Know-It-All continue with her theory.

"Yes, that's why Vuyo didn't come, because he was coming with her," she says.

"Oh," they all look disappointed now.

I'm not sure whether to continue standing here like a statue or walk out and try to find Sgcino.

Another one clears her throat, "She should be with the Ngwanes, even if she's Sgcino's girlfriend, she's not allowed in the kitchen yet."

The Hlongwanes and Ngwanes are one clan, however I don't know the Ngwanes that are here, they're from this village and I'm from Mashoba. But I'm relieved and happy to be leaving the gossip-squad in the kitchen.

A matured dark-skinned maiden gets me from the door and leads me inside the rondavel where the Ngwanes are.

"I'm Zandile Ngwane," she introduces herself.

"Londeka Hlongwane from Mashoba," I say.

"I'm glad you're joining us, some couldn't make it, you know people and canceling on last minute."

The Ngwanes make me feel comfortable. I sit with Zandile and her friend, Thembi. There's a group of maidens in traditional wear

singing and dancing competitively.

“So you’re a girlfriend here?” Thembi seems to be nosy.

“Yes, I think my boyfriend is the groom’s cousin.”

“You think?” she frowns and chuckles.

“Our relationship is still new.”

“And he’s already bringing you to family functions? He’s going to marry you, whatever it is that you fed him don’t lose the contact of your supplier,” she says.

Zandile laughs, “Stop! Not everyone uses love potion to keep a man, stop corrupting my sister, please.”

“Uthando luyaqiniswa and that’s a fact,” Thembi persists.

“Yes, you strengthen it by being submissive and faithful to your man,” Zandile argues.

I don’t agree with both of them and strangely today I’m not up for any debate.

“If that was real a recipe to keep a man, how many would you have kept by now Zandile?”

It’s getting hot in here!

“Not every man is worth being kept, you’d know that if you hadn’t been stuck with one man since high school.”

“I don’t hop from dick to dick.”

“Well, he jumps from pussy to pussy and you run from nyanga to

nyanga trying to keep him on leash.”

They're toxic friends, I can't believe they're exchanging all these nasty words so calmly and pretending as if they're not hateful towards one another.

One of the phones in my hand vibrates. I check mine, there's nothing. It's Sgcino's, a call from Vuyo and I'm not sure what to do with it. I let it ring until she drops and sends a text message:
NDABEZITHA PLEASE CALL ME BACK AS SOON AS YOU CAN

He said he granted her freedom to contact him should she need anything. But I'm not happy with it knowing that his family and relatives want her for him. She's in his life as much as I am, do I know him well enough to trust another woman with him?

“Are you okay mntase?” Zandile asks.

Deep breath! I nod and fake a smile. I don't know why this man gave me his phone knowing very well that he receives calls from women.

I'm feeling down, I don't even enjoy the ceremony as it continues. I help Zandile distribute the gifts, I'm the tallest and she's the oldest in the house, so it made sense that the two of us help each other. Shortly after gifts' distribution refreshments are served, my plate and Zandile's are covered because we are the oldest, I guess. But I'm not comfortable with the arrangement, especially after the cold welcome I got from Sgcino's cousins. As snobbish

as it may look, I don't eat the food, I go to the car outside and have the snacks Sgcino bought me. He's nowhere to be seen, I don't have the option to call him because his phone is with me. I return back to the rondavel with a bottle of water. I'm not putting anything they're serving in my mouth.

A group of men enter shortly after I've walked in. I spot Sgcino between them and feel a bit relieved. Girls are singing louder and twerking as they dance. I've been there, done that and had my few shenanigans with men in ceremonies like this.

It's time for 'indishi kamakoti', the most exciting part of the day, but my eyes are on the watch. It's getting very late, almost 8pm, and I still have to drive with a ghost-whispering man to Durban.

"With this R50 I want the short-hair girl sitting by the door to come and sit on my lap," a man requests throwing two R20 notes and one R10 inside the metal basin placed at the center.

I only realize when everyone's eyes turn to me that he's talking about me. I'm the short-hair girl sitting by the door. Lord, I'm too old to be playing these games.

"Go!" Thembi whispers with a giggle.

The man is staring at me, he's wearing a cap low to his forehead so I can't see the rest of his face.

He opens his wallet and pulls another note. "I'm adding another R50, I want her to pour me umqombothi in a cup as well."

Why did I agree to come here? And why is Sgcino sitting there with his back leaning against the wall and not protesting this madness?

“Go, you’ll come back after a minute,” Zandile says.

All Sgcino has to do is oppose this with a bigger amount. What is his fuckin’ problem? I have to kneel and scan umqombothi in a cup and go kneel in front of that man and serve him. That’s not all, after he’s done drinking he wants me to sit on his lap.

He doesn’t drink, he puts the cup aside and pulls me to his lap. Thembi is laughing like a hyena. There’s still no emotion or movement from my beloved boyfriend on the other side. Maybe I don’t mean that much, he doesn’t really care.

The man wraps his arm around my waist and speaks closely to my ear. The singing has resumed, the attention has shifted from us granting him freedom to express whatever he called me here for.

“My name is Nqabayezwe Mhlongo. I saw you going to the car outside and you stole my heart. What should I call you?”

“Londeka Hlongwane,” I say.

“Oh, MaSangweni.” His voice rumbles and sends tingles all over my body.

My eyes randomly lock with a man leaning his back against the wall and staring at me menacingly. I don’t know how long he’s

been staring at us, his stare sends a cold chill down my spine. He had an option to protest this, it's just a game, I don't know why he's now looking at me like that.

"I have to go," I tell Nqabayezwe.

"I'm happy to meet you, uyezwa?" he continues to whisper against my ear, his arm is still around my waist, he's not willing to let me go and I'm getting uncomfortably feeling his rod under my butt.

"Nice to meet you too," I say removing his arm from me.

"I'm still going to see you, right?"

Fake a smile, Londeka.

"Maybe," I say.

He lets me go, I go back to my spot. There's a man sitting next to Zandile now, they're talking softly you can't hear a thing they're saying.

"With this R100 I want to choose a girl who's going to help me take off my jacket." This is the most ridiculous one. It's a short man wearing umblaselo and white sneakers. His eyes are still searching around the house. They land on me and stay longer...I'm holding my breath, I'm already tired, I'm not going to get a cent for participating in this, all the money will go to the bride.

"Ubukeka unenkani nje," he says to me.

How do I look stubborn? How do you tell that someone is stubborn by just looking at them?

Thembi and her stupid giggles!

“Please come,” he says looking at me and starts a song.

I look at Sgcino. Again, he’s not backing me up.

Is he broke or what? This doesn’t make any sense.

I’m the center of attention again going to another man and helping him take off his jacket. It ends with him shaking my hand firmly, refusing to let me go for a minute and begging for my number. I do what every girl does; changing the last digit.

Manto steps forward waving R50 in the air.

She’s a good singer, I must say.

“I don’t have millions but with this R50 of mine I’d like to choose a beautiful girl for my cousin, Sgcino.”

Oh, woowow! She’s coming for my jugular, all guns out. I didn’t see this one coming.

She picks a light-skinned girl with a Bob-cut. She looks younger than me even though she’s big-boned, she’s already blushing as Manto forces her to stand up.

“Come and sit next to him, he doesn’t bite,” Manto says pulling her.

Sgcino finally gets his ass off the floor. I’m not sure what he plans on doing but I pray this game doesn’t cost us our relationship. He talks to the guy in charge of indishi and gives him a couple of notes and says something to him.

“Bopha!” the guy says stopping the singing. They pause immediately. “This R100 is for you my sister, bafo says you you can return to your seat and enjoy yourself with other ladies because he’s taken.”

So he’s turning down Manto’s girlfriend offer and Manto looks like she’s praying for the floor to open up and swallow her. Are we allowed to do vosho here? I meeeeean, ra-ta-ta-ta!

“And this R200 is to say hello to the bride.” My man is the sweetest.

Oh there’s a last one.

“This other R100 is for Londeka to choose a sisterwife of her choice from these beautiful maidens.”

What the fuck? Is Sgcino kidding me right now.

Our eyes lock, he doesn’t show any emotion. I hate that stupid plain face of his, he didn’t oppose when men took turns with me and now he wants me to choose a girl I want to share him with.

“If Londeka doesn’t want to do that she has to go to the car and stay there until the ceremony is over.” Wow, he brought me here to do this.

“Just choose the ugliest one,” Zandile whispers.

I’m trying hard not to laugh. I look around, I can’t say people are ugly, I’m in no position. Not to mention that I’d obviously mind sharing my man with anyone regardless of how they look.

“I will go to the car,” I tell her.

“But you....”

“Don’t worry, I’ll be fine.”

She nods uneasily.

I take two steps towards the door, then someone stops me. It’s Nqabayezwe, the one who made me sit on his lap.

“R200, Londeka is not going anywhere!” he says.

Sgcino stands, so does two guys who’ve been sitting with him, they’re his cousins.

“Bafo, I’m not going to ask you with any money to leave my woman alone. I’m asking you free of charge.” I’ve never heard this tone from him. I don’t like it, I come from a family of power rangers, I don’t want a fighting boyfriend to add in that toxicity. Fights do break at times like these. I don’t want to be that girl who caused men to fight, I walk out and leave the mayhem behind.

Minutes later Sgcino is walking towards the car. His cousins are accompanying him, they shake his hand before walking back and leaving him opening the car door. He doesn’t say anything, he takes the keys and starts the car. A lot has happened today, from Vuyo’s call to the events that have led to this moment, I think we have a lot to hatch out before we get all lovey-dovey, a silent drive is a way to go.

The road is better than I thought, there are few farms nearby. I don’t know why he’s driving this slowly, ours is the only car on the

road, we are almost at the bridge. It's a tall girder bridge with a lot of history behind it, I heard. I'm not a fan of height though, when he suddenly slows down I raise my eyebrows.

"Sgcino!" I'm anxious.

He doesn't look at me. His eyes are on the road, his foot is still on the accelerator, the car moves until we are at the end of the bridge. Then he freezes.

His body completely goes rigid.

I keep calling his name and he's not granting me even a glance. I'm not sure if this is about that man who made me sit on his lap or about...

His body moves. He opens the door, alarm bells set off in my head, this is my worst nightmare. He's getting out of the car, we are near the bushes on the side of the river, it's around 9pm at night and it's foul dark with no street lights.

"Sgcino where are you going?" My voice is shaky. I don't know if he still knows me at this moment or he's completely zoned out.

He's going under the bridge, sliding through thick grass like a robot. I have to keep this at the back of my mind, whatever my next step is- Do Not Drive! His wife tried escaping with the car and she died. My family don't even know that I'm here, imagine them having to fetch my dead body here.

There's a bush in front of me, the only option I have is running by foot and try to find my way back to his cousin's.

I think I have lost direction, not just it alone but my other shoe as well. I don't know where I am or where I'm going, all I'm praying for is that Sgcino and his ghosts don't track me down and I bump into a house soon.

I don't bump into any house but I bump into a woman. I let out a shrill scream as she comes closer to me, she takes two steps back. I don't know if she's a real person or a ghost, at this point I'm not sure about anything.

"Hey nana, what's wrong?"

That's not a ghost accent, right? I don't think there's any dead gang that would call a young girl 'nana'.

"I need help," I say in a shaky voice.

"Are you in danger? Is someone chasing you? Where are you from? Do you know anyone around here?"

Can she just slow down with 21 questions?

I need to breathe for a minute.

(Kindly note that Ungodly Hour will be distributed tomorrow evening. If anyone wants to communicate with me please use my email as I currently don't have access to my business Whatsapp)

SIKELELA

CHAPTER 29

SIKELELA

A close source has told him that Mela is being discharged today and he can be squeezed in to see her in the morning after check-ups. He got up and jumped into bath right away. He has to get her number so that they can communicate after she's gotten out of the hospital. If he doesn't get it today he may never see her again and that's just not an option. He dresses up in multi-pocket camouflage joggers, navy sweatshirt and the Air Jordan sneakers he bought to match Vumo's on Valentine's Day. He heads out with his phone and wallet in the pocket.

Msizi said he should be there before 10, he still has to take two taxis to get to the hospital. Luckily he doesn't stand long before he gets one taking him to town.

He beats Msizi's time by 10 minutes. He arrives before time and sits at the gate to pass time.

"You really like this girl, huh?" Msizi enquires with a chuckle.

"Yes, I like her," he nods.

"What about MaNtuli?" He cannot close the Vumo chapter in his life, can he? She will always be a part of his story, people will always ask him about her even a decade later.

“I don’t know where she is. We broke up and moved on with our lives,” he says with a hint of irritation.

Msizi opens a pocket of peanuts and throws a few in his mouth.

“There was something about you and her, you know that Romeo and Juliet kind of love. You two were the foundation for the conception of love to many of us. The kind of love that makes you want to take a chair and watch. I never thought there’d be anything that would come between you two, the love you shared was the purest. From the day she brought ucu to your home, the most-wanted girl in the village choosing a boy who many saw as nobody. How confidently she’d walk with you, talk about you and...”

“Msizi, please stop!” He’s trying to move on, he doesn’t want to hear these things.

“So you don’t think about the good times you two shared?” Msizi penetrates him with a stare.

He swallows and takes a deep breath. “Well, not everyday.”

“If she hadn’t fallen pregnant, would you have forgiven her?”

“I don’t know what I would have done Msizi. It really didn’t matter whether she was a virgin or not, whether she had a child or not, before our relationship, I loved her for who she was. But lying in the relationship and falling pregnant while she was claiming to be in love with me, that was a deal-breaker.”

“I hear you ndoda. So what’s the plan with the Mshengu girl? I’ve seen a couple of males coming to check on her.”

Sikelela chuckles, "Just shooting my shot, if I win then I will mark my territory."

"I hope marking your territory doesn't mean beating anyone," Msizi says.

They both laugh.

Msizi receives an alert from the inside and finally permits him to go in for a few minutes. Today he came with no gifts, it was a short-notice, he walks in empty-handedly.

She's looking fresh, active and beautiful. She's not wearing the hospital gown anymore, she's in a cute lilac sundress and a headwrap that just turns him on.

"MaMshengu," he can't take his eyes off her.

Mela is still trying to figure out how he keeps visiting at odd hours. Of course he looks like a humble guy and she doesn't mind his company.

"Hey Sikelela, I didn't expect to see you today."

"Aw, when did you expect me?"

She smiles; that question is too ambiguous.

"Just not this morning but I'm glad you're here."

His eyes glitter with hope, she's glad he came, that's something, right?

"They're discharging me today," she tells him.

“Oh really? That’s awesome.” He has to be surprised, she can’t know about how sneaky he’s been to gain access to these visits.

“Yes, I’m well now.”

“You look well, and beautiful too.”

She smiles, “Thank you, so what brings you here today?”

“Nothing has changed Melamina, what brought me here the first day is what has brought me here again. Now I can’t even sleep at night.”

She laughs, “You see me in your dreams, right?”

“Yes,” he nods with a light chuckle.

“You, men, need new lines.”

“Well, I’m not creative so I always choose to just show my love instead of singing about it.”

“I love that,” she’s smiling. There’s something she likes about him, it’s not a romantic feeling but it’s unique.

“Can I please have your number?” he asks.

“Sure,” she takes his phone and saves her number while he stares at her adoringly.

“How did you save it?”

“As Melanina, my name.”

“Did you add Dlamuka as the surname?”

She rolls her eyes and laughs.

“For real, Melamina, I need you in my life.”

“I said we will talk, you know I have someone.”

He releases a low sigh and looks at her again. He’s hurt, it doesn’t make sense but he is. She’s the first girl after Vumo that he’s ever fallen in love with, why does it have to be this complicated?

“So there’s no hope for me Melamina?” His anguished voice tears her heart apart.

“I’m not saying that,” she says guiltily.

Another deep breath!

“I guess I can’t just call you at any time, you’ll let me know when you’re okay to talk,” he says.

“Sikelela come on, you and I can be friends right?”

Friends? He chuckles and buries his face with his hands.

“If something happens it will happen,” she says looking at him desperately.

He looks up, “I love you, I don’t want to be your friend, I want to be your future husband.”

She blinks rapidly and faces up to stop the tears. She can’t give him that, her life is more complicated than he thinks.

He stands up to leave, he’s overstayed the time Msizi gave him.

“Please be well,” he says.

“You too, be okay,” she says.

He spends a minute staring at her, she can't hold his stare she's looking at her hands playing with her fingers.

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LONDEKA

Never in my wildest dreams have I ever thought I'd be waking up in a stranger's house with people camping outside to help me. I thank God for this MaMkhize woman, if it wasn't for her I don't know where I would've ended last night. I can't say I slept good but she tried to accommodate me as surprising as my sleep-over was. I didn't sleep a wink not knowing what happened Sgcino, if he was safe or not.

After taking a bath I put my clothes back on and go to MaMkhize's room and knock.

"Oh, you're ready nana," she walks out adjusting her doek. I still don't know why she lives alone, where she was going at night alone, she looks nothing over forty.

"So these are my neighbors, I called them to come and help us search for your husband," she says introducing me to men who look forced to be here. Don't ask why she's calling Sgcino my husband, we've all made up things to strangers.

"You left him at the bridge?" the one with brown eyes and unsettling aura asks.

“Yes, he got out of the car and went under the bridge. I ran off and left,” I explain.

“Okay let’s go and start looking.”

We get in their car, it’s a Porsche Macam. They seem to be well-off, they even smell expensive. I don’t know which route I took, driving to the bridge seems to be shorter today.

Seeing the car still parked at the end of the bridge gives me cold fever. What if something happened to him? What am I going to tell his family?

“Relax, he’s fine,” says the brown eyes man.

I don’t know what makes him think Sgcino is fine. We haven’t found a single trace of him.

“Don’t cry,” MaMkhize rubs my back.

I never thought I’d ever be caught in a situation like this in my life. They’ve searched under the bridge, in the car, in the bushes, he’s nowhere to be found. I can’t take the car and leave not knowing where he is, how he is wherever he is. Is he still breathing?

“Maybe you should call his family. What do you think nana?”

I only have Ntuthuko’s number, my phone is in the car, I don’t even know what I’m going to tell him. I shouldn’t have ran, I should’ve stayed in the car and waited for him. Mauve he cried for help and nobody was around to hear him.

“Londeka,”

We all turn our heads to the direction of the voice.

It's him. He looks awful but it's my love. Tears flood my face, I want to run and hug him but he still looks a bit lost.

"Are you good?" the other man asks. He's older than the brown-eyed one; slimmer and taller too.

Sgcino nods. I'm afraid he's still not looking at me even though he remembers my name. He's looking at the two men, MaMkhize has gone completely mute. I think she's scared, we didn't see him coming out of the bushes, he looks like a mess with dust all over him.

"There's a war here," he's talking to them.

They look at each and frown.

"There's no war, it ended over six years ago," the elder one argues.

"People lost lives in this river before this bridge was built. They never crossed over, they come to this river every night to continue where they left off. When you all decided to put down your weapons, you never informed them that the war was over hence they're still here fighting."

There are no frowns this time. They're staring at him, not arguing, not correcting him, just looking at him.

Finally, the one with brown eyes clears his throat and speaks,

"We did make peace with the Ngwanes but we didn't go that far. That was my mistake, I guess." He sounds guilty, like he should've known, he's to be blamed for all that.

“So what should we do?” the older one asks.

He shrugs, “We will figure it out, Busikhaya.”

Sgcino steps towards the car, I should follow him but I still need to thank these people.

He stops before the door and looks at them again. They’re still standing where they were, staring at him.

“Reconciliation is sealed with a cow. Your peace gathering should be where blood was spilled, acknowledge those who were casualties, honor them and inform them that the war is over.”

With that said he opens the passenger door and climb in.

I turn to MaMkhize, “Thank you so much Ma. You did a lot for me, I really appreciate your help.”

And the two men who left their wives in bed to come and help me look for him.

“Thank you very much,” I say.

The older one nods.

The other one is still feeling guilty, I guess.

I’m on the wheel, it seems.

He’s closing his eyes and dozing off. It’s going to be another silent drive, not that I want him to say anything, he hasn’t fully snapped out of his zone.

He was sleeping the whole journey. I made a stop at Nandos, he

doesn't even know it, I bought chicken and rolls because I don't think either one of us will be cooking.

He's dragging himself in, following me.

"Sit," I tell him.

His eyes can meet mine now, I think he's back at the Sgcino I know. I leave him lying on the couch and go to the bathroom to run a bath for him. Last night was scary but I think I understand him a little bit now.

"Your bath is ready. Do I need to add anything?" I don't know his bath salts.

He looks a bit surprised.

"No, thank you," he says.

"Okay then, your clothes are on the bed, I'll be in the kitchen

" More shock on his face. I know I'm a bit dramatic but I'm a genuine person and I'm caring. I know he needs someone around him right now. I don't think what he does is easy it must be emotionally and spiritually draining.

I have warmed the chicken and made some salad to go with. I leave his plate on the coffee-table and go back to the kitchen to call home before they start thinking the Mshengus kidnapped me.

There's a text that was sent about an hour ago from someone I haven't talked to in a very long time. I'm scared to open it, I don't what she's saying, I've been wanting to text her for a very long

time.

I count to five and then click the 'read' button.

****HEY LONDEKA, I'VE BEEN DISCHARGED FROM THE HOSPITAL****

Why is Mela telling me? Is she not mad that I sold her out to my brother? I don't know how to respond, I still need a chance to explain myself to her.

****I WILL SEE YOU SOON**** - I send a reply.

I'm a bit relieved to hear from her because I didn't know where I was going to start. I walk back to the lounge and find him sitting with an empty plate on his lap. I was gone for literally a minute!

"Hey," I say taking a seat on the other couch. Things have never been so weird between us.

"I thought you've left," he says.

I don't know what he's implying by saying that. Our eyes lock randomly, I can't tell what he's going through. His eyes are sunk back in, he looks tired but determined to sit.

"You are not leaving?" he asks.

"Maybe later, it will depend on how you are."

There's a moment of silence...

"You're not leaving?" Is this not the question I just answered? Or he means leaving the relationship?

"No, I'm not leaving," I say.

“Are you not scared?”

I shake my head, “Not anymore.”

He releases a deep breath and signals me to come to him.

I sit on his lap, he pulls my hand and kisses it.

“Thank you for being there and for not making a hasty dangerous decision,” he says.

Running by foot and following a woman I didn’t know was a dangerous decision but at least I didn’t try to speed off with the car.

“Where did you sleep?” I ask him.

“I don’t know,” he says.

Strange!

“What do you want to do right now? Do you want to sleep? To go outside and get some fresh air?”

“I just want you to kiss me,” he says.

I roll my eyes, “After you allowed men to make me do crazy things yesterday. I thought you didn’t care about me that much.”

“Sitting by the door meant that you’re taken, all you had to do was say no, but you didn’t. You went on to sit on that disrespectful fool’s lap and allowed him to touch you.”

“Allowed?” I raise my eyebrow.

“Or maybe you act single because I haven’t done anything to you?”

He's not joking.

How was it my fault though?

"I'm sorry but you also asked me to choose a sisterwife. Is that what you want? A polygamy? Is that why Vuyo was calling you?" I ask.

"The only thing I want Londeka is your kiss and to sit with you like this the whole day," he says.

I don't know how he's able to annoy me, charm me and make me wet all in less than five minutes.

SIKELELA

CHAPTER 30

VUMO

Fridays, a part of her is always mentally prepared, but when it actually happens she always realizes how difficult surviving the drunk Mthoko is. A kick almost landed on her stomach, if she didn't jump today would've been another story. They fought because she denied him sex, according to the drunk him, he's entitled to her body as long as he takes care of her. It spiraled out of control, he ended up putting his hands on her. Luckily she was able to protect her tummy, but not her face.

She takes the ice, sits on the bed with blanket over her chest and nurses her bruises. Mthoko is nowhere to be seen, that's always his solution; running. He's going to come back later and mumble his apologies, then everything will be fine, as always.

A text comes through, she grunts in agony before checking it. Qambi wants to know if she's in the house, she's around and wants to see her. They've talked about this, Vumo doesn't want her family involved in her relationship with Mthoko. They were involved in her previous relationship, look where that ended!

Before she can lie and say she's not around, Qambi makes a call. Damn it!

"Dad'wethu," she says.

Vumo releases a low sigh, “Qambi, unjani?”

“I’m good, which road do I take after turning the tuck-shop corner?”

“You’re coming here?” She’s not impressed.

“Yes, I have something for you. It’s your birthday, remember,” Qambi says with a chuckle.

It’s her birthday? Who forgets her own birthday?!

“Take left, you will see the peach-painted rooms,” she says.

Qambi thanks her and drops the call, she’s still trying to figure out how the hell she forgot it was her birthday. Because of the bruises on her face? Probably not. This is her birth-month, something nobody has acknowledged, not even herself.

The last birthdays of her life had been nothing short of amazing. She celebrated differently every year, Sikelela always went out of his way to make her birthdays memorable. Last year she rode a boat at Durban Harbor, ate a scrumptious breakfast and went to a shopping spree afterwards. Sikelela always tried...no, he didn’t try, he made things happen and he never expected anything in return, but her love. Mthoko feeds her chicken gizzards, cabbage and rice, and expect her to be his sexual slave.

“Knock, knock!”

She snaps out from the train of thoughts. Qambi is here already and she hasn’t even made an attempt of covering up the bruises. Damn, she’s got a lot of explaining to do.

“What the hell?” Here it comes!

“Hey Sisi,” she turns her face away from her. But Qambi being Qambi, she pulls her by arm and turns her around.

“What happened to your face?” she asks.

“We had a fight,” Vumo says hoping she’d let it go immediately. “I hit him too.”

“And that justifies this, how?”

“Qambi you said you’re coming here for my birthday, this has got nothing to do with you.”

“Where is he? I’m asking where Mthoko is?” Qambi is pacing around, looking behind the fridge and inside the wardrobe as if a tall man like Mthoko could hide there.

“I don’t know,” Vumo says.

“Was it the first time or this is your life?” Qambi is fighting back tears. Her sister knows better than this, she’s the one who has experienced love in their family, she should be able to distinguish love from this thing she’s living here for.

“He’s not always violent,” Vumo defends.

“Does he need to be always violent to be an abuser? Do murderers need to kill everyday to be identified as one?”

“Qambi you’re now comparing apples and pears,” she turns to make the bed. Mthoko’s jacket is on the pillow, he must’ve forgotten it, for whatever reason she decides to put it on.

“Wow,” Qambi sighs.

“Please don’t ruin my birthday,” Vumo begs and turns to her with a smile. “What did you bring me?”

Qambi takes a small plastic packet from her bag, from it she retrieves a beaded neck piece and passes it to her. She had it custom made by the granny who used to groom Vumo as a maiden.

“Really?” That’s Vumo’s first reaction.

“You don’t like it?”

“What am I going to do with this?”

“It’s a piece of fashion, you can wear it with a dress.”

“Qambi, you could’ve bought me something useful. You probably spent R300 on this, that could’ve gotten me a baby’s bathing set.”

“You’re being ungrateful right now.” Qambi’s tone changes. It may not be the greatest gift of all times, but it’s the only gift she’s seemingly getting today, a ‘thank you’ would’ve been nice.

Vumo exhales heavily and goes to the front of the mirror and puts it around her neck. It’s beautiful, beaded with her favorite colors and taking her back to her hey-days.

“Thank you, mntase. It’s beautiful,” she says. Another heavy breath, “Now it’s just my ugly face.”

“Why don’t you come home though?” Qambi asks with worry.

“Home?” Vumo slightly frowns.

“Okay, malume’s house.”

“And get verbally attacked everyday. Look at how thin you’ve become, soon he’ll be driving you to the hospital. You and mom,” Vumo says.

“At least I don’t have any bruises.”

That hits a nerve, Vumo drops her eyes.

“Look, I’m going to Durban to look for work, if I find something I’m going to come back for you and mom,” Qambi says.

“What kind of a job? You only have a matric certificate and it doesn’t look colorful,” Vumo asks.

“Anything to put bread on the table, even if it means doing peoples laundry and cleaning after them. I hate that you have to depend on a man to survive, you should be completing your trade,” Qambi says.

Vumo exhales softly, “Do you think baba would ever take us back home? I don’t want my baby to grow up in the shacks.”

There’s someone at the door. Right place, wrong time. His eyes widen to their corners when his eyes land on Qambi. He’s never had a relationship with the Ntulis, he knows he’s a downgrade of a man Vumo was previously dating. He works in a clothing factory as a machine operator, that barely covers for their rent, food and transport. At times he has to walk to work, with Vumo’s maternity check-ups and random money demanded by his sisters back home, he’s in no position to impress a girlfriend’s family.

“Sawubona,” he greets after clearing his throat. He’s naturally shy, without alcohol he’d never hold a long conversation with strangers or hold an eye contact for over a minute, even with Vumo.

“Mr Tough Guy,” Qambi clicks her tongue.

Vumo is looking at him, both of them are angry. A part of him wants to run and disappear, but he has to confront this moment.

“Who gave you the right to hit a pregnant woman?” Qambi enquires with a few lines creased on her forehead. She’s trembling with anger, only if he wasn’t a man and he wasn’t capable of leaving a woman with such bruises.

“No one,” he says.

“Oh, you just thought it’s okay to hit her because she lives and depends on you?” There’s so much despise in her voice, truly abusers wear no particular face, looking at Mthoko one wouldn’t think he’s even the violent type. Weak ass man, five inch forehead and bloody rabbit ears.

“I can call the police on you right now!”

Vumo clears her throat. Yes, she hates him right now, but calling the police is a bit extreme.

“We can talk about it,” she says, that’s what they always do every week- talk about it.

“Really?” Qambi turns her enraged face to Vumo. She fails to hold the eye contact and drops her eyes.

"I mean, he was drunk," she looks at Mthoko, who shifts his eyes away in embarrassment.

"You know what, fuck both of you!" Qambi's voice cracks in anger. "You're allowing him to beat you, making excuses for him and justifying his behavior. You're going to lose that baby and die!"

She storms out, without saying happy birthday or spending any quality time with her sister.

Vumo sinks down to the bed and starts crying. She's still defending this man after every bruises he's left on her body. Mthoko hesitantly takes a seat next to her. He's not sure what to say, he's never been good with words.

"I'm sorry," he says in a low whisper.

"That's what you always say. I'm glad the dictionary invented the word "sorry" because I don't know what else would be fixing this relationship." She stands and looks at him, teary, "Juice or tea?"

"Vumo," he brushes his face and exhales. "I'm going to stop drinking, I'll find other ways of dealing with my personal issues. I really love you, I never wanted any of this to happen."

"Is beating me part of you dealing with your issues?"

"I don't know what goes through my mind when I'm drunk. I really don't." He slightly shakes his head and releases a low sigh.

"You almost killed my baby, Mthoko. I understand that it's not your baby and..." He cuts her short, before she goes on explaining

how her ex dumped her.

"It's my baby, our baby," he says.

Vumo frowns, "No, it's not your baby."

"Not my sperm, I understand. But I'll take the responsibility and make sure he or she grows in a loving home. I love you, Vumo." He stands and pulls her hand, their eyes lock for a minute, then he looks down.

"Every child needs a father," he says.

"I know," she says guiltily. The plan was to give birth, takes the baby to Cebile and reconcile with Sikelela.

"I'm sorry," he says again.

Heavy breath!

"Vumo," he lifts his eyes to her. "Do you still love me?"

She clears her throat and nods.

"Thank you," he kisses her cheek. "Please keep my bank card, you're going to see what we need and take charge. I don't want to be this person, I'm embarrassed looking at your face knowing that I'm responsible for these bruises."

"Mthoko, how are you going to be a father to a baby you have cursed so much?"

"I don't have a problem with the baby, I have a problem with alcohol," he says.

"If you say so," she goes to their small table and plugs the kettle

of water.

He's right behind her, holding her waist and trying to kiss her.

"Mthoko, no," she pushes him off.

A heavy sigh, then she hears him walking away, the door shuts, she stops and exhales deeply.

She types a text, a long one narrating everything she's been through the last couple of months. She still knows Cebile's number by head, it goes through then she clears the chat history and switches her phone off.

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SIKELELA

He woke up feeling a bit down. There's something missing, it's been there for the last couple of years but today it's just a hollow space. He's feeling it, no matter how busy he tries to get himself. It's obviously the day he's always spent with that person who used to be special to him, he always looked forward to it. It doesn't help that he's off work, maybe something would've distracted his mind there.

His phone rings, as fate would have it, it's Mela. His lips stretch into a smile as he swipes the screen and answers.

"I just saw your text now, are you okay?" she asks in a very concerned tone.

"I am," he says.

"No, you are not."

He chuckles, "Okay, I was feeling a bit down, nothing much, just work stress."

"I have wine, I got it from my colleagues as 'get-well- medicine'. You can come over and have some, you know I'm not allowed to drink yet."

"I don't drink wine," he says.

"I was just being a good friend."

He clears his throat, "But I'd love to come over, if your boyfriend is not going to kill me."

"I'm in my place, so chill!"

"Mela," he chuckles, "Don't set me up, I have a thing of fighting brutally."

"Sound like a Hlongwane. Must I send the address?"

"Yeah, you can," he says a bit worried. He loves Mela, which obviously means he hates her boyfriend, they can't cross paths, it will be messy.

His phone beeps, it's the address. He'd love to spend this day with Mela, maybe it's one thing that can lift his spirit today.

An intimate flat, if that's a word to describe it. He's a bit intimidated when he thinks of the room he's renting and

comparing it to her place. It's fully furnished, with built-in cupboards and spotless kitchen. She's the only Mshengu that was afforded a high education learning opportunity, now he's thinking how ridiculous and cheap his gifts may have been.

"Please take a seat," she's still wearing a cast on her arm but she looks more lively. As usual, he's staring at her and hypnotized.

"Sikelela," she snaps her fingers and giggles.

"You're beautiful," he compliments.

She blushes and looks away.

"Sorry," this shouldn't be awkward, he takes a seat as asked. "You live alone?"

"Yes," she says.

"Who helps you?"

"My friends and boyfriend."

"So they come here often?"

"Yes, in the afternoons."

"You never ask me to help."

"You live in Effingham, that's 25 minutes away, and you don't have a car."

Silence falls into the room. She doesn't realize how offensive that may have sounded until she looks at his face. She really didn't mean it in that way, not every friend of hers owns a car.

“What’s troubling you at work?” she asks.

“Nothing,” he says.

She raises her eyebrow, “But you said you were feeling down because of work stress.”

Oh, that!

“They moved me to another station,” he says.

“Is it a bad thing?”

He chokes down a brief laugh, “Not really, you ask really interesting questions.”

“I feel like you’re lying, something else is going on.”

He just looks at her. She takes off to the kitchen and comes back with a beer and a glass.

“I don’t want a beer, Melamina.” Now he looks stressed, his eyes have darkened, he has really strange, scary pupils.

“Okay, I’ll get you something else.”

“A hug, maybe.”

She puts down the beer and goes to him. Careful not to hurt her arm, she hugs him, a friendly hug. He wraps his arms around her, rests his head over her shoulder and exhales deeply. For a minute she’s not comfortable, but eventually she melts in his arms. It feels like a protective hug, like he’s shielding her from every harm in this world. He smells good too, she inhales him, mentally putting an identity to his smell.

“It feels like I’m doing to someone what they did to me, I feel guilty but I can’t stop myself from loving you. I don’t want to be the reason why another man go through what I went through, but you Mela, you make me feel different, like a happy sinner.”

“Did someone take your girlfriend?”

“Yes,” he says.

“Is today about her?”

He lets go of her, she sits beside him and holds his hand. A low sigh escapes his mouth.

“I didn’t have a relationship with my father. He only saw me once in his life, he never reached out, never sent any money, never done anything. He wasn’t a financially struggling man, he knew where my mother and I lived, but he never tried to be a father to me. He didn’t deny paternity, he just didn’t want to be there. I was angry growing up, my mother was struggling a lot, but my life changed when I met this particular girl. We fell in love, she was my first love, my only love. I wanted to have a family with her, our thing was beautiful. For years, she was the only thing that made me happy, that made me forget and forgive myself for not being enough for my father. Every year, today we’d be together. This is the first birthday of hers in years that I haven’t spent with her. I’m so mad at myself for even realizing that today is her birthday because my heart is no longer there.”

“Are you sure?” she asks.

“Sure of what?”

"That your heart is no longer with her."

"Yes," he nods. "For months I was thinking about her, I carried her in my heart as hard as it was. But ever since I met you, my heart has moved to a different place."

"Do you think we can ever be friends without exploring those feelings?" Their eyes lock, he's not responding to the question.

"I don't want to hurt you Sikelela," she says.

"I'm not going to give you any reason to hurt me," he says.

"What about my boyfriend?"

"You don't love him."

"Who said that?" Her eyes widen.

"If you did you wouldn't be needing a company of another man," he says.

"I could be in love with someone else, who's not him."

He slightly frowns.

"Someone I can't have," she adds.

"Who is that?" He's confused.

"I can't tell you that, but that's the reason why I said I don't want to hurt you because there's no guarantee that I'd get over my feelings for him if I pursue another relationship. Not that I don't think you'd be a good boyfriend, you seem genuine and loving."

He's hurt beyond imagination. He could handle her having a

boyfriend, but being deeply in love with another man hurts. Initially she said they could be friends and see if a chance for them to try comes up, now she's changing the story.

"I don't want to be a good boyfriend, I want to be a man that people can love. To be lovable, I know I don't have much to give, I don't have the best looks, I have anger problems and..."

"Sikelela stop, please! Don't emotionally blackmail me, I've never lied to you, I've never led you on, I told you all I could offer is just a friendship."

"You gave me some hope, Mela."

"If I did that, I'm sorry."

He takes a deep breath and sits still for a moment, then he gets off the couch and stands.

"So you're leaving?" Mela asks.

"I can't be friends with someone I love, it's unfair to me. I'd rather let you go and wish you the best and happiness, and hope that I find myself the same too," he says.

"You're going to find happiness," she says.

He doesn't cheer up as she hoped, he just zips his jacket and looks at the door, the handle just moved.

The door opens, her heart almost leaps out of her throat. She didn't expect anyone, everyone who usually comes to her place is working today.

"MaMshengu,"

(If you ordered the PDFs via email and hasn't received anything yet, kindly send a Whatsapp text to 0637108652. I don't know why some emails aren't going through)

SIKELELA

CHAPTER 31

MELAMINA MSHENGU

Busizwe walks in, it's one of those many times when she can't recognize her brother. He's dark, murderous and scary. It's too late, she cannot hide Sikelela anywhere now, and with his looks it won't be hard for Busizwe to notice that he's a Hlongwane. He's everything his father was.

"You!" He's pinned exactly where he first saw Sikelela and what transpired that day. Just one glance and he knew. This won't end well. Sikelela hasn't moved, even when Busizwe steps closer, he doesn't shift an inch.

"You killed my father," Busizwe says, enraged.

Sikelela doesn't answer. He's looking at Busizwe like he's just another guy at the free market.

Mela is confused. Yes, Sikelela is a Hlongwane, but he had no relationship with his father or his family until...until...

"He's lying, right?" she asks Sikelela. This cannot make sense, it can't!

"No, he's not," Sikelela says.

"What?!" Her face puffs up in an instant. This could change their friendship, forever. She didn't love her father but the fact that her mother is a widow makes his death matters.

“You’re a Hlongwane,” Busizwe says looking at him closely. Still Sikelela doesn’t move, Mela is in shock.

Busizwe looks at her, a few lines creased on his forehead, he’s disgusted. “What is it with you and befriending our enemies. Are you sleeping with both of them?”

“I’m not sleeping with anyone,” Mela denies. Busizwe lives to embarrass her, he didn’t have to bring it up like that.

Sikelela is looking at her with his eyebrows snapped. He doesn’t care about Busizwe and his ingwe vest in front of him, it’s Mela and her lies that keeps hurting him. So it’s possible that she’s in love with a Hlongwane, probably Hubo. If it was a stranger, someone he’s never met, maybe he would’ve accepted it, bit by bit. But a Hlongwane, his brother again! Again, he’s not the chosen one. His father didn’t choose him, Vumo didn’t and now Mela. It’s a heavy load of rejection for him to carry. His eyes are on Mela, he’s hurt, he cannot even hide it in front of the enemy.

“You know if I kill him here you’re going to be caught in the middle and have to answer to the police,” Busizwe tells Mela. He’s still annoyed with her and she looks like a kid who was caught with her hand in a cookie jar.

“Kill who?” Sikelela turns his gaze to Busizwe. A dark shade masks his eyes, but he’s not enraged or feeling any type of strong emotion, Busizwe doesn’t rub him that way, he’s just another guy.

“I’ve been looking for you for months, your father knows what I do to people who cross me. Pity you can’t ask him because he’s six feet underground now.” Unlike Sguqa, he’s not shaken or offended

by that insult.

“That means you didn’t look for me hard enough, I’ve been around,” he says.

Busizwe chuckles, “So you’re cocky like the rest of them, uzofa mfan’ omncane.”

Mfan’omncane is now an insult.

His jaw tightens, he steps closer to Busizwe. “Except that I’m not them, look at me in the eye and spot the difference,” he says.

The difference is in the eyes. His pupils look slit, when he blinks they turn more darker. As much as that pours ice on Busizwe a little bit, he still chuckles and sizes him up with his eyes.

“Are you trying to scare me?” he asks.

Sikelela ignores him and looks at Mela, “All the best!”

Those aren’t best wishes, both of them know it.

“You killed my father Sikelela?” She desperately wants him to say no, even though things have turned out differently as far as romantic relationship things are concerned, she still wants to value the friendship they have, or had.

“I killed a man who killed my father, if that was him then yes, I killed him,” he says.

Tongue click! Busizwe’s hand grabs something from his waist.

Mela takes two steps back and screams, “Bhuti, no!”

“Let him try,” Sikelela dares.

“Sikelela please keep quiet, he’s going to kill you and I’ll have to answer to your family,” Mela cries. “Bhuti please put the gun down!”

Busizwe inhales sharply and puts it back behind his waist. Only because of his baby sister, Sikelela deserves no mercy for what he did to their family.

Sikelela walks past him and stops just a shoulder away and looks back at him.

“I don’t have a problem with you,” he says.

“Too late for apologies ndoda. The only reason I’m letting you go today is because of my sister,” – Busizwe.

“Thanks, I guess.” He puts his hands into the pockets of his jacket and walks out.

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Busizwe has never come to her place, she’s just unlucky, how the hell is she going to explain this?!

“What’s wrong with you?” He’s enraged, as expected.

“He’s my friend,” she says.

“He killed your father and he’s your friend?” Fury cages his face as he menacingly glares at her.

“Obviously I didn’t know that,” Mela says guiltily.

“We are not friends with the Hlongwanes, MaMshengu. We will

never be, that should get into your thick skull.”

Heavy sigh! She nods.

“Ma sent me to come and check on you,” he says.

Mela shrugs, “I’m good.”

“Why don’t you come home and come back here once you’ve fully recovered?”

“I’m good here,” she insists.

“Why don’t you like it at home?” He’s now concerned more than angry at her. She should be under someone’s care as she recovers, and there’s no place like home.

“Because I don’t have best memories of home,” this is not the answer he expected or wanted to hear. This direction always brings him painful memories.

“Must I ask your sister to come and look after you for a while?”

She frowns, “Your fiance? No, thank you.”

He chuckles sheepishly, “Why? You don’t like her?”

“I don’t know her not to like her.”

“Then you can get to know her.”

“I don’t care to know her.”

Heavy breath! He’s trying to fix things, but honestly a lot has been broken in their family.

“But you’re willing to make friends with our enemies, just not us,”

he says, that's below the belt but he's hurt by her continuous rejection. "Family forgives, I know I'm not perfect and I have disappointed you in the past. But you're my mother's baby, I want to make up for my mistakes." He doesn't talk like this, he'll never beg anyone unless they're family.

"Come to therapy with me," Mela says.

"What therapy?" He frowns.

"You want to be a better brother, right? Then let's attend therapy as siblings and open our chests to each other."

"You want me to go to a stranger with my problems?"

"Yes, a professional stranger," she says.

That's not a road he's willing to travel, he shakes his head. "I can't do that, there are things a man cannot talk about to anyone."

"For us to fix our relationship and be able to heal from the past we have to talk about it. Being a man is just a gender identity, if you're serious about uniting the family then this is the healing road we have to take," Mela insists.

A deep breath! He looks at her, she's just a baby, there are things she'll never understand.

"Okay," he says.

She smiles, there's something so innocent about her, he can't help but smile back.

"Please don't kill him," she says.

That's a mood changer! Sikelela has to die.

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SIKELELA

He's home, that's the best place he could be at right now. Cebile saw him coming with no bag and instantly realized that something was wrong. He does randomly come home but he's never come empty-handed. When he went into his room, without a mere greeting and shut the door behind him, she knew shit was about to go down.

"Sikelela!" she yells at the door.

There's no answer.

She knocks harder, "If you don't open this door right now I will call the neighbors to come and break it."

Obviously, he doesn't care.

"Please open, I'm begging you."

It takes a while, the door handle finally turns. He's half-naked, the T-shirt is over his left ear that's bleeding more than the other.

"No, no, no!" she walks in and cries. "Sikelela, don't do this to yourself, please."

He lies in the bed, on his stomach, and buries his face in his arms.

“What happened?” she asks in a trembling voice.

No answer.

She can't do anything, she has to stand and watch until he's done and satisfied with himself. It hurts as a parent, she did everything in her power to show him that he is enough, nobody should be able to trigger him in a way that he'd opt to hurt himself like this. One day he'll take it too far and he'll bleed to death.

More blood, he's wiping himself with a T-shirt, at least now it looks like he's done. He sits up and looks at Cebile.

“How long are you going to punish me?” he asks.

Cebile takes a pause, and a deep breath, then frowns.

“What are you talking about?”

“Can't you see that my life is a mess? Why do you refuse to let them make things right?”

Oh, this is about the surname.

“You want to be a Hlongwane?”

“I am a Hlongwane, it's not a choice I have to make. I just want the correct identity, maybe things will fall into place.”

She wants to ask what happened but that could trigger more pain, so she remains silent.

“Can I be alone?” he asks.

She takes another deep breath and nods, but before she leaves she has to tell him about the sms.

"I got an sms from Vumo," she says.

Sikelela lies back on his stomach, he releases a yawn, that should be enough to make her let it go.

"She says she's living with a man and he abuses her," she says.

"Are you a police officer?" He lifts his face and looks at her.

"What are you talking about? She's pregnant, what if that is your baby?"

"So you think she miraculously found a man while pregnant with my baby, then he accepted her and they moved in together?"

"You think he's the babydaddy?" Cebile is confused. She'll always have a soft spot for Vumo despite all her imperfections, for years she was her son's source of joy.

"Don't trust anything that comes out of Vumo's mouth. Please, I don't want to talk about her. Close the door on your way out."

"Sikelela..."

"Please Ma."

Sigh! She walks out and closes the door behind.

The last person she'd ever turn to is a Hlongwane, under any circumstances. At least it's been that way for years, however today her finger scrolls down and stops on Sthembiso's number.

"Are you in Mashoba?" she asks.

"Yebo Ma, what's going on?" He quickly picks the panic in her voice and worries.

“I need someone who can talk to Sikelela.”

“I thought he was in Durban.”

“He’s here, hurting himself.”

“I’m coming.”

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STHEMBISO

He doesn’t know Sikelela to be suicidal, but maybe he doesn’t know him that well. He’s been driving like a maniac, Cebile sounded broken over the phone, whatever it is must be serious. He’s in Mashoba within fifteen minutes, he parks his car outside the yard and rushes in.

Sikelela’s door is closed. He goes to the kitchen and knock outside. Cebile comes out with bloodshot eyes and greets in a shaky voice.

“What’s going on Ma?” he asks.

“I don’t know what triggered him today.” That confirms it’s not the first time Sikelela pulls a stunt like this.

They both head to Sikelela’s room, Cebile remains outside while Sthembiso pushes the door and walks in. It’s not his duty, it was his father’s, had Mkhonto been there for his son a lot would’ve turned out differently.

“Bafo,” Sthembiso lowers himself on the bed, below his feet.

Sikelela moves his head, he looks at Sthembiso and quickly puts his head back on his crossed arms.

“What’s all this blood? Your mother is crying,” Sthembiso asks.

He takes a deep breath first, then lifts his face, blood has clotted on the T-shirt in his hand. For the first time Sthembiso notices the scars...

“Come on!” He shuts his eyes, pain and guilt cage his heart and throw him down the memory lane. His father was in his life, not as much as he wanted him to be, but compared to Sikelela, he had a better upbringing.

“What’s wrong?” he asks opening his eyes and looking at the young version of his father.

“I don’t feel good,” Sikelela says.

“Physically or emotionally?” Worry lines etch on his face.

“Just,” Sikelela shrugs with a low sigh. “I want to be happy it feels like that’s something I was denied from birth. Maybe because I’m using the wrong surname.”

“Your surname is not wrong. If you’re talking about a Hlongwane surname, I’m using it and I’m miserable.”

“You’ve had a shot at happiness, don’t compare us. The only person who’s ever loved me is my mother. All I want is a chance to...”

“To do what?” Sthembiso’s eyes narrow at him.

“To rebuild everything that was broken,” he says.

“But why is today such an intense day?” – Sthembiso.

“I live in the future, not in the presence. So once the future I have pictured blurs out I remember who I am, the denied son.”

A moment of silence passes...

“Hubo is a good guy, he’s a good brother and I know he deserves to be happy as much as I do. But every woman I like would rather be with him than me, and that leaves me with questions. Why am I so hard to love?”

“Did he take your girlfriend again?” Sthembiso asks. The first time was excusable because neither one of them knew the truth, but it can’t be made a norm.

“Not really, it’s not even his fault. The girl I wanted to be with said she’s in love with my brother and not me, after I had bared my heart to her many times and got hope that she’d give me a chance.” He releases a heavy sigh, “I hate whining like this, I’m not this person!”

“Maybe you don’t need to be in a relationship right now. Your head is not in a good space, another failed relationship will leave you even more broken.”

“For my head to be in a good space I have to be loved and appreciated by someone.”

Sthembiso sighs, “You’re hurting your mother, you’re making her

feel like she failed you.”

“This has got nothing to do with her!”

“How? When she has to go through this with you? She’s crying, for what Sikelela? Because you didn’t get the girl you wanted and now you’re hurting yourself.”

“Because your father hated me, fresh prince!” Sikelela snaps.

“I’m not a fresh prince,” Sthembiso says, offended.

“You are. I didn’t bother Cebile about anything, I came straight to my bed without stressing anyone. Cebile is the one...”

The door shifts. The look on her face says exactly what time it is.

“Did you call me Cebile?” she asks.

“You called him here and I’m explaining to him that...”

“Go take a rope and hang yourself! Your father didn’t love you, right? It’s the end of the world, every day I have to hear about it while you know very well that I cannot dig him up and force him to do what he didn’t want to do.”

Sthembiso glances at Sikelela, this is taking another turn, an ugly one.

“Go take your ‘real’ surname, your life will fall into place. You will be happy my boy, go,” she clicks her fingers ordering him to get up and leave right away.

“I’m sorry,” he says.

“No, leave! I’m tired of begging a grown man to get it together.

This is probably why MaNtuli went to seek comfort somewhere else, you make it so hard to love you.”

Sthembiso stands between her and him still lying in bed. It’s getting too far, they shouldn’t be bickering like this, nothing is going to be resolved.

“Ma, can you just calm down?”

“No Sthembiso, I raised him up and sacrificed my whole life for him, now he wants to disrespect me because life isn’t going how he wanted it to be? I’m trying my best, I’m always there for him, MaNtuli knows this wherever she is.”

“You’re a good mom, I’m not disputing that. I just want us to talk calmly,” he says.

She exhales deeply and nods. Sikelela has gone back to his shell, he’s lying on his arms with his face tucked in between. Cebile didn’t have an easy journey raising a complicated boy child like him.

“Are you okay?” Sthembiso asks Cebile who’s visibly trembling.

“I’m good. Call your mother and set up a meeting,” she says.

He’s hesitant because it’s such a rushed decision, but he takes his phone out. There’s a new message that may have come in during the chaos. Before calling MaXulu he decides to open it.

It’s a picture- his late wife in Safir Hotel Cairo. It’s sent by an unknown number, that’s not what disturbs him though, it’s the man with her.

[02/28, 11:29] Ntsiki: SIKELELA

CHAPTER 32

STHEMBISO

He can't drive, his hands are sweating and trembling. There has to be some explanation and he needs it right now.

Cebile is still standing in the yard, she knows something is wrong but she doesn't know Sthembiso that well. She's worried though, one minute he was okay and next he was breathing heavily and sweating. The meeting has been set up, Sikelela's issue will be discussed in a week, Cebile is finally ready to face the Hlongwanes.

Paul's phone is ringing, he should be able to trace the anonymous number and get to the bottom of the picture.

"Paul," his voice cracks as soon as Paul picks up.

"I guess you've seen the picture I sent you," Paul says.

"It was you?" He feels so stupid right now. Of course Paul would message him with unknown numbers and not drop a single hint that it's him.

"Where did you get that picture?" he asks.

"From the hotel management. I'm backtracking your wife's steps, there must be something that can lead us to the killer." He's been

convincing Sthembiso that Zime's death had more to it than what meets the eye. But Sthembiso has been holding onto the speculation that the Mshengus had everything to do with it, he just needed proof then he'd strike.

"Who is that man with my wife?" They were in a very cozy position, a droplet of sweat runs down his forehead.

"I'm sorry to say this, but they traveled together a lot. He was in the same room as her in Cairo, the whole time. He's based in East London, he runs a brand management company, when Zime came back unexpectedly he had an emergency at home." You don't ask Paul how he knows, if you ask him to get you information that's what he goes out and do.

"Are you sure?" His heart has been ripped out of his chest. Yes, he wasn't the husband of the century, but he sacrificed a lot for their marriage for her to just toy around with East London men.

"Yes Sthembiso, your wife had an affair with this man. I have hotel footages, which I will present to you in person," Paul says.

"Okay, let me know if you find more information." He drops the call, his chest is heavy, his body is aching, he needs to be at the gym lifting weights and punching boxing bag.

He's still trying to control his breaths. He's learnt how to control these moments, he just needs to keep breathing.

"Sthembiso," Cebile's gentle voice calls outside his window.

Why didn't he roll up the windows? Why didn't he park far? This is a moment of him just breathing, he has to focus on that, not talking.

"What's wrong?" Cebile asks. She's a gentle soul, if it was someone else he would've driven off and left her standing right here, there's something warm about her, something MaXulu and Co obviously lack. She's a caring woman.

"I...I'm...I..." His chest burns, he gasps a few times, at least she's standing outside the window, he has space to recompose. "My wife was having an affair," he shouldn't have said it like that, he shouldn't have said it at all. But he's not in his right senses.

"What?!" Cebile gasps in shock.

"Yeah, it's that."

"Wait Sthembiso, why are you saying it so lightly?"

His body says something different from his tone.

"I don't blame her," he says.

Cebile's eyes widen. Is he a South African man? This is impossible, it can't be.

"She was cheating on you?" She needs to be sure they're talking about the same 'affair' because what he's saying right now is unbelievable.

"I sent her away, to trips, because I was trying to cover up for the misery our marriage had put her in. There was always something coming up, danger waiting to happen, misery to be covered up. I

was asking her to leave, on her own, and..." He's just rambling on and on, not even taking a break to breathe.

Cebile cuts him short, "So it was your fault that she had an affair?"

"Yes, she wouldn't have needed to have one if she was treated right at home," he says and looks at her, the spark in his eyes is dead, he's empty.

This day cannot get any worse; Cebile stares at him with so much pity. He's not just telling her, he's also convincing himself for the sake of holding onto the memories him and Zime shared.

"Can you drive by yourself home?" she asks.

"Absolutely!" he nods.

His body language is giving away a lot of emotions that his voice tries so badly to mask.

All Cebile can do is just pray for the best.

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He arrived safely. He's got inside the house and locked the door. He didn't go to the main homestead to see his mother about Sikelela's issue, that's not something on his mind right now, they'll talk about it maybe tomorrow.

He stands in front of the wine cellar, all the bottles are sealed, he'll never give them away, they're his wife's wines. They were her happy place, now his.

He moves from them to her picture hanging on the wall. The sexiest woman on earth, that's what she was. Today he's looking at her with tears glittering in his eyes and a lump forming in his throat. His biggest fear is having lived a lie. Having felt love that was so deep for someone whose heart didn't belong to him.

"Was I that bad?" He wants to know, sadly Zime is not alive to give him the answers. "I knew you were not happy, neither was I, merely because of the situation at home and here in the village, but you and I had each other. That's what I thought, that you had me as much as I had you. I never looked at another woman ever since I met you, even now after you've gone, it's still just you in my heart." His chest burns, he lets a tear drop down his cheek and then wipes it.

"All I want to know is if you were just having fun or you had feelings for him. That's all I need to know." He inhales sharply and goes to the chair and sits. "Of course you can't give me any answers. You're dead."

He looks at the picture again, she was sitting right on the man's lap wearing a bikini that he bought for her, his favourite nautical blue Lisa Marie Fernandez. They look cozy, he had his arm around her waist. He was holding a woman Sthembiso had believed belonged to him, only him. His heart is pounding once again, something is burning his throat.

He drags himself to the wine cellar and pulls out a bottle of wine; Nederburg Baronne. He opens the cap and pours it straight into his mouth. With no single pause, he downs almost half of it, allowing it to cool down the burning feeling in his chest.

He'll be here, locked inside his house with his pain, because seeking comfort from his family would mean telling them what happened during Zime's many trips and that would make everything his mothers said about her right. He can't have that. They weren't right, not about everything.

An hour late the bottle of wine is finished. The meat is in the oven cooking, he was hungry and going to bite something before sleeping. But that didn't happen, the wine had more effect than he anticipated. He's flatly asleep, there's smoke coming from the oven as the meat turns into charcoal. The smoke fills up the house, there's a flame leaping out of the oven. The bottle of cooking oil on the counter melts, inviting a flame of fire to the counter and other items nearby.

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HUBO

They're sitting in his car in total silence. It's by chance that he got her to come out and even sit like this with him. He never say much to her, she knows everything he feels for her. She cannot reciprocate that, not now and probably not ever again, but he still needs these moments. Just them sitting together.

He inhales sharply, glances at her and finds her staring at him. There's a ghost of a smile on his face.

“Why are you looking at me?”

She blinks, a bit embarrassed, and looks away.

“I’m wondering why you called me here,” she says and looks at him again, “None of your hoes picked up?”

He chuckles, “Language, Mam’ Mfundisi!”

She slightly rolls her eyes and looks away veiling a heavy breath.

“I haven’t seen you in a very long time,” he says.

“As it should be, you know everyone will assume things if they find out about this,” she says referring to the cozy position they’re in, things can be easily misinterpreted.

“What are they going to assume?” Hubo raises his eyebrow.

“That there’s something going on between us. I’m a pastor’s wife and a mother,” she says.

“But you know how I feel about you Ayanda.” There’s a brief pause, everything stops for half a second, even their breaths.

Then he exhales deeply and lifts his eyes to her. “How is Luqobo?”

“He’s good,” she says, a bit uncomfortable. There was a bit of a confusion, or rather misunderstanding between her and Hubo when Qobo was born three years ago. But they worked it out, Hubo finally accepted that he wasn’t his but her husband’s son.

“Why do you come when I call you if you’re so worried about being a wife and a mother?” He should’ve just let it go because he doesn’t want them to fight, but he asks inviting her rage and

irritated face.

“Would you prefer if I don’t come?” she asks.

“Ayanda you’re hurting my feelings. But that’s nothing out of ordinary for you, right?”

“Okay, let me go before this ruins my day, my husband will be home at 8 anyway,” she says putting her phone inside the pocket of her jean jacket.

“I still love you,” he says in a hushed tone.

Their eyes lock for a second, then his go to the ring on her left finger, when Pastor Mdluli met her he made sure he secured his spot. Bloody tomfool!

“Come on Hubo, it’s been three years and you’ve slept with hundred girls after me,” she says.

“It doesn’t change the fact that I love you. I made a mistake, just one, and you cut me off like I never meant anything to you. You know I want to smack that ugly pastor’s face everytime I bump into him.”

“Let’s not go back there. You had your chance and you wasted it, we are never going to be anything but friends.”

“I’m not short of friends, you’re the one that got away and I’m not going to forget about you or get over it.”

“Whatever you want to call it. Please take me back now.”

“I miss you Ayanda.”

“Hubo, please!”

“Just one kiss and we’ll leave.”

“I’m married.”

“Yet you’re here with the ex who was your first, sitting in the car with him at the side of the dark road.”

“Because you asked me to come,” she says.

“No Ayanda, because you and I were meant to be, I fucked up and you moved on too fast and made one hell of a big decision-getting married to your rebound.”

“Ok,” she folds her arms and looks out of the window.

“Ok, give me my kiss then, before I ask for more.”

She frowns, “More?”

“I’m kidding,” he chuckles.

“Don’t be creepy!”

He pulls her by waist, “I’m sorry-ke, I’m not going to ask anything more, just a kiss.”

“Hubo...” her tone softens. He cups her face and pulls her closer, until their noses link, he’s looking into her eyes.

“I think about you everyday,” he whispers rubbing her lip with his thumb. Her whole face flushes up, she drops her eyes to his lips, they’re slightly open and trembling. Once upon a time, this man meant everything to her, not that he means nothing now, but they’re now two worlds apart.

He's still looking at her the same way he did four years ago when they first met. He had girlfriends when they met, they were petite with perfect skins and best dresses, she was just a fuddy-duddy daughter of deacon. A chubby girl with rosy cheeks and shabby dresses. A girl nobody wanted in their team during chigago because she'd ruin the game for everyone. Always reserved and trying not to outshine anyone, limiting herself in everything and staying away from the spotlight.

He's always looked at her like she's the most attractive thing in the world. It's the admiration in his eyes that makes these secret moments happen. The way he holds her hand, breathes next to her and cracks that annoying bunny smile of his that makes her feel like a child.

He brushes his lips against hers and exhales softly, "Mamina."

"Don't call me that," she whispers.

"Or what? Uzokwenzani?" He locks his lips into hers, slowly smooches her lips while caressing the back of her neck gently. Four years later, he still knows where to touch and what to say to erode her strength. She melts in his hands, he's gentle, moist and breathy. He's seeking the reunion of their souls, chasing down the affection deeply hidden in her soul and heart.

His phone rings in the middle of a heated moment. He tries to ignore it but the caller is persistent.

"Please give me a sec," he's a bit annoyed.

MaDlamini? Maybe someone has seen the car and now they want to know why he's parked at the side of the road in the dark. If they find out about him chasing a married woman it would be a big scandalous deal.

"Hello Ma," he answers.

"Hubo where are you? Your brother has almost died."

"Which brother?" He immediately releases Ayanda from his embrace, his erection stands up and steals the shine, flushing Ayanda with embarrassment.

"If Azile didn't get there in time next week we would've had another funeral," – MaDlamini.

"Ma just tell me what's going on." He's alarmed and impatient.

"Sthembiso almost burnt with the house. They've taken him to the hospital to examine if the smoke did any damage to his lungs. He was locked inside, if it wasn't for Dladla and..."

"What?!" He drops the call and starts the car. He has to be in the hospital with his brother. They made a mistake, he shouldn't have lived alone in the house he shared with Zime soon after the funeral. The Hlongwanes have lost many people this year alone, Sthembiso can't be next.

"Hubo you have to drop me home first," Ayanda says next to him, she's a bit scared, his focus is not even on the road and he's speeding.

"Ayanda my brother is in the hospital, I don't know how bad it is,

he was almost burnt in the house.”

“But you have to drop me off first, how am I going to explain to my husband and mother-in-law?” He’s not even hearing, he’s driving and dialing someone’s number.

The person picks up,

“Londeka where are you?” he asks.

“Hubo,” Ayanda whispers as he leaves the route leading to her house and joins the main road.

“Sthembiso is in hospital,” he’s telling Londeka over the phone. “You have to come, I’m on my way too...no Londeka, this is not time for that, just come.” He ends the call and hits the gas harder.

“Mahubo!”

“Ayanda please!”

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MaXulu is overreacting, her sisters aren’t helping either, they’re all acting like Sthembiso is dead. He’s even awake and talking to the nurses, he’ll be kept over night just to make sure he’s okay.

“Ma where is he?” Hubo asks storming in followed by Ayanda with his leather jacket over shoulders. She looks forced to be here, as soon as her eyes meet the Hlongwane mothers she stops.

“He’s inside,” MaJiyane says.

They’re looking at each other, with them a whole conversation can

be silent and chatted with stares.

“Why is she here?” Everyone knows Ayanda, she’s married to Pastor Mdluli who eats his congregants’ money and drives sport cars while they come to church by foot every Sunday. Him and this wife of his are the reason why MaXulu and Co don’t set their foot inside the church.

Hubo looks at Ayanda, his pupils dilate, he thought she’d stay in the car. But this is his doing, he has to try to get Ayanda out of it before the Hlongwane Big Three comes for her jugular.

“I asked her to come and pray for us,” he says.

Ayanda frowns, but quickly irons her face when the mothers turn to look at her.

“Do we have to pay millions after she’s prayed for us?” MaDlamini needs a bit of a filter.

“Ma!” Hubo gives her a look and turns back to Ayanda.

“Please sit.”

MaJiyane looks at him, studying his face and how he looks at her. Everyone knows Hubo, he’s one trouble child.

“Does her husband know that she’s here?”

Hubo frowns, “Yeah, he knows.”

“No, he doesn’t,” Ayanda interjects.

Silence!

Stares are on Hubo.

“It was an emergency, Ma said Sguqa was dying, so I called a God’s earth intern,” he says.

“I’m not a God’s intern,” Ayanda snaps, he’s putting her in a very comprising position and he’s not even realizing it.

“But you can pray for us, right? Then oMa can...”

“Can back you up?” MaDlamini asks, cutting him short.

He exhales heavily and nods.

She gives him a look; this will be addressed later.

SIKELELA

CHAPTER 33

STHEMBISO

He's got a lot of questions. Even the near-death experience hasn't shaken him. Maybe they should've just let him die, but he couldn't say that loud to his mothers. They are still chanting praises to God and the ancestors for rescuing him.

The house burnt down, they say. With everything that was inside; memories and his wife's belongings. He can rebuild the house, buy new furniture and get back all the important documents that were burnt. But he cannot get back Zime's clothes, her wine cellar and the soft touch she left in that house.

"Bafo," Hubo walks in the midst of his crowded thoughts. He's not walking in alone, Mrs Mdluli is behind her, which is strange.

"I don't need a prayer," he says before they even open their mouths. All he wants is to be left alone.

Hubo glances behind him as if he's cautious about something. There's some sly shit going on with him.

"Please bafo, she will say a short prayer. You need God in your life, uzokuthoba amanxeba," he says.

"Wazini ngamanxeba athotshwayo uyinxeba kwawena," Sthembiso clicks his tongue, exhales heavily and looks at Mrs Mdluli. He intends not to make her feel uncomfortable, he's just

not in a state of believing anything associated with God at this time.

"I appreciate you coming but I don't need your prayer," he says.

"Thank you," she says with relief and turns around to leave.

Hubo grabs her arm, she turns and gives him a glare. There's a moment there, them just locking their eyes for ten seconds and him slowly removing his hand and clearing his throat.

"I will find you outside," he tells her.

She says nothing, just turns and walks out. He's staring at her until she disappears and then turns to Sthembiso's eyes scrutinizing him.

"Today is about you. You're the one who tried to kill yourself, not me," he says, a bit defensive for someone who hasn't been asked anything.

"Where is that coming from?" Sthembiso asks him with a slight frown.

"From you staring at us."

"Oh, there's 'us' between you and MaMfundisi?"

"No, there's nothing between us."

"You happened to suddenly believe in God and had an access to the pastor's wife and she just agreed to come and pray for me?"

"As I said bafo, today is about you, not me. What happened? Why are you burning yourself?"

“I was drunk, I don’t know what happened.”

Hubo frowns with concern engulfing his face, “But you don’t drink.”

“I don’t drink?” Sthembiso chuckles.

“You sip to cool down your head. You don’t drown in the bottles. So what happened? If you don’t tell me I will go and investigate on my own, while at it I will break the law and get in trouble, then you’ll have to come and save me.”

Sthembiso chuckles, “You’re so childish.”

“I know. So what is it going to be?”

He takes a deep breath and looks away, deep in his thoughts, for quite a moment.

“Do you believe in love?” He shifts his eyes back to Hubo.

“Before you and Sis’ Zime I didn’t, but now I do,” Hubo says.

He nods slowly. If his love story helped someone, gave inspiration and changed narratives, as flawed as it was, maybe he should keep this to himself.

“I was missing her,” he says.

Hubo scratches the side of his face and keeps his eyes glued to him. He’s not buying this story.

“I was irresponsible, I apologize, that’s not the picture I want you and Thobani to see. Alcohol is never a solution, I just lost myself in the pain for a moment. It won’t happen again,” he says.

“Why can’t you talk to me if you need someone to talk to?” Hubo asks with concern.

“Hlongwane chill, I’m not depressed or anything like that. If I need to talk obviously I will reach out.” He removes the drip connected into his arm and sits up.

“Are you supposed to remove that thing without the nurse?” Hubo asks.

“Ey, I’m not sick,” he says and grabs the bottle of milk his mother came with. “Is the pastor aware of his wife being here at night?”

“We will make him aware. If he’s truly a man of God, he won’t have a problem with Ayanda coming to the hospital to help.”

“Why are you calling her Ayanda?”

“Because that’s her name. I think my five minutes is over, I have to go.” He takes a glance at his wrist watch, pretending to be concerned about time.

“Mahubo we have enough enemies. At least we can fight the ones we have, but we cannot fight a pastor because we don’t know how to pray. So please leave his wife alone.”

“I met her first.” He shouldn’t have said that, he’s just frustrated. Nobody knows how far he’s come with a broken heart, they can’t dictate what he does, he’s been very respectful of the pastor. Even when Qobo was born, he didn’t cause any drama, he took it up with the one he slept with. If Ayanda wants to be left alone she will stop giving him any attention.

“But you didn’t marry her, he did, respect that,” Sthembiso says in a firmer tone.

“I told Londeka to come, I will see you tomorrow,” he turns around and leaves.

“I mean it, Mahubo!”

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VUMO

It wasn’t the same birthday she’s had over the years but it ended on a high note. She received flowers and a box of chocolate. Mthoko is promising to be a better man for her and the baby, which she doesn’t believe yet, and she’s not comfortable with him getting carried away with the idea of being a father to Sikelela’s baby.

It’s almost mid-night, they cuddled for hours before he fell asleep with her in his arms. At times he’s a warm, affectionate man trying to survive. Although he’s not much of a talker when sober, he does open up about his family. He’s the man in the family, without parents his siblings are his responsibility. They’ve never come to visit while Vumo is here but they do call frequently to ask for stuff.

She slowly removes herself from his embrace and tiptoes out to

the outside toilet for the third time in one hour. Maybe she went hard on the hot wings, she uses the torch of her phone and leaves the toilet door open. This time nothing comes out but the stomach ache is still there, so she sits on the toilet seat a bit longer.

“Vumo,”

She hears his alarmed voice calling her name in the yard. Really? Where does he think she could've gone. She cleans herself and washes her hands in the tap next to the toilet.

“I'm here Mthoko,” she says walking towards their room.

He's standing in front of the door in his shorts, the light is turned on.

“Where are you coming from?”

“I was in the toilet. My stomach is aching,” she says.

“You should've woken me up to go with you. Did you see the time?”

“I didn't want to disturb you, let's go in.” She pulls him inside and closes the door.

They both get back in bed.

“How are you feeling now?” He's wrapping his arms around her and pulling her closer.

“Still aching,” she says.

“Maybe you should try the flour mixture,” he suggests rubbing

down on her big tummy.

“That’s for running stomach, mine is aching.” She groans as another sharp pain plunges in.

“Ay Vumo, is it that bad?” He’s freaking out, turning on the light again.

“It comes and go,” she says.

“Is there anything we can try? Maybe glucose.” He lifts her to sit and wipes the sweat on her forehead.

“I feel like throwing up,” she says.

That’s normal for pregnant women, he gets the basin and a glass of water.

Everything she ate earlier comes out, she’s now crying. In panic Mthoko calls one of his sisters asking for help. The solution he gets is to call the ambulance. He’s now freaking out even more.

“Baby, I’m calling the ambulance,” he says.

She doesn’t argue, so he makes the call and starts packing the belongings she takes with her everywhere as a pregnant woman.

“Are you sure you’re not in labor?” he asks as the thought crosses his mind. It’s still early for her to be in labor but things like that happen.

“It’s not my month Mthoko,” she says in a snap.

“Okay, sorry.”

She’s groaning in the bed, he’s pacing up and down with his phone

in hand impatiently waiting for the ambulance to arrive. A lot happened the previous night, even though he doesn't remember all of it but he knows he fucked up. What if he's behind this? Vumo will never forgive him. Why now? When he's determined to be a better man, to stay sober and cohabits with her harmoniously.

He's not a bad person. Or is he? He loves Vumo, there's something calm that she brings in his life. Something he's never had. It warms his heart when he comes home to her looking like a melanin goddess. For the first time he's settled with someone who doesn't demand things he doesn't have. She eats what he eats.

"What's wrong?" Vumo asks, she's been looking at him, studying his emotions.

"Nothing." He sits down on the bed and holds her sweaty hand and kisses it. "I love you Vumo. I will never forgive myself if anything happened to the baby because of me. And I wouldn't expect you to forgive me."

"I don't need to hear that Mthoko," she starts crying again.

"I'm sorry, I can't help but worry."

His phone rings. It's the ambulance guy asking if they can walk to the road.

"Can you walk?" he asks her.

"Yes," she nods.

He grabs the bags and walks out holding her hand. Right now all

he can do is silently pray for the best.

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48 HOURS LATER

An emergency C-section was performed to save the baby. The doctors were going to conduct tests to find out what caused premature birth but something shocking happened. Vumo wasn't pregnant with one baby, but omphalopagus twins. They're conjoined at the abdomen with a single umbilical cord and fused liver.

Vumo only shows signs of fatigue after her caesarian, she keeps dozing off before the doctors could address the situation with her. So Mthoko is the one communicating with the medical team, his T-shirt is soaked in sweat, he didn't expect anything like this, he's beside himself with fear. Vumo's fatigue is even more frustrating because he's not sure what to do at this moment.

His sister, Nomusa, calls as he's about to doze off on the bench.

"Mthoko where are you?"

He yawns, "I'm at the hospital."

"What about work?"

"I called in sick, Vumo is still resting so I have to be here just in case anything happens."

“Seriously though, those disabled babies aren’t even yours. You’re just inserting yourself in other people’s bad luck. So tell me, are you going to pay for the surgeries and take care of two babies?”

“I can’t afford any surgery but I have to be here to support her.”

“You’re so dumb, Mthoko. Don’t you have enough burden on your shoulders?”

“Nomusa, I can’t just leave. I promised her that I’m going to support her every step of the way.”

“You can break that promise, it’s not like God will punish you. This is a tough situation that should be handled by her family and babydaddy.”

Nomusa has a point, maybe he’s biting more than he can chew, but can his family fill the gap that Vumo filled in his life?

“No,” he says louder than he intended.

“What about your family?” She’s asking if he will be able to sustain both families, them and Vumo and the twins.

“There’s nothing to worry about Nomusa, I’m a man.” He will make a plan, even if it means taking a second job, rather than failing Vumo after everything he’s put her through.

Both Twin A and Twin B spent the night in NICU, as expected, undergoing several medical tests. Mthoko was begged to go home in the morning for a rest and come back later.

Vumo is awake, looking lively than she’s been the last day. After

having breakfast she went to freshen up and came back to the doctor waiting for her.

“How are you feeling?” he asks with a comforting smile.

“I’m good. Where are my babies? Did you separate them?” In this century, nothing should be difficult for the doctors, they have all the resources.

The doctor clears his throat, looking a bit uncomfortable.

She raises her eyebrows.

“According to our standard procedure, we cannot separate them until they’ve grown strong enough to handle the surgery, we also need time to learn their bodies. They’re omphalopagus twins.”

“What is that?” Her voice trembles, she’s gone through a lot for this baby...babies.

“They are conjoined at the abdomen, with a fused liver and one umbilical. Twin B has undersized heart, he’s relying on his brother for blood supply and cannot survive without him. However it may affect the health of Twin A, who’s looking fine at the moment and doesn’t depend on Twin B for anything expect sharing certain organs with him.”

“I don’t understand, doctor. Are they going to be fine?” Tears flood her face. This is not what she expected to hear after she’s struggled so much with her pregnancy.

“Right now it looks like we might have only one option, if the emergency surgery is approved, we might have to save the twin

with better chances of survival, Twin A. It's going to be a very tough decision to make. I recommend you get counseling while we explore our options and seek help from the department."

Waiting means both her sons could die, Twin B's health is declining and draining Twin A's.

But granting doctors' the permission to separate them right now will mean she didn't give the weaker son a chance to learn to be independent, and that would be something she'd have to carry in her conscience for the rest of her life.

Mthoko arrives with Qambi. It's strange seeing them together, not fighting. He looks exhausted and stressed out.

He leans over and kisses her forehead before greeting and stepping aside for Qambi.

"Dad'wethu, how are you feeling?"

Vumo inhales heavily, pain masking her face.

"My babies could die," she says.

They look at each other, her and Mthoko.

"Why?" Mthoko asks.

"They can't be separated right now. The other one has a heart problem, he's depending on the other one. A surgery at this premature stage may lead to both of them dying, just like waiting. B can't survive without A but the longer he survives on him A's health will be affected as well."

“So what’s the way forward?” Qambi.

“Waiting and praying,” she says.

Mthoko releases a sigh and buries his head in his hands. Qambi throws a quick questioning look at Vumo.

“Have you told Sikelela?” she asks.

Mthoko raises his head. That Sikelela may have contributed with the sperm but it’s him who’s been up and down with Vumo throughout the journey.

“No,” Vumo says, silently praying for her to drop the subject. They can talk about Sikelela, but not in front of Mthoko, it bruises his heart.

“Don’t you think you should?” Qambi asks. She cannot care less about Mthoko who turned her sister into a punching bag.

“He changed his number, his mother did not respond to my text.”

Mthoko looks up with a slight frown, “What text?”

“I was just asking how she was doing.”

He says nothing further, just drops his head and plays with his fingers. This is exactly what Vumo didn’t want.

“Ma is coming later,” Qambi says breaking the two-minute silence.

The mood is tense, maybe she should give them a minute to talk about the text. She won’t go far, she will never trust Mthoko again.

After she's exited they don't talk about the text. Mthoko doesn't bring it up, which isn't surprising at all because he's only talkative and able to confront her when he's drunk.

"How long are you going to stay here?" he asks.

"I don't know. You should go to work tomorrow, I will call if there's any update."

He nods.

A moment of silence passes.

"Do you want to call him?"

"Who?" She knows exactly who he's talking about, she just didn't expect it from him.

"The father."

She doesn't answer, he knows what that means and it hurts him even though the situation is understandable. Their eyes lock for a second before he drops his.

"My sister called and asked what I'm going to do," he says almost inaudible.

"About?" Vumo raises her eyebrows.

"Everything. I said I want to stay with you, we will figure it out. I'm not going to run away, I promised to support you, no matter how hard it gets."

This is expected from his family, they're worried about their bread.

"Why?" she asks him.

"I don't understand."

"Why do you want to stay with me?"

"I know I treated you bad but..."

She exhales heavily, "Mthoko, I don't want us to be a burden."

"You're not a burden, you never will be," he assures her.

"I'm scared Mthokozisi," a tear rolls down her cheek.

He gets up from the chair and holds her hand tight. "Everything will be fine, sthandwa sami."

(I'm caught up in a few projects but this week I will be here making up to you guys. Please contact me via email: nellypage88@gmail.com after paying for PDFs. I'm failing to update my Business Whatsapp)

SIKELELA

CHAPTER 34

LONDEKA

I had a photoshoot earlier, I was hoping for a glass of wine and relaxed afternoon. But Hubo is here, chilling on the couch with a beer in his hand and a bowl filled with my grapes. I don't remember cutting a spare key for him, which makes me wonder how he just walked in like a landlord.

"Brother," I greet kicking my heels off and lounging myself on the couch with a sigh.

I have to shoot a promo video tomorrow, I wish I can say I'm getting used to being in front of the camera everyday but I'm not.

"Where are you coming from?" Move out from your father's house, get your own place and have peace of mind, they say. I'm in my own place, yet I have to report my whereabouts to my brother.

"From the photoshoot," I say with an eye-roll.

"I called you two days ago telling you that Sguqa almost died. You never came."

Oh this is what he's here for.

"You know how things are between us. What was I going to say to him? He doesn't speak to me."

"Londeka you cannot compete with an emotional broken,

mourning man. He's a heavy drinker now; he burnt the house down. When are you going to realize that he needs you more than you need him at the moment?"

"Why do I feel like you're now holding me responsible like everyone else? How many times have you convinced me to be a bigger person and take the first step? When do you sit him down and tell him to fix things with me and be a bigger person as well? Or it's easy to confront me because I'm younger."

He stops me with his finger and gulps down his beer.

"I understand that you're in the beauty industry and everything is now a competition to you, hence daily photoshoots. But baby sister this one is not a competition. You just have to do the right thing, come home and check on your brother."

Phewww! I have to embrace myself for another disappointment. Hubo thinks I enjoy hearing my brother telling me that he doesn't like me and kicking me out of his house without even hearing me out. But I'm going to be a bigger person, again, and go check on him.

"I will come later," I say.

"When is later Londeka?"

Later is after I've seen my boyfriend.

"Around 7pm, I will spend the night and come back tomorrow morning."

"And if you don't?" He doesn't trust me this one.

“Kill me,” I say.

He puts the empty bottle on the floor and stands up with my bowl in his hand. I didn't even know he likes grapes this much because he never buys them.

“You can't leave with my bowl,” I say.

“I will bring it back. How do you expect me to carry my grapes?”

“I don't trust you. What if you try to charm your 99 girlfriends with my bowl?”

“You talk too much. Okukuqala I know this bowl from MaMkhulu's kitchen, it's the one that went missing. I might get a ransom if I take it home.”

“Don't snitch Mahubo. Snitches get stitches!”

He laughs and walks out of the door. He better not tell MaXulu anything, before their husbands, African mothers would kill for their dishes.

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I haven't seen Sgcino this week. I didn't know my schedule would get so busy. I thought I'd be able to make time to come for a sleep-over and get rid of all my fears. I understand him now, his gift is still scary but I can live with it. It's not something he can control, I just need to learn how to control my nerves if I happen to be around him when he transitions.

Following the Mpofana episode, I can say he's now more open

about his past. He's talked to me about his wife, in details. I'm sad she died but I'm grateful it happened because it gave me the opportunity to find love in her husband. God is a man of plan, I love him. May her soul rest in peace.

He opens the door, still in his formal shirt and black pants.

He hugs me with one hand while unbuttoning his shirt. My gaze fall onto his chest, I haven't seen a man's chest in a long time, I'm salivating.

"How are you?" He plants a soft kiss on my lips.

"I'm good baby." My nose is desperately sniffing for a stew. I'm starving, the tasteless sandwich I made didn't go anywhere. I need a home-cooked meal that's not cooked by me.

"I thought you were coming a bit later."

To sleep over, he means.

"Well, I have to go home and see my brother."

"Which one?"

"Sthembiso, I hear he almost died in a burning house while drunk."

He stops and frowns.

"Really?"

"Yeah. I couldn't even call and talk to him because you know, me and him are blood enemies."

He holds my hand, walks to the kitchen with me, there's a box of pizza on the counter. I was hoping for a real meal but pizza can do, as long it wasn't bought by me.

"Are you hungry?" he asks.

"Yes, that's one of the reasons I came here."

He chuckles, "Are you hungry in the stomach or below the stomach?"

I don't pay attention to his sexual advances anymore. I could be naked, dripping wet and begging him to fuck me, and he would still leave me dry with no single excuse. I'm not sure what we are waiting for, but I don't want to look like a sexually-starved cow, as long as my two fingers still move, I shall be fine.

"Why are you quiet?" he asks lowering his eyes with a smirk.

"Because I'm hungry in the stomach."

"Oh, who's feeding you below?"

"My two fingers," I lift them for him to see.

He doesn't laugh.

"What did you expect to hear? That you have an assistant? I'd gladly give you one," I say.

He grunts with irritation and takes one plate from the cupboard. He wipes it and takes three slices of pizza and sits.

I'm looking at him with my eyebrows snapped, I'm going to start a Twitter thread about him.

“Your two fingers will get you your own plate, right?” he says with a full mouth.

Men and their fragile egos! Now he’s beefing with my fingers.

I will eat straight from the box, I’m from Mashoba. I get juice from the fridge and pull the pizza in front of me.

He laughs loudly, “Yoh, umakoti wakwaMaNgcobo shame!”

“So when are we going to have sex? Are there any protocols?” I finally ask the big question.

I didn’t know I was this brave but this man pushes me to my limits.

“I have already had sex with you,” he says.

“What???” My eyes are about to drop into this juice I’m drinking.

“I just haven’t penetrated you. But you’ve felt my touch and squirted with my name in your mouth.”

My heart drops to my feet. I’m not the only girl who masturbates and picture their partner with them. But, how?

“So we can seal it with penetration right after we finish this,” he says.

Can’t he see that I’m shocked, almost having a heart attack?

“Sgcino!” my voice rises with shock.

He laughs.

“You look so guilty,” he says.

“Do you have cameras planted in my flat?”

“You watch too many movies. Don’t scream my name at night if you don’t want me to hear you.”

“So you hear me?” Earth open up and swallow me now!

“I hear anyone. The God of Winds favors me, don’t mess with my name sweetheart.” He’s laughing, I don’t know if he’s teasing me or dead serious.

I can’t help but wonder how weird he is altogether.

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We didn’t have sex after eating. After that God of Winds talk I was too freaked out to want him to be inside me. I don’t know if we will be getting intimate anytime soon. He makes no excuses, in fact he’s shown interest several times, I don’t know what keeps holding him back. I will just have to wait for him to be ready and stop calling his name when doing my behind-doors business.

I have traveled with him at night once and it didn’t end well. So I was skeptical when he offered to drive me home, but he insisted and I couldn’t turn him down. He’ll be dropping me off and coming back.

“When am I going to be granted visits at the Hlongwanes?” he throws the question out of nowhere.

“I don’t have a house, I have a room that’s connected to my mother’s. If you can be comfortable with that arrangement, I’ll

gladly invite you over.”

He laughs, “You want me to be fined. A grown girl like you should have a single-standing room. Or you prefer to come to MaNgcobo’s house?”

“We are grown-ups with our own places, there’s no need for that,” I say.

“The ones guarded by human beings and electronic systems?” He chuckles and fixes his eyes on the road. It looks like he’s not joking.

“You want to come to my home?” I ask.

“Yes. If not to visit, then to introduce myself.”

“Introduce yourself in which way?”

“The right way.”

I hope this is not what Mela told me about because it’s soon, too soon.

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SGCINO

He wanted to spend the night with her and somehow he thought driving her to Mashoba would be enough to fill that gap. His kiss lingered longer, he grabbed her waist and felt his hard pipe growing in his pants. There was an urge to push her against the

seat and give her what their bodies desire, but his fear of obeying sexual desires at the expense of his spirituality had him groaning and pulling back before lust got better of him.

“I will watch until you walk through the door,” he told her.

“What if my brothers come out and see you parked here?”

“I will handle it Londeka, go.”

She leaned over for the last kiss and climbed out with her bag.

Indeed he waited until he saw her figure disappearing inside one of the houses. He should've left then, but he didn't. He buried his head over the steering wheel hoping his hard pipe would calm down and stop aching against his pants. A minute turned into ten minutes, a cloud of fatigue drowned him, he had to step out of the vehicle to get fresh air before driving off. And that's when he met him...

He stood not too far from his car. Londeka, his mother and friends, all had to be left in the world of the living. A part of his brain shut down, he faced the man who looked everything like the girl who owns his heart. Unlike other defuncts Sgcino had met, he looked absolutely fine. No sight of blood, no open wounds, no streaming tears. Which confused him because if he wasn't experiencing any difficulties crossing over to the next world, why was he coming to Sgcino?

He didn't ask or say anything. He always allow them to say the first word and listen without interrupting.

"My son has twins. They're fused in the abdomen. The other one is going to live because he's his father's son and his grandfather's grandson." He took a brief pause, Sgcino still didn't know how any of that concerned him but he had to listen carefully.

He continued, "My son, the second one, won't be strong enough to make the right decision. So I will reverse this role to Sthembiso. He has to pay the best doctors who will separate my grandsons."

"You want your son, Sthembiso, to pay for the surgery?" Sgcino asked.

"I want him to break the genetic curse. I couldn't protect Sikelela but he can protect the next generation," he said.

Sgcino didn't understand, so he kept quiet and paid attention.

"Sthembiso will have to save the fragile twin, the one with less chances of surviving, and kill the one who looks like us, me and my second son, the stronger one."

For the first time Sgcino questioned the defunct.

"Why is that?" he asked.

"Because the next generation need to be saved. All that lies in Sthembiso's hands because if the mother or Sikelela make the decision, they'll save the stronger twin and that twin is everything we are."

Deep breath...

“Sthembiso must pay the best doctors, instruct them to save the twin with less survival chances and let go of the twin who looks like me and Sikelela.”

Sgcino recorded it in his head and then looked at the man, “What if he saves the fragile twin and that twin later dies?”

“He won’t, umkhulu will be looking over him.”

Fair enough!

“What if Sthembiso is not strong enough to make such tough decisions?”

“Because he’s mourning? He will have to grow a backbone and do it.”

There was no negotiating after that. After all his duty is not to oppose messages but to deliver them.

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INSIDE THE HLONGWANE HOMESTEAD

Thobani walks into the kitchen with his eyes wide.

“There’s a car parked next to bhuti’s house.”

“How does it look like?” MaDlamini asks a bit alarmed. Things happen in this village, peace doesn’t come with the package of being a Mashoba resident.

“It’s a Nissan X-trail, graphite grey, with roof racks.”

Londeka was about to crack the egg into the pan, but she trembles, it drops to the floor. She looks at Thobani with her eyes widened out of their sockets. That car brought her to Mashoba, the driver should be in his house preparing for work. How is the car still parked here?

“Are you sure?” she asks Thobani.

MaXulu gives MaDlamini a side-glance and asks if Londeka knows whom the car belongs to. She blatantly denies and stands like a robot that ran out of batteries.

These woman are staring at her, she can’t even take her phone and quickly text Sgcino to ask why he’s at Mashoba.

There’s a knock, Thobani attends to it. The low voice that exchanges greetings with him sends her heart right on her feet. She knows how that man talks, she cannot mistaken his voice with anyone’s.

“Come in,” Thobani instructs.

It’s him in flesh.

She gasps, “What?”

Stares!

He walks in behind Thobani.

“You can sit here, I will go and wake him up,” says Thobani.

Londeka is about to faint. Why is this man not lifting his face and looking at her? What could he be up to? He better not play games with her.

He's still in the same clothes, they're creased like they came out of a bull's mouth.

"He's here to see Sthembiso," Thobani briefs the house.

Londeka looks even more uncomfortable. She came late last night and couldn't see Sthembiso. Now the first time she sees him has to be in front of Sgcino whose intentions are still unknown.

"Is there anything important you want to tell Sthembiso?" she asks in a formal tone people use when talking to strangers.

MaXulu shoots a look at her, "A man is here to see another man, stay out of it and fry those eggs."

Well, this man is her boyfriend.

Sthembiso walks in looking tired and annoyed. They had to wake him up in his sleep to come and see this man he's never seen in his life.

"Morning," he greets without looking at Londeka's direction.

"How did you sleep?" MaXulu asks.

"It was good until I got disturbed." He pulls the chair but before he sits, he looks at Sgcino and asks if he'd like some privacy.

"I have a message for you," Sgcino says without any specification.

"Let's go outside," Sthembiso says lifting the chair.

Sgcino leaves his and follows him out.

They stand outside, under the veranda.

"May I ask who you are?"

"It doesn't matter. I was sent by your father, I met him last night."

"His ghost, right?" Sthembiso asks with a mocking chuckle.

"Yes, his ghost." Sgcino is serious; no smile, no hint of practicing comedy.

"Really?" Sthembiso frowns.

He always gets that. Some believe him, some don't, and it's okay.

"Your brother's twins were born. They're conjoined at the abdomen. One has good survival chances, while the other one is facing death. You have to make sure they're separated, that means you will pay for the surgery and any other medical assistance required."

"I don't have any brother who has a baby, let alone twins who are conjoined."

"Sikelela, that's his name."

His forehead creases into lines. This is news to him. They spoke a few days ago with Sikelela and he didn't mention anything like this.

“Are you sure?” Something tells him not to trust this man even though he doesn’t look crazy at all.

“Your father said so,” Sgcino says.

Now this is the most confusing part. It makes no sense, no matter how you look at it.

“If Sikelela has babies, then where are they?”

“I don’t know. I’m here to tell you what your father asked you to do. And that is, saving the twin who doesn’t look like him and Sikelela. He’s the fragile one. Save him, your father promised to look after him,” he says.

“He wants me to kill a healthy baby?”

“Yes,”

“How is that my call? Their health will determine which one lives and which one dies.”

“You will be funding the surgeries, the parents will be in no position to make any decision, so it will be your call.”

“For what? Why would I kill an innocent child who’s fighting for survival and save the one who’s meant to die?”

“To break the genetic curse.”

“And if I can’t do that?”

“He said you’ll have to grow a backbone.”

Still the same selfish old man who never took his feelings into consideration. Before, he didn’t have any reason to believe Sgcino,

but now he does. Because this is something Mkhonto would say to him- grow a backbone- as if he had any himself, he ran away from his son.

“Why would Mkhonto put me through this? Did he even ask how I’m doing with everything that’s going on before giving me this heavy task?”

Sgcino just gives him a look of pity.

“He didn’t, right? Bustard!” he curses and walks back inside the house leaving the chair and Sgcino behind.

There’s a look Londeka was giving him. A part of Sgcino wants to just leave before he puts her in trouble, but leaving without saying goodbye will be rude.

He stands by the door with his hands clasped, “Nisale kahle.”

“Did your message upset him?” MaXulu asks with concern.

“I don’t know Ma, but I wasn’t here to fight,” he says.

MaXulu sighs deeply, “Please sit and drink tea before you leave.”

Londeka turns her face to him, she looks like she’s about to have a heart attack. He has to bite his lip to refrain from laughing, seeing her this scared is actually funny because with him she’s always the alpha woman.

“No, thanks Ma, I’m rushing to work,” he says.

Londeka blows out a faint sigh of relief.

Hubo walks in as Sgcino stands up to leave. Before Londeka warn him, he shouts;

“Sbari, you’re here!”

SIKELELA

CHAPTER 35

LONDEKA

His turned back should've given me some sort of relief but Hubo just had to walk in and call him sbari. Now MaXulu and Co are staring at him waiting to find out how the man is a brother-in-law to him.

The idiot is not even looking at me to see the serial-murder look I'm trying to give him.

"You know him?" Thobani asks.

Silence! You can hear the pin drop.

"Yeah, I do," he says.

I gulp down a glass of water and cough loudly on purpose. He finally turns his eyes to me, they're filled with mockery. He's doing this on purpose now, bastard!

"Why do you call him sbari?" Detective MaXulu begins with the investigation.

"Oh, he's a regular customer at the hardware," he says.

I let out a sigh of relief. I'm glad Sthembiso is not here because he would've known this is a lie. I don't think they believe him either, they just don't want to suspect me because I have a big mouth.

"Who's going to wash my sneakers today?" He's taking them off,

there's mud congealed on them, God knows where he was.

"Definitely not me," Thobani says.

"Not me either," I say.

He chuckles looking at me, "Excuse you."

I look at him. He quickly looks at MaXulu and Co sharing a teapot and then narrows his eyes back at me.

This is what he saved me for, to turn me into his sneakers' washing machine!

"Fine!" I hiss through gritted teeth. This is one of many reasons why I'll never stay more than a week at home; siblings are annoying.

"Do you remember what we talked about?" he asks.

"Yeah but you saw he's already angry for some reasons," I say.

"A good time for his sister to make him breakfast and go ask him what's wrong."

Wow, so he wants me to grovel to Sthembiso. This is not why I came here, I've made breakfast for everyone who's hungry, they just have to come in and dish for themselves.

"That's not what I signed up for," I say.

"I know baby sister, you signed up for Skinture." He's snatching the plate in front of me, my breakfast.

“This is mine, get your own plate.” I pull it back. He raises his eyebrows. Seriously, how hard is getting a plate and putting slices of bread and eggs?

“Ngizomemeza phela,” he says.

“You will scream what?” I ask. I swear even Thobani is more mature than him.

“Ukuthi usbari ngoba...” Why is his voice so loud. Fuck him!

“Shhhh! It’s just eggs and bread, you can have it.” I push the plate back to him and get myself another one. This is torture. I’ve always covered up for him, even when he sneaks girls in during the day. This is a lesson, there’s no such thing as a favor from today onwards.

“There’s something I want to tell you, but first you have to promise not to tell anyone.” Just about time! He’s stuffing his face with my food and wants to share his secrets with me.

“I won’t tell anyone,” I say.

“I’m going to introduce someone to you guys. She’s my girlfriend, a real one.”

The urge to roll my eyes! This is not a secret I was hoping to hear.

“How long have you been together?”

“One week,” he says.

What did I expect? I sip my tea and put the cup down. Show time bitch!

“Attention everyone!” I hit my hand on the table.

MaXulu and Co raise their heads. Thobani stops playing whatever game in his phone and looks at us. Azile stops at the door and pays attention.

“What are you doing?” He’s whispering to me.

I ignore him, he’s put me through so much this morning.

“Mahubo is going to bring a girlfriend he’s dated for one week and introduce her to us.”

Thobani laughs and looks back at his phone.

“Didn’t he tell you not to tell anyone?” MaDlamini asks.

“He did but I’m telling everyone,” I say.

“Well, he’s telling everyone himself and asking everyone not to tell anyone. I don’t think that girl even exists,” she says.

I look at him with my eyebrows snapped. He’s laughing. His is just a hopeless case.

After washing the plates and cups, I boil two eggs and make a spicy relish. The last time I remember he liked brown bread, so I put four slices on the plate and hot water into the tea-pot. If he still doesn’t appreciate my efforts after I’ve come down to Mashoba and took my time making breakfast for him, then I’ll humbly ask Hubo to never talk to me about unity ever again.

He’s lying in the bed, the door is widely open.

“Can I come in?” I ask.

He turns his head, looks at me and sleeps on his stomach again.

“Ngena,” his voice is almost inaudible.

I walk in and put the tray on top of the bedside cabinet. Seeing him back home is a bit strange, I haven’t gotten time to look at his burnt house on the other side of the road.

“I brought you breakfast,” I’m on my feet because there’s nowhere to sit.

“I’m not hungry,” he says.

Now this is the reason why I didn’t want to be a bigger person. I told Hubo but he cornered me and made me agree to come and make a fool of myself once again.

“Look who’s being ungrateful now? I took my time cooking for you, someone who doesn’t even like me, because...”

He blows out a sigh, cutting me off.

“Fine, I will eat,” he says.

It’s not even important for him to eat, he’s already proved to me twice that he no longer eats my food.

“No, don’t worry, I’ll give it to someone else.” I take the tray and walk towards the door. I can feel hot steam coming out of my nose and ears, why did I even come here?

“When is the sale ending?”

What?!

I look back at him. He's now lying on his back with his hands crossed behind his head.

"What sale?" Why am I still talking to him?

"Your products' sale. I have a skin break-out, I need the organic soap and cream."

It's strange, isn't? I can't see anything on his skin, I'm still shocked he knows about the sale at Skinture and he's interested in purchasing products that have my dark face on them.

"It ends Tuesday, next week," I say.

"I will purchase using your code."

Is he one of my followers? It looks like he knows everything.

"Is this the attitude you give your bosses too?"

I'm still standing at the door with the tray in my hands. What is he talking about now?

"Which attitude?" I ask.

"Bring the food back, I said I will eat."

"But before that you said..."

"This attitude," he says.

I'm still not sure what attitude he's referring to.

I walk back in and put the tray back on the cabinet.

He shifts, making space below his feet, I guess I'm welcome to sit on his bed.

I sit, taking a look around the small bedroom. I'm sure he's not coping being back at home, in MaXulu's care. It's one of the things I know he hates because once MaXulu realizes you're depending on her, she starts controlling you.

"So you're dating that man who was here earlier?"

My chest is rolling drums.

"Me? Dating that man? No."

"You're not dating him?"

Clearing my throat! I look away.

I'm here to solve issues between us, not to be confronted about my dating life.

"Have you and Mela talked?" I'm glad he's changing the top.

"We haven't met but we do text now."

"How is she?" He's asking about her, Mela would throw a bash-party for this.

"She's okay now, returning to work soon," I say.

He pulls the saucer and starts peeling the eggs.

"Do you still go to the gym?"

He chuckles, "Would you prefer me to stop?"

"To slow down, the veins in your arms look like electric cables." Oops, maybe that wasn't a nice thing to say. But I can't take it back now and it's not far from the truth.

"If bad lucks slow down, I'm sure I can slow down too. But it's one thing after another, working out is the only thing that brings me peace of mind."

"Add alcohol on the list," I say.

"I'm not a drunkard, I had one moment where I felt like my whole life was a joke, that I made sacrifices for nothing. It was a dark moment."

"What happened?" I'm genuinely concerned.

"Nothing for you to worry about. Thanks for breakfast. Arrange with Mela, I'd like to take you out for lunch some time next week," he says.

"Me and Mela?" Shock me again!

"Yes,"

"You know she still has a crush on you, right?"

"Really?" He frowns and then chuckles and sprinkles salt on his egg.

"Yes, so don't lead her on."

"I'm not that kind of a man. You should worry about the sangoma you're dating and your manager who's living a double-life."

Who's living a double life?

"Ntuthuko?" My eyes are bulging out.

"Yes, he's an after-nine, right?"

I need to breathe, for myself and on behalf of his wife in the village.

“How do you know?” I don’t want to believe this.

“I did my homework,” he says.

“Is there anything you don’t know about me?” I’m not sure whether I’m pleased to know this or scared.

“We have people baying for our blood. You don’t think it’s serious but I have lost many people to just not care who gets into business with my family.”

“But you don’t like me, why do you care?”

“I don’t like your attitude, not you as a person. I’m not your mate, so you have to watch how you talk to me, others may be okay with it but I’m not. That’s what you refuse to acknowledge.”

“I don’t refuse to acknowledge it, I don’t know how you want me to be. I was raised to be free to say anything on my mind.”

“That’s where we collide, I was raised to be responsible for my words and actions. There are things I can’t say, things I can’t do and some I have to do whether I like them or not. So I get angry when people don’t pay back the respect I pay them or don’t acknowledge the efforts I’ve made for them. Not that I’m perfect, I have my flaws too, but you cannot entirely put the blame on me when you’ve refused to be a sister I wanted. If you can be a sister that I want, who says “please” and “thank you”, and doesn’t throw rude remarks and then fold arms like nothing happened, then I will be willing to meet you half way. “

“You make me sound like a spoilt-brat?” I’m appalled.

I do say ‘please’ and ‘thank you’ to people. I can count a number of times I’ve said that to people.

“You’re a spoilt-brat,” he says.

“No, I’m not. You’re the only person who’s accused of such.”

“Imagine telling Londeka Hlongwane that she’s a spoilt-brat, I’m sure that person’s ears would be blocked for the rest of his life, he’d need to write his apology and put it on billboards and stand on top of the mountains to retract his statement.”

“I’m not that bad,” I roll my eyes.

He laughs, “You are.”

Even though he’s accusing me of something I’m not, I’m grateful I made another attempt to have a conversation with him. It’s the longest we’ve talked in years, maybe we can work on our relationship, both of us.

“So tell me, what was that man saying to you earlier?”

“You know his name,” he says giving me a look.

“No, I don’t.” I’m like Peter denying Jesus, he’s one person in this family that I would never be comfortable discussing my dating life with.

“It was a vision or something like that, Sikelela is a father.”

Excuse me?!

“Whaaat?”

He blows out a sigh, “He’s on duty, I’m seeing him later about it. It’s a very complicated matter.”

Wow, I’m the aunt at last.

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SIKELELA

Coming home was unplanned. He doesn’t know why his mother and Sthembiso insisted on him taking the first taxi to Hlabathini after work, hopefully nobody is dead.

He leaves shopping bags in the kitchen, it’s just breads and his mother’s goodies. Then he proceeds to the veranda where they’re seated.

The afternoon wind is blowing faintly, in front of Sthembiso is a glass and 2L of cold-drink.

He greets, their responses are rather low and laced with worry.

“What’s going on?” he asks looking at his mother.

Sthembiso clears his throat, “How was your day?”

“Cut it Sguqa, why am I here? Couldn’t you tell me whatever it is on the phone, I have to go to work tomorrow, I’m doing day shift this week.”

Those deep sighs and shared glances!

“Ma?” He looks at her with his eyebrow lifted.

“Someone visited Sthembiso today in the morning. A sangoma. He was delivering news about your babies.”

He frowns, “My babies?”

“Yes, he said your twins have been born and they’re conjoined. Only one of them is going to survive after the surgery.”

He’s hearing this but it just not recording. Twins? Him?

“Is he a real sangoma?” He’s not trying to insult Sthembiso’s sangoma but this one is a fake vision.

“The question is, is there any chance that you had a baby or babies coming?” – Sthembiso.

“No,” he says.

Cebile gives him a look, “No?”

He frowns, “Yeah, Vumo wasn’t...it wasn’t me and this wasn’t her month.”

“Please call her, if none of the things that man told me earlier match then I’ll say he just came to lie. But if it’s accurate then we need to find where those babies are, immediately.”

“I...I...I don’t have Vumo’s...”

His mother passes her phone to him. A few days ago she received a text from Vumo, they must call that number and find out what’s going on. Not even once had she ever doubted that Vumo could be carrying Sikelela’s baby.

Sikelela's finger pauses on the screen, he exhales heavily and looks at Sthembiso.

"I haven't spoken to her in months." How is he going to start asking her about this crazy vision from a man he doesn't even know?

"Sikelela call her, we don't have time," Sthembiso says.

He takes a few steps away from them and exercises a few breaths before pressing the call button.

It rings a number of times, just as he about to drop there's a faint hello.

Deep breath!

"Hey, it's me."

"It's you, who?"

"Sikelela."

Silence...

He clears his throat, "Where are you?"

"I'm in the hospital."

"Why?" His breath is held up.

This cannot match what the man told Sthembiso.

"I gave birth to two babies," she says.

“They’re conjoined?” he asks.

“Yes, how do you know?”

All he can do is sigh. He slowly sinks down on the cut grass with a trembling hand.

Sthembiso rushes towards him and snatches the phone from his hand.

“Hello,” he says.

“Ummm, hi.”

“I’m Sikelela’s brother, which hospital are you at?”

“Queen Nandi Hospital.”

“Thank you.”

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VUMO

All along she’s been longing and praying for a call from Sikelela. She thought she’d jump up and down and swell in joy hearing his voice after such a long time. But all she felt was nothing but hatred. She’s paid for her sins, more than she should have, even her babies suffered in the midst of it all. There was a time when she would’ve welcomed Sikelela with opened arms, throw herself on his feet and beg for his forgiveness for the umpteenth time. That time has passed, now she’s a mother waiting for the

possible death of one of her sons, or both of them.

Standing here looking at them, so tiny with their abdomens fused together, pain grips her heart.

Twin B is said to suffer from bronchopulmonary dysplasia. His survival chances keep declining, right now it's obvious that she's going to lose him.

It's better for her not to even start bonding with him because that would only end in tears for her.

She sits by Twin A's side and shuts her eyes for a moment, collecting herself. This is the first time she's seeing them in NICU.

"You're my little warrior. I can't believe as tiny as you are, you're able to take care of your brother and becoming his pillar of strength. You're my little star, shining and giving me hope when darkness engulfs my life and throws down in the pits. UyiNkanyezi yami, I trust you to hold on until we get the funds, then the doctors will separate you from your brother." This feels like she's putting a burden over her baby, he's not even fully developed, none of this should be his responsibility.

She wipes a tear dropping from her eye and looks at Nkanyezi again. Doing her best not to look at the nameless one, Twin A. It's best she doesn't even remember his little face.

"But if you feel like it's too much it's okay for you to put yourself first. I know that you love your brother but I'd hate to lose both of you. Mommy loves you Nkanyezi, a guardian angel is going to

come and you're going to go to surgery and have a normal life."

She sniffs, wipes another tear. "I can't wait to sleep with you next to me, hopefully with your brother too."

Leaving them is hard but her time is up, she has to return to her ward where other mothers are breastfeeding their babies. She's wiping tears off her face, as she turns and walks towards the exit door she bumps into a man. He's two heads shorter than Sikelela, with muscular arms and chiseled jawline.

He's wearing a face mask and gloves. He's staring at her, looking a bit disturbed.

"Looking for someone?" she asks, trying to mask the pain in her voice.

"I'm Sthembiso, Sikelela's brother," he says.

Oh that makes sense, but who granted him NICU visit?

"Okay," that's all she can come up with at the moment.

"I wanted to see them, I had a chat with the head of hospital about transferring them to Red Cross in Cape Town. I've made a few calls, they'll get the best help they need."

This is the guardian angel she was telling Nkanyezi about. Tears of joy roll down her cheeks.

"Thank you," she cracks through tears.

"I saw you talking to one of them."

"Nkanyezi, yes."

“You named them already?”

“I only named Nkanyezi. I don’t want to get too attached to his brother because I’ve been told he might not survive, I guess that makes me a selfish mother, I just don’t want to crumble when the time comes.”

His Adam’s apple bobbles up and down. He nods with sympathy, failing to keep his eyes on her.

She walks past him, she has to prepare herself mentally and emotionally, Sikelela is here as well.

SIKELELA

CHAPTER 36

SIKELELA

There's a dark circle beneath her eye. It's fading away but having known this face for years, he's able to know something happened for her to look like this. Which then takes him back to the text his mother told him about. He was so caught up in the flames of anger and betrayal that he never took a second to digest and give her the benefit of the doubt.

He could've handled a lot of things differently. Maybe he wouldn't be here, standing next to her hospital bed with guilt slicing his heart apart. More than her, it's about his babies that he abandoned. He's nothing like his father, he should've been there every step of the way. He should've fed her cravings, rubbed her feet and bonded with his babies before they came to the actual world. Now he could lose them before ever attempting any kind of bond with them.

Vumo walks towards her bed, she still has difficulties walking due to the C-section, she passes right in front of him without granting him a single glance. There are other new mothers with their babies and relatives visiting them. Only his babies are not here, Sthembiso went to see them because he's leading the discussions about the expenses and everything that that has to do with transfers, surgeries and specialists.

“Hey,” he says with his voice rumbling low, looking at Vumo with his eyebrows lowered.

She’s not talking nor looking at him.

He clears his throat, “How are they doing?”

Her head turns, her eyes have instantly turned red, raging with nothing but hatred.

“Who is they, Sikelela?” she asks.

This is a difficult question, a trap maybe. They is their twins, their sons.

“Our sons,” his voice cracks out more broken. Admitting paternity is hard when you’ve denied 99 times. In this case there was no need for DNA test because a vision came and matched everything that’s happening now, nobody could’ve made this up, especially a stranger.

“What makes you think they’re yours? Months ago you were denying my pregnancy and saying I’m lying. Because of you, my mother’s marriage ended, she has nowhere to go, she has to be someone’s slave to get a plate of food. I had to endure...”

Someone is clearing his throat, interrupting the intense moment before she could open up about the abuse.

Sikelela doesn’t turn, Vumo does, with her eyes filled with tears. When she sees who it is, she quickly wipes them off and drops her eyes.

The person walks closer, he passes Sikelela and stands at the

other side of the bed.

He's looking Sikelela, he already knows who he is. Just as expected, he's come flying after him, Mthokozisi, has gone through the ups and downs with Vumo. Just like Mthoko feared, he planned a future with someone who wasn't fully his. Nomusa had told him so, but he was too stubborn and sold with the idea of having his own family.

Sikelela hasn't acknowledged the third presence yet, his eyes are still on Vumo.

"I had a reason to have doubts Vumo," he says.

"Now you don't?" she lifts her eyes to him, a thousand tears are locked behind her eyelids.

"No," he says.

She inhales sharply, pulls a pillow beneath her head and releases a breath.

"Are you okay?" Mthoko asks, grabbing her hand and massaging it. A part of him is genuinely concerned, she's already going through a lot regarding the twins' condition and now this. But him grabbing her hand is to indirectly introduce himself to Sikelela and the position he occupies in Vumo's life.

"I'm good," she says with a heavy exhalation.

In that moment Sthembiso walks in taking off the face mask. His eyes land on Mthoko holding Vumo's hand, a frown creases on his face.

“Who is this?”

Vumo’s face flushes hot. They shouldn’t have met like this, or even met at all. Mthoko should’ve been the past before her and Sikelela reunite.

“Mthokozisi Gumbi,” she says.

Sthembiso turns to Sikeleka with his eyebrow raised in question.

“Mthokozisi Gumbi?” He’s confused.

Sikelela remains quiet, showing no emotion, who the guy is makes no difference.

Sthembiso exhales softly looking back at the couple holding hands in the bed.

“Can we have a moment, Mthokozisi Gumbi? This is a private, family matter.”

Mthoko doesn’t move, instead he holds Vumo’s hand tighter. He cannot be excluded now, he’s been with Vumo since day one, taking care of her cravings and clinic visits. If it’s about the twins, then that’s his family, he’s got every right to stand here.

Sthembiso looks at Vumo, a bit irritated.

“Doesn’t Mthokozisi hear Zulu?” he asks.

Vumo clears her throat in embarrassment and pulls her hand from Mthoko.

“Please give us a moment,” she whispers.

“What?” Mthoko frowns.

“Please.”

He draws a sharp breath, nods his head slowly and turns to leave.

He passes Sikelela and pauses. He lifts his eyes to him, he might not have the money that they have or have muscular brothers like him, but he’s twice a man Sikelela is.

“You should be ashamed of yourself,” he says and heads out.

There’s a brief moment of awkward silence. Then Sthembiso tells them what him and the head doctor talked about. They’re flying the babies and Vumo to Rondesboch, a team of specialists have been booked to assist the medical team to separate the twins as soon as possible.

“How much is that going to cost? Traveling and specialists?” Sikelela asks in a heavy, broken tone.

“I’m paying for the specialists because they’re under my request. I have to make sure nothing goes wrong,” he says.

“How much? I have to know and start budgeting how I’m going to pay you back.”

“You don’t have to, it’s your father’s money and his request.”

A brief pause...

Sikelela frowns, “What do you mean?”

“It’s him who sent the sangoma, at least that’s what the sangoma told me. He said I must make sure nothing goes wrong and be there during the surgery.”

“Oh, so now that he’s dead he acknowledges that I’m his son? He has a will to help me with money,” he sounds ungrateful but wtf! That man never contributed a cent to his life and now he wants to show up when he’s six feet underground, when he can’t ask him any questions.

“It was complicated Sikelela, maybe you’ll understand when my mother tells you what really happened. He didn’t hate you,” Sthembiso says.

“Sguqa, how much do I need to pay for the surgery?”

“You don’t have to pay for it and I don’t want you to get into debts for something I can easily take care of.”

“I don’t want Mkhonto’s money.”

“Fine, I will pay straight from my pocket.”

“You’re your father’s son, no thank you.”

“Sikelela this is not about you.”

“It’s my babies, this is damn about me!”

Vumo releases a very aggressive grunt that shuts both of them up. She’s tearing up, looking at Sikelela with so much anger.

“How dare you! You’re not going to stand in the way of my sons getting help because of your father issues. You want to pay for the surgery now, after being absent when I needed you the most. How is that different from your father who wants to be there for you now? I’m not going to let your ego kill my babies.”

He’s quiet, his eyes inflamed and turning red instantly.

Vumo breathes sharply and looks at Sthembiso.

“Are they going to live, both of them?”

The question chokes Sthembiso, he just gags looking at Sikelela trying to find a better way of saying it.

Vumo nods consciously; she gets it.

“I see, only Nkanyezi is going to live.” It breaks her, deep down her heart has been shattered from the very first day she discovered the news. She had to find a coping strategy which was dealing with a loss that was yet to come; mourning the other twin before he actually dies.

“They’re both going to be fine, that’s what specialists are there for, to make sure nothing goes wrong. You have to bond with both of them,” Sthembiso says.

“What if I lose one of them? Then what? These last seven months have been the hardest time of my life, I don’t want to cry anymore.”

Sikelela drops his eyes. He could punch Mthoko’s teeth out for what he’s done to Vumo, but he can’t because he’s the one who threw Vumo to the wolves.

“They’re going to live,” Sthembiso assures her. “They say mothers have a special connection with their babies. I just need you to be emotionally supportive of the other twin as well, I think he needs his mother too.”

She shuts her eyes, covers her face with her hands and weeps

softly. In the whole ward, she's the only one facing this challenge. Is she a bigger sinner than all the women here?

"You will find me in the car," Sthembiso says to Sikelela, excusing himself to give them space.

It's been months, time has passed, she's not comfortable with him just standing and staring at her.

She wipes her face and looks at him, "Leave!"

"Vumo, I'm sorry."

"Leave Sikelela, why are you here? You don't care, all you cared about was a virginity. Not me, not my babies! I don't have the virginity and I'm not going to get it back whether I like it or not."

"Can we not fight? I'd like you to be emotionally strong, not for me but for them."

Vumo chuckles, "Emotionally strong? Says the person who has destroyed me the most."

Sikelela exhales heavily, takes a step closer to her bed and tries to hold her hand. She aggressively slaps him away.

"MaGodide," he pleads.

"Sikelela don't!"

He holds her hand despite that protest.

"You know how I feel about being a father, don't deny me that chance because of what happened between us. We can talk about

it, you can be mad at me for abandoning you. I will allow you to, if that's what you need to heal."

"I don't know how you feel about being a father Sikelela. I just know how desperate you want to be the opposite of what you think your father was. And you're not going to use my babies for that game, continue singing the song you were singing seven months ago."

He's frustrated because this isn't the right time for all this. He wants to be supportive, to start his journey as a father.

"It's not too late Vumo, why don't you want me to be here?"

"It's too late. I've already protected my babies on my own and took..." She can't breathe! Her chest is tightening and dry, tears are pouring out again.

"You mean he almost hurt my sons?"

No answer.

"Vumo, did that Mthokozisi of yours try to hurt my sons?"

"No," she says. There's no way she's going to allow blood to be shed in this hospital.

"If he did I'm going to kill him."

"You're not going to kill anyone."

He shakes his head and breaks a short chuckle.

"I'm coming back later. Do you need anything?"

She picks her phone and keeps busy- pretends to.

He walks out, a deep sigh escapes her mouth.

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Mthoko

He walks back in, it's just a few minutes before the visiting hour ends. He should've left and went home, he'd gone through enough embarrassment for the day. But like Nomusa said, he's dumb- he's still here.

"Are you okay?" Vumo asks.

She knows he's not okay, so he doesn't answer, he just sits.

"Tomorrow we are flying to Cape Town," she announces.

"Congratulations!" He doesn't share the excitement, he's cold.

"It's not a vacation, you can't say congratulations," Vumo says.

"But it's a family reunion, right?"

"No," she denies.

A moment of silence passes, Mthoko is looking down at his hands.

Then he looks up, "You made me feel useless after everything we've been through, just because they afford things I don't have."

"Because I asked you to give us a moment?" Vumo frowns.

“You didn’t stand up for me. Vumo, I’ve been standing up for us, for you and the babies, from my friends and family. I endured labels and mockery, all because I believed in us. And this is what you do to me first day your babydaddy arrives? Exactly what my sisters said you’d do.”

“And you beat me up for it after doing all that for me, I don’t owe you anything Mthokozisi.”

“I’m not saying you owe me something, I’m...”

“Good!”

He inhales sharply, “I’m just saying you have to make your ex and his brother respect me.”

“Why can’t you make them respect you? You’re a man, so are they. Why do you need me to step in and do something?”

His chest tightens, he exercises a few breaths to collect himself.

“Are we still together?” He never thought he’d be asking this question today- so soon.

“That’s a good question,” she says.

“Vumo come on, I love you. I wasn’t perfect, yes. But you saw my efforts, I stood by you, I supported you and loved you the best way I could.” His eyes burn up. He shuts them with his fingers and exhales heavily.

He looks at her, eyes bloodshot. “You’re the only thing close to happiness that I have. You know where I come from, how hard my life has been, please don’t hurt me like that. I deserve a chance,

just like everyone else.”

“I don’t want a stepfather for my babies. I don’t want to confuse them, they can only have one father and that’s Sikelela,” Vumo says.

“You said we are going to be parents, me and you.”

Vumo sighs, “Seriously, I’m not doing this now, I have a lot going on.”

“Are you going to come back home from Cape Town?”

“Home? Hhayi bo Mthoko!”

“You’re making me look stupid.” He looks down and shamefully covers his face.

Vumo picks her phone and scrolls down her messages. At least they haven’t drawn any attention from other new mothers, this is just ridiculous.

“I will bring you some clothes later,” he says lifting his head.

“You don’t have to, I’ll be wearing a hospital gown anyway,” she says.

“You don’t want me around?”

She sighs, “You can come but he’s coming back too.”

“I will come!”

She didn’t expect that. Her brows furrow, why is he sudden this brave?

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SIKELELA

Hubo offered to come and fetch him from the hospital. He was coming too but something came up. There's someone he remembered somewhere in town and went there. Not surprising, right? He's Hubo, he knows people from all places.

The taxi drops Sikelela opposite the hospital, he's carrying a shopping bag with cosmetics he thought Vumo might need in the hospital and foodie bag. When he went to Ackermans looking for premature baby clothes store workers told him to hold his horses a little bit and laughed behind their hands.

He crosses the road deeply focused on his thoughts. He doesn't notice two men walking towards him until they bump onto his chest.

"Watch where you're going," one says.

He was going to say sorry but now he's got no reason to. He pushes his way between them and get blocked by one's arm.

He can't act crazy, he's a father now. He inhales sharply, turns back to the man locking eyes with him for the first time. It's Vumo's scumbag.

"Now your eyes are open," Mthoko says as his brows furrow in confusion.

“Are you trying to fight me?” Sikelela asks, he’s not insinuating anything, just getting to the bottom of it.

It takes a split second, the other guy plunges a knife below his right arm. The bags in his hands drop to the ground as he tries to fight back. The guy with the knife aims for his chest but he manages to hold his hand, not knowing that Mthoko has a cudgel. It lands and cracks behind his head.

He falls down on the ground just as people start screaming and calling for help. Mthoko and his partner run off.

The first security guard to arrive at the scene checks his pulse. He’s still alive.

Two other security guards rush to carry him inside the hospital before it’s too late. He’s bleeding a lot from his right side with several knife wounds.

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SIKELELA

CHAPTER 37

HUBO

Sikelela is irritating, why the hell is he not picking up the phone?

He tries one last time, this time if Sikelela doesn't pick up he will walk back to Hlabathini. He should be acting car-less.

"Hello," a female answers.

Hubo frowns. This is not like Sikelela, this means he's hooked up with a nurse inside the hospital. "Sho, where is Sikelela?" he asks.

"You're his family?"

"Yes, I'm your brother-in-law. Where are you keeping him?"

"Sir, your brother is in the hospital," the woman says.

"I know, I'm outside waiting for him."

There's a brief sigh...

"He's fighting for his life. He was stabbed by two men outside Queen Nandi hospital earlier and rushed here, to Ngwelezane hospital."

"No, you can't be talking about my brother. Is he dark-skinned? No, not dark, I mean black-black, with a Mohawk cut?"

"Yes, his identity card was with him. He's under intense care unit for advance respiratory support. "

His hand slowly drops down to his lap, the call is still ongoing, he curses in a low voice.

Even though he didn't know Sikelela's enemies could reach the streets of Empangeni, he still feels like this is his fault, he chose to hook-up with an ex instead of staying with his brother and protecting him. He has to report to Sthembiso and tell him he didn't accompany Sikelela to the hospital but went to kwaNhliziy'ngiyise instead. That will definitely go south but he will do that once he's seen how bad the situation is, then before the week ends he will find whoever did this to Sikelela and reunite them with their maker.

He's not going to panic, now is not the time for that. He clutches on the wheel, presses hard on the accelerator and follows the Union Street, heading towards Smith St while reciting a silent prayer.

He's not let in to see Sikelela right away. It takes the last drop of patience for him to sit two hours on the waiting chairs, staring at the nurses walking up and down in front of him, not giving a damn about his presence.

He's finally attended by the matron who explains the severity of Sikelela's wounds and how much blood he lost. He's in a critical condition but there's hope.

After two minutes of begging, he's let in to see him for five minutes.

Seeing him so helpless, breathing through the machines, brings tears in Hubo's eyes. But he won't cry because he knows how strong Sikelela is, he's not going to die.

"Bafo angithi ngeke ungshiye?" He wants assurance from Sikelela that he's not going to leave. But Sikelela is sedated, he cannot give him the assurance.

"I know I'm a headache but your presence has comforted me. You came into my life when I needed you the most. Having you by my side has made my healing journey easier after losing ubaba, you're everything and more of what he was. The way you tolerate me, hate me when I'm around and call me ten minutes after I've left; those are the things that make you the unique brother. It didn't take you long to understand me. You and I take advices from one another, you cannot make any decision without me. When it's time for you to die, you will seek advice from me first. I'm going to come back tomorrow morning, I have to take the things you bought for Vumo to her, the nurses kept them. And then I'm going to call home and let them know you're here." He takes a brief pause and exhales heavily thinking about the chaos that's about to break when MaXulu and Co, Cebile and Londeka find out about this. Why didn't Sgcino see this coming though? He has to ask him the next time he sees him. Selective sangomahood won't be tolerated!

"Bafo, if you get the chance ask for the number of a slim nurse with blonde haircut for me. I think she can make me forget about Ayanda. Thinking about one girl everyday before going to bed and trying to find love knowing very well that your heart is still

somewhere else sucks.” He takes a deep breath and chuckles. “Do you think I have bad lucks? At least Vumo loved you, look at you now, you’re a father. Sthembiso had a wife who loved him with everything she had. But me, I don’t have any story except that I have an ex whom I still love very much and will never get. Damn, I shouldn’t be here talking about myself. Get me the blonde nurse’s number, I will find people who did this to you before this week ends.”

Someone clears the throat behind him. The blonde-hair nurse, hopefully she heard him, that would cut the chasing.

“Your time is up,” her attitude isn’t pretty like her face.

“I was leaving,” he says.

She raises her eyebrow, he’s still standing next to the bed staring at her.

“Then please leave sir, I have to do my job,” she pleads.

He glances at Sikelela, “I will see you bafo, tomorrow be up and talking. Your sister-in-law is asking me to leave now.”

The nurse looks annoyed, she’s that feisty type, which is more intriguing. But he’s not going to make any move, there’s a situation him and his family has to deal with first.

On second thought, leaving the hospital to Queen Nandi, he calls Sthembiso. The sooner they find out the better.

“Hlongwane,” he says in a lowered voice as Sthembiso picks up.

“Mahubo what’s up?” Sthembiso is already suspicious, Hubo doesn’t get humble for no reason.

“There’s a situation here. Sikelela was attacked and stabbed by two guys, he’s in hospital as we speak.”

“What? When? How? Where were you?” This is what he didn’t want, the panic!

“He’s alive, just in need of respiratory support and blood transfusion,” he says.

“Respiratory support?” That’s a big word for Sthembiso, this means Sikelela cannot breathe on his own and that means he might die.

“Yes, but they say he’s going to be fine,” Hubo assures him.

“Is it the Mshengus again?” It’s not an obsession, they will always come first in his mind whenever something bad happens to his family. They deserve that.

“I don’t know but I’m going to find out very soon,” Hubo says.

“I’m coming,”- Sthembiso.

“Better come in the morning. For now call his mother and let her know. I’m on my way to drop the things he bought for Vumo.”

“Don’t tell her about this,” Sthembiso says.

“Why? She’s going to ask questions, you know she doesn’t like me because...”

“Hubo just do what I tell you to do!”

He sighs, "Okay, where must I say he's at?"

"Say there was an emergency, he had to come home."

"I'm not a good liar but I'll try."

Vumo hates him, that's why he was going to pick Sikelela outside the gate- to avoid drama. But now he has to go there and face her. A lot happened between them, from smashing behind Sikelela's back to him spilling the beans to Sikelela causing them to break up when he found out they were brothers. Obviously now she hates him ten times worse. Unfortunately this time he's the uncle of her children, they're family.

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STHEMBISO

He had MaXulu and MaDlamini in the car coming from the shopping centre when Hubo's call came. It was going to take long for him to drive to Mashoba to drop them off and come back to Hlabathini again. So he just took the off-ramp towards Mganwini and headed to the Dlamukas, with his mothers in the car.

MaXulu knows Cebile from pictures and she was told about her as the senior wife. But she's never felt connected to her the way she is to MaDlamini and MaJiyane. Not because she didn't get a ring on her finger, something about the way Mkhonto felt about her rubbed her the wrong way. And she birthed a Hlongwane

marked child. Even though Mkhonto kept his distance from Sikelela, MaXulu knew he carried him in his heart and through Londeka. Unfortunately Sthembiso had to go through the most for that to happen. His needs were ignored the most, at some point he had to prove himself twice before getting acknowledgement from Mkhonto, if he got any. Driving trucks during weekends and delivering sand and blocks to customers, helping out at the hardware store and juggling it all with his business studies, without any gratitude from Mkhonto. But Londeka showing up at the hardware store and smiling at the workers with her arms folded was met with a shower of compliments and gifts. MaXulu had to step in, before her son felt completely abandoned, and unfortunately in trying to fill that gap there was a crack in her relationship with Londeka.

A part of her blamed Cebile because if it wasn't for her, her children would've grown in a warm house receiving equal love from their parents.

"You know your way around," she says from the back, as Sthembiso parks below the Dlamuka homestead.

"I've been here twice," he says.

She looks at MaDlamini; they share a frown.

"Here to do what?" they ask in unison.

"To see umama," Sthembiso says opening his door and climbing out.

"Umama?" MaXulu raises her eyebrow.

MaDlamini chuckles, "It's just out of respect."

"I will wait in the car."

"Come on sisi, let's go inside and check how she lives. This person was the sidechick of our husband."

"You'd think someone was just a sidechick not knowing she owned your man's heart more than you do."

MaDlamini frowns, "Meaning?"

"Meaning let's sit in the car, we will see her in the meeting."

This doesn't settle well with MaDlamini but she remains seated.

Sthembiso doesn't bother with them, he heads towards the yard with his phone against his ear. He's on the call postponing his meeting with his late wife's lover. He's the only person who can give him the desperately needed closure right now. Did Zime love him the way he thought she did?

He drops the call and slides the phone into his pocket. Cebile is already standing at the door, her instincts have been subtly telling her something bad but she hasn't been able to put a finger on it.

Now Sthembiso is here, looking all broken and scared.

"Where's my son Sthembiso?" she demands to know, tapping her fingers on the wall restlessly.

"Ma, can we sit?"

Sit? No.

“He’s my world. My only son. The only family that I have. Where is he? You said he was coming back this evening,” she says.

Sthembiso exhales heavily, unable to look at her in the eye.

“He was attacked in Empangeni. He’s in the hospital right now getting all the help he needs. I’m sorry Ma.”

“You left with him Sthembiso. You weren’t supposed to leave him there, he has enemies everywhere and he’s always ready to fight.”

“Hubo was supposed to be with him, I had to take MaXulu and MaDlamini to the shops and...look Ma, it was a mistake and we are going to make sure justice is served and he gets all the help he needs.”

She pulls a chair and sits hopelessly.

“And the babies?”

“They’re going to be okay. I will make sure of it.”

“I made a mistake, I should’ve handled this on my own, he’s been mine since birth. Now both him and his sons are fighting for their lives, I’ve been warning him about this whole Hlongwane nonsense, look what’s happening now!” She’s on her feet pacing up and down. Sthembiso remains silent, maybe they deserve this, after all it was the Hlongwanes who were supposed to handle this matter and they’re failing right from the beginning.

She turns her face to him, “Who did this?”

“Hubo is investigating,” Sthembiso says.

“Is Hubo a detective?”

Clearing throat...

“No, he’s not.”

“Get serious Sthembiso!”

He nods, “We will find them, I promise.”

“You have to take me to my son.”

“Hubo is there, we will go in the morning, I still need to take my mothers home.”

She frowns, “They’re here?”

“In the car outside. Don’t worry about them, you’ll meet them when the time is right.”

“But I have to offer them a drink.”

“No, don’t worry,” he quickly dismisses it. He knows they’re going to judge her water or whatever it is that she wants to offer them. His fathers wives are drama queens, right now he needs no drama.

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HUBO

No visitors are allowed at this hour but an exception was made for him because the nurses understand the situation. They show him Vumo’s bed, she’s lying on her side scrolling her phone.

“Maka wele, you have a visitor,” the nurse tells her.

She lifts her head slowly, a frown spreads across her face when she sees Hubo. Neither Mthoko or Sikelela came back in the afternoon as promised. She’s mad at both of them, Hubo showing up is making it even worse.

“Why are you here?” Her voice is hushed, other mothers are sleeping with their babies.

“I was sent by Sikelela,” Hubo says.

“Where is he? Why didn’t he come here himself?”

“He’s home, there’s an emergency. Where should I put this stuff? It smells like pills and needles in here.”

She blows a low sigh and shows him the bedside cabinet. If it was up to her they wouldn’t be close, him and Sikelela. Their relationship is going to make her life awkward moving forward.

“How are you?” he asks.

He’s still standing, sigh!

“I’m good Hubo,” she says.

“And the babies?”

“The other one is strong and the other one not so strong. I’m hoping for the best while preparing for the worst.” She’s not supposed to be vulnerable with Hubo, there can’t be any sort of friendship between them—he’s one of the biggest mistakes she made in this life.

“They’ll be fine, their father is strong, I’m sure they have some of his fighting genes,” Hubo says.

“Nkanyezi, maybe. The other one is very fragile, even with looks, he’s nothing like Sikelela.”

“They already have looks? Aren’t they premature, like rodents?”

Rodents, really? She rolls her eyes and picks her phone looking irritated.

“I didn’t mean to offend you, I’m just trying to understand. So the other one is going to live, guaranteed?”

“Nkanyezi is going to leave if they’re separated sooner. I’m just worried about what my sister told me.”

“What did she tell you?”

“That twins are twisted. Maybe I will be shocked after the surgery when the twin I least expected comes out alive.”

“But that would be still great, right?” he asks.

“He’s got your face and nose.”

He frowns, “Who? The other twin?”

“Yes,” she nods.

“Is that why you haven’t named him and referring to him as the “other” twin? Because you’re scared he might survive and look like me?”

“Of course not, I love them both but I have to be mentally prepared for whatever happens after the surgery.”

“Fuck you, Vumo! Fuck you, okay?”

“Hubo!”

He’s leaving. Vumo can hate him all she wants but that shouldn’t come between her and Sikelela’s babies. Whether the other twin looks like him or not, he’s Sikelela’s and Sikelela would be a dick if he thinks otherwise. Him and Vumo happened way before she fell pregnant and broke up with Sikelela. They’ve worked through that as brothers, they cannot take another step back just because one of the babies look like him. He’s a Hlongwane, this won’t be the first time a child looks like an uncle.

SIKELELA

CHAPTER 38

They left KZN without Sikelela. As much as Vumo had been unwelcoming and telling him she wants no part of him in the twins' life, leaving without him seeing them off was a bit unsettling. She's been fighting back tears and swallowing a lump that's been stuck in her throat from the moment they flew out of KZN.

Sthembiso was already in Cape Town when they arrived. He's been very supportive and hands-on with every decision made. The surgery room was cleared for the twins, it could take over 24 hours for them to be separated.

Sthembiso walks into the room she's been put in. Unlike Hubo, she's respectful and humble towards him. Not only because he's paying for the surgery expenses, his character is commanding, he's nothing like Hubo.

"Are you okay?" He has a McDonald's foodie bag. She hasn't eaten the chicken he bought her earlier, her stomach can't take anything at the moment.

"I'm anxious," she says.

He pulls the plastic chair and sits.

"Why is Sikelela not calling or even sending a message? I thought he was ready to be a father." This has been bothering her since

yesterday. Maybe she was too hard on Sikelela, she allowed frustration to take over her judgment.

“You’ll understand when he explains. He wants to be here more than anything but unfortunately there’s a situation he cannot control,” Sthembiso says.

“Is he going to come after handling that situation?” she asks.

“I cannot tell, all I can say is that he’s ready to be a father, everyone is excited.” He’s not answering the question, he’s just doing his job as a brother; making sure she channels her emotions to the right place for now.

“If he doesn’t come that means from here I will be going back to Mthoko. This time it will be harder because he might harm the boys too, when he’s drunk he loses his mind.” She shouldn’t be opening up about her relationship with Mthoko to Sikelela’s brother, but the possibility of going back scares her.

Sthembiso’s shock invites a slight frown on his face. “What are you trying to say?”

“I had a very difficult time during my pregnancy. Even if I showed you the scars on my body it wouldn’t reveal the amount of pain I’ve gone through. Never in my life had I ever thought I’d be sexually abused and convince myself it’s not that deep because he was drunk. To be slapped, punched and kicked like a donkey, and still pick a plate and dish for the very same person. During my reign as the girls’ leader, I talked about these things, I advised girls to never put up with abuse, to always choose themselves. I guess I’m just not a woman of my words, I’ve done the opposite

of every word I attached to those girls.”

Sthembiso knows her history with Sikelela and the encounter she had with Hubo. None of that suits this young, beautiful girl he sees in front of him. He cannot judge her because he’s never lived a day in her shoes. But one thing he knows of is how hard it is to have people look up to you and expect you to be a sample of perfection.

“I cannot stay with my mother in one house and see her cry herself to sleep everyday, knowing very well that my actions got her kicked out. It had been long time coming but despite everything they went through in their marriage, they had done one thing right- me. I became the glue to their marriage. And one mistake ruined my life, my sister’s, my mother’s and obviously Sikelela’s. I’m angry with myself, maybe everything Mthoko put me through was a punishment from God. Fine, I deserved that. But what did my babies do wrong?” She lifts her eyes to Sthembiso, they’re moist with tears, this is too much for one person.

“Nobody deserves to be abused, Maka Wele. Don’t put that on yourself, you have your own problems which you’re brave enough to deal with, without hurting anyone. Unfortunately some people are cowards, they’d rather abuse and inflict pain on others than to confront their real issues. You’re young, you’ve made mistakes, we all have. You’re not responsible for anyone’s marriage or relationship except yours. Don’t burden yourself and hold yourself responsible for every problem under the sun. This is the most difficult day of your life, you need to focus on that.”

She shrugs, tears dropping down on her cheeks.

“I guess I just needed Sikelela here with me so that we can face this day together. But izono zikamama ziwela ezinganeni zakhe, right?”

“You will understand his reasons for not reaching out. Please wipe those tears, recharge your spirit and come see your babies before they undergo surgery.”

She nods, wiping her face with the sleeve of her gown.

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It's thirty minutes before the surgery. Both Vumo and Sthembiso are with the twins in their incubator. The other twin looks even more fragile, looking at him knowing that today may be the last time she sees him breaks her. Sikelela grew up alone as a child, he never had the bond that these two. Why must God do this to her babies? She wants to watch them grow old together, to dress them in matching tracksuits and confuse their names. She wants that crazy life of being a twins mother.

“He's so cute,” she says in a low whisper.

Sthembiso clears his throat and steps closer. His eyes are on Nkanyezi. He's given his instruction to the surgeon leading the medical team. If there's any twin to be sacrificed it has to be Nkanyezi. This is something he's going to live with for the rest of his life. Nkanyezi is a strong little boy and he's done a great job supporting his brother with his blood to this day. That alone

proves that he's going to take after his grandfather; he's brave. And that's something the family can't have, so he's given permission for a larger part of the liver to be given to the other twin.

"You have to give him a name," he's telling Vumo.

She nods, "I know, I'm still thinking about it. It has to be meaningful, just like Nkanyezi- his brother's shining star."

A moment of silence passes, they're staring at the boys like it's the last time they see both of them. Sthembiso takes out his phone and snaps a number of pictures, focusing more on Nkanyezi's face, the first innocent life he might be responsible of destroying.

"Osang'elibanzi elingavulwa abantukazana ngoba livalwe zihlangu zamadoda!"

Vumo turns to him with a slight frown- where did that come from?

"They're a blessing, both of them, in their unique ways. God made no mistake," he says.

Just confusing! She smiles awkwardly and looks back at the babies.

"This isn't goodbye, it can't be," she whispers under her breath.

This is directed to both of them, this is not goodbye.

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LONDEKA

I didn't think I'd be so broken meeting my friend for the first time since the accident and all that drama. Hubo says he can now breathe on his own and talk but unless I see him for myself nothing will put me at ease. At this point I don't even know what to think. I don't think the Mshengus are still on our case, even though I wouldn't be surprised if they are, but this is just pure bad luck. How can one family go through so much?

Mela is looking all glamorous and spiffy. It's not awkward as we both thought it was going to be, we hug before settling on our table.

"Ms Ambassador!" she's beaming with pride.

"Yes girl," I say raising my hand for a high five.

As expected, the first part of our conversation is all things Skinture. The service is a bit slow here, we've been waiting for our drinks for over ten minutes. We might just wait the whole day for our food.

"How is you?" I ask her.

She exhales heavily and rests her hands on the table. It's a lot, I guess.

"Family matters," she says.

"You're excluded from the drama, right?" I ask.

"Not really, I'm in the middle of it all. But on a positive note, me

and Busizwe are trying to work things out, soon we are going to therapy.”

I don't see Sthembiso ever going to therapy with me. I can imagine him looking at the therapist with one of those stony faces of his.

“That's good babe,” I say.

Our drinks are brought at last. I'm having a margarita blended with ice. Of course Cinderella is having strawberry milkshake opposite me, it's one of those days.

“Why are you drinking mid-week, Ms Skinture?” People who've been sober for two minutes will judge you more than God for drinking one cocktail, just one.

“Sikelela was stabbed, he's in the hospital,” I'm just making an excuse, Sikelela is not the reason why I'm drinking. Her friend, Sgcino, is the problem. I don't know if it's the abstinence but I feel like we are slowly turning into “an old married couple” that get butterflies over sharing a cup of tea.

“Who stabbed him? I hope that had nothing to do with Busizwe.”

“Why would it have anything to do with him?” I frown.

“Because they had a confrontation a few weeks ago at my place.”

“I don't think Busizwe stabs people and run,” I say.

She chokes on her milkshake and looks at me with her eyebrows snapped.

“Did you just say that? I mean defend my brother.”

It's shocking, I know. But I'm a deep thinker, unlike both her brothers and mine.

"I don't let anger cloud my judgment," I say.

She laughs, "You've grown."

"Life experiences make us grow. Just like the one that almost made us enemies. I was shattered but I understood things from your perspective." We've talked about it over the phone, it's all water under the bridge, she's more forgiving than I am.

"He had just lost his wife. I understood his pain and that he was trying to get revenge to heal his conscience. He went about it the wrong way though. I guess we all make crazy decisions in our weakest hours," she says, a beaming smile cracking from her lips. Anything that has Sthembiso's name in it makes her blush, even him kidnapping her and almost killing her. Refuse with me Lord! (Nqaba nami Nkosi)

"How is he?" she asks.

"Who, Sikelela or Sthembiso?"

She gives me a little eyeroll before answering. "I'm talking about Sikelela, we are no longer talking, he's angry at me."

"I don't think he's angry, Sikelela is not petty. I think he's just hurt, he hasn't been much lucky when it comes to love."

It's easy to read a yellowbone's face, redness blushes over her cheeks as she tries to mask her emotions with a long slurp from her milkshake.

“He’s going to be okay though. He’s one of the strongest people I know. He had a tough upbringing but he’s still able to love. I think it takes a strong head to do that when you’ve never witnessed love growing up. I can’t say he’s unlucky, he just haven’t met the right person.”

“You’re right.” She picks a serviette and wipes her lips aggressively, tearing the serviette into pieces.

“Where the fuck is our food?” she yells, turning from her chair to look at the waiters gathered at the counter. “Are we going to get our food after you’re done gossiping there?”

Their service is slow, they kinda deserve this clap. But come on, who has Mela ever shouted at before?

“How annoying!” she adjusts on her chair with her face turning red.

“Is it about the service though?” I’m trying hard not to laugh, I’ve never seen an angry Mela before.

“Yes, fuckin’ yes!”

I can’t help but break into laughter.

“Or you’re just mad because you’re robbing yourself life.” God forgive my smart mouth!

It looks like I just dropped a bomb on her when she least expected.

“I haven’t robbed myself of any life,” she argues.

“Mela, you’ve never opened your heart for anyone. Not that you’ve never liked any guy, you just didn’t open up because you already had your future with someone else drawn up.”

“Is that a bad thing?” she asks.

“Is it not? You’re robbing yourself happiness because you think there’s a perfect life waiting for you. What if that doesn’t happen? What is going to compensate you for all the years you’ve lost waiting for someone who...I’m sorry mnge, but someone who doesn’t even think of you.”

“He’s still mourning,” she says.

SMH! Let me get another glass of cocktail. The waiter is making his way towards our table with our food. I’m sure they were waiting for ingredients that were being shipped from overseas.

“He wanted to take us out for lunch this week before the Sikelela issue came up. Do you know where he was going to take us?”

She’s adding sauce to her chips with one hand, her eyes are on me splashed with curiosity.

“McDonald’s to buy us burgers and milkshakes. Because in his head you’re just a little sister like myself.”

She laughs, “You don’t know what’s on his mind.”

“But I know you’re not what’s on his mind, periodt!”

“He lost his wife not so long ago, I don’t blame him.”

Now I think mothers should hire her for their kids’ birthday, she’s a fuckin’ clown.

She blows a low sigh, stops eating and looks at me with sympathy-begging eyes.

“I feel like now I know him, we have talked on a deeper level, and his wife is no more. Why should I give up?”

I’ve never had a crush lasting more than a year. I had one on Ne-Yo but he took his hat off. I cannot relate to how she’s feeling, maybe that’s why I’m looking at her like she’s lost some of her marbles.

“Can I ask you something?”

She nods.

“If you hadn’t gone through what you went through and Busizwe was your hero growing up, do you think you would’ve had a crush on Sthembiso?”

“I don’t know,” she says after probing for a minute.

“I think you just want to feel safe and he’s that place for you. In your head he’s some sort of hero, you have shut out every possibility of another man becoming a part of your life because you’re scared they’re not going to be what you think Sthembiso is.”

“Gosh Londeka, stop trying to be a psychologist,” she says, pulling her plate and eating her chips.

“And unfortunately Sikelela swept you off your feet, you enjoyed his company but you wanted it in your shell. You didn’t want to come out of your shell because...”

“Stop Londeka!” she snaps.

I laugh, if I’m lying why is she getting all worked up.

“Admit it,” I say.

“Sikelela is a genuine man. I liked his approach, consistency and his perspective on love. But I don’t think he deserves someone like me, I have this huge crush on his brother and a lot of issues to deal with in my personal life. After everything he’s gone through, I think he deserves someone who’s going to be there for him wholeheartedly.”

“I’m talking to Melamina about Melamina. What does she deserve?” I say.

She’s snapping her fingers for the waiter and asking for plain water.

Me and my margarita will wait for the answer.

“Happiness,” she says.

“And someone who notices you Mela. Don’t deprive yourself a chance to be loved because of your fantasies.” I don’t advise people but now that I’m in a relationship I feel like a relationship expert, never mind that my own relationship has holes in it.

“Enough about you,” I say cracking a fake smile, I can see that I’m stressing her with all this mature talk. “Sgcino hasn’t touched me.”

She frowns, “How?”

“Like we haven’t had sex.”

“Because you don’t visit him.”

“Come on, we can have sex during the day. What confuses me is

that he gets an erection when we kiss and I do feel him wanting to rip my clothes off, but he never go any further.”

“You have nice life problems yazi,” she says.

“How is that nice? What if he cooks two-minutes noodles?”

She chokes down a laugh and takes a sip of water.

“Would you leave him?” she asks.

“No, I love him, we’d find other alternatives. But the sooner I know about his skills, the better.”

“You’re just horny,” she’s laughing again.

I don’t expect her to understand, she’s been waiting for Sthembiso longer than Christians have waited for Jesus to come back.

From here I’m heading home, Mashoba. I need to know what’s going on, what everybody is thinking and what’s next. Sikelela was stabbed, he’s lying in the hospital, that won’t just slide off, someone has to pay. I don’t even know if I’m still safe where I stay or not. Someone is out there baying for our blood and we don’t even know who it is.

“I regret tipping that waiter,” she says as we climb down the stairs.

She’s still dramatic about their service, surprisingly I’m not.

“I’m sure it was the kitchen staff, not the waiters,” I say.

She clicks her tongue, “Still, they were moving like snails.”

There's a taxi parked in front of the restaurant. It's familiar because it operates in Mashoba. It's one of her brothers, normally I'd be freaking out but I'm not.

"MaMshengu," the voice comes behind us.

We turn our heads. I'm my father's daughter, he notices me instantly and frowns. It's Busizwe with his striped T-shirt and brown utility pants. I didn't know Brooks runners still exist.

"What are you doing here?" he asks Mela.

"I was having lunch with my friend."

I'm also standing to this family conversation, Mela and I came in one car, I can't leave without her.

"I see," he turns his eyes to me for a split second and looks back at his sister.

I'm sure his hand is itching to slit my throat into pieces but he can't do that in front of Mela. I'd make one phone call and Hubo would be here, he doesn't intimidate me.

"Where did you buy your runners?" I ask.

He's looking at me like I'm a piece of used toilet paper.

"Bhuti, my friend is asking a question," Mela nudges his arm.

How annoying am I? The way he looks at me says more than anyone he's ever met.

"At the shops, that's where people buy shoes," he says.

"I didn't know Brooks is still a brand," I state.

Mela looks at me with her eyes widened.

“You’re being spicy now, let’s go.” She’s pulling my arm.

I wasn’t trying to throw any shade, I don’t fight my brothers’ battles.

“I’m sure it’s legacy shoes, from your grandfather to you. You wouldn’t buy these for yourself in the 20th century, right Busizwe?”

“Don’t talk to me like that,” he says sternly. .

Mela’s hand tightens around my arm. She’s so dramatic!

“This is how I talk to everyone, don’t worry.” He mustn’t take offense in that.

Mother hen- Mela- is pulling me away.

SIKELELA

CHAPTER 39

STHEMBISO

He had had hope that both twins would survive. He's never believed in miracles but in this one instance he did. He was holding his father in high regard, unnecessary so. Why wouldn't Mkhonto use any opportunity he gets, even in his death, to test him and make his life miserable? After 15 hours of scissors and unimaginable strength from both boys, a fatal decision had to be made. Born with underdeveloped heart, a condition known as hypoplastic left heart syndrome, Twin B had no chance of surviving unless a heart was donated to him within twenty-four hours.

"Mr Hlongwane, we have a problem," announced the leading surgeon, Dr Butler.

Just when he thought it was over, he summed up a huge breath and looked at her with his eyes burning.

"What now Giana?" He snapped at her unnecessarily and with disrespect. He should've referred to her as Dr Butler, they don't know each other on that personal level. Unfortunately he was tired, he had stayed up throughout the surgery.

"Twin B's pulse is very weak. I have sought advice from Dr Chumayo, the cardiologist. He needs a heart transplant urgently."

“W-hat!” He almost fell on his feet.

A heart transplant? That was huge.

“Is there any other option? Maybe a temporary medication to buy me some time?”

Dr Butler shook her head.

“But we were almost there. Damn it!” He turned and punched the wall.

If it was someone else she would’ve been freaked out but as a doctor she understood his reaction.

“I’m so sorry, we have tried our best,” she stated.

He took a few deep breaths, remembering why he was doing this in the first place, and then turned to her.

“Twin B has to live,” he said and swallowed hard. “Even if that means you have to take his brother’s heart.”

“I need the mother’s consent, Mr Hlongwane.” She wasn’t that much surprised because they had discussed the possibility of saving Twin B should anything happen.

Getting Vumo’s consent was going to be a problem because there was no way Vumo was going to consent to that. He had to figure that out, it wasn’t Dr Butlers job, she had already put her career on the line, as well as her morals.

Sthembiso walked into the room looking for her. Upon walking in

a woman she's staying with told him to check in the bathroom. He couldn't do that, he's Sikelela's brother, it would've been inappropriate. So he waited at the passage for almost five minutes wondering what was taking Vumo so long. The very same lady came to him and asked if he'd check if everything was alright.

That raised his eyebrows.

"Was she not well?" he asked.

"She said she was feeling light-headed," the woman said with a calm face.

"And you didn't follow her to the bathroom?" He was rather annoyed.

"The nurse said I must rest. I think my baby is crying," she hurried off, back to the room.

There was no time to analyze her mental state, however there was no crying baby anywhere, which proved a mental case.

Entering a female bathroom was awkward but there was no else in sight to help him.

"Maka Wele," he knocked at one closed door and got no response.

Other doors were left open, he had to knock again on that one.

Vumo didn't answer. He broke the door handle without much effort and walked into her lying on the floor with her eyes closed. The position she was at showed that she had fallen and landed on the floor unconsciously. He picked her up and ran out screaming

for help.

It was syncopal episode, a sudden drop of blood flow to the brain resulting into unconsciousness and loss of muscle control. They suspected the amount of stress she must've gone through after giving birth. The doctor recommended rest and counseling.

"We need the father to consent organ transplant from one twin to another and second surgery," Dr Butler said looking at him with suspicious eyes.

"He's in KZN, hospitalized too," he said.

She chortled and scribbled something on the file.

"A family member?" She lifted her eyes to him. They were accusing him of something.

"Giana...I mean Dr Butler, I hope you know that I'm not behind this. I found her passed out in the bathroom."

"I believe you," she said with a thin grin. "Please write your name and sign here."

He took the pen and filled in his details as the next of kin. His hand was shaking but as his father would say, he had to grow a backbone.

He went to the car as soon as another surgery was announced, leaving every other obstacle to Dr Butler to solve. He felt as though his heart had made an exit out of his body. He couldn't feel his own fingers, his whole body was numb.

Someone knocked on the window. He kept quiet but the person kept knocking. Eventually he rolled down the window and sternly looked at the hospital cleaner who had a juice bottle and two oranges in his hand.

“Dr Butler sent me to give you this,” the cleaner said.

“Thanks.” He snatched the things and closed the window.

He had no appetite but he needed something to drink. Grapefruit was exactly what he needed. Needed for himself, not for a call from Busizwe.

“Who are you?” That’s how he answered even though he had already recognized the number.

“Hey wena keep your mother’s parrot in check. I don’t fight women,” Busizwe said, clearly pissed.

“What are you talking about?” He could’ve just dropped the call but he was human enough to let him say his piece.

“You’re sending your sister to fight your battles,” Busizwe said.

“What did she say?” Deep down he knew Busizwe wasn’t making it up, Londeka’s mouth is capable of making people make phonecalls to their enemies.

“Just grow balls and tell her to stay out of this. What I wear is none of her business. My father did not steal, so I don’t have a truck company and hardware stores to keep up with fashion trends.”

“I’m sure she just spoke from her head, that’s how she is. I actually don’t have time for your whining.” He dropped the call, a sigh breezed out of his mouth. He couldn’t care less about Busizwe being offended by Londeka’s mouth. He deserved that and much more. But he needed to call Londeka to find out how her path crossed with Busizwe in the first place. Nobody knows what happened to Sikelela yet, they should be watching their own shadows.

Londeka picked up with so much ecstasy. “It’s going to rain cats and dogs, I’m receiving a call from you!”

She was just excited about getting a call from Sthembiso because they rarely call each other still.

“What did you say to Busizwe Mshengu?” Sthembiso asked.

“Busizwe Mshengu? Oh, Mela’s brother. I cannot remember what I said to him.”

“Of course you cannot remember because you offend thousand people a day and forget about it.”

“I didn’t mean to offend him, whatever I said.” A parrot wouldn’t be a word he use to call his sister because of the deep voice but she has a character of a very annoying bird.

“I don’t care about whatever you said to him. But for the thousand time Londeka, watch what you say to people. How did you even meet him? I thought we were being cautious of our steps given that one of our own is lying in the hospital.”

“I was out, having lunch with Mela,” she said.

“Now be careful. How is Mela?”

“She’s good, just worried about Sikelela,” she said that with a strange chuckle.

“Why would she be worried about him?” he asked.

“You don’t know?” Girly conversations are sometimes too exhausting for him.

“Never mind, I have to go,” he said.

“Wait, you’re not worried?”

He frowned, “About what?”

“I told her! Are the babies okay?”

“Yes, they’re okay,” he lied.

He cannot stand Londeka’s mouth as a brother who shared a womb with her but he wasn’t going to ask her to apologize to a Mshengu. Never!

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Nkanyezi suffered neonatal sepsis soon after the surgery, Dr Butler addressed during a media conference. It wasn’t what the medical team had anticipated because he was a stronger twin. Most of his organs failed, including kidneys and brain swelling. Family was consulted as both twins suddenly faced death and the doctors had reached a dead-end. Nkanyezi showed no signs of

recovery, instead his condition deteriorated. It became impossible for the team to reverse the brain coning as his brain had begun to force through the small opening at the back of his skull. The family member who was fit to make a decision under the gut-wrenching situation begged the doctors to save Twin B, who, at that point, had a better chance of survival if he received a heart transplant.

“It was the most complicated surgery I’ve ever taken on, with a lot of twists and challenges, but I’m glad we were able to save at least one twin. He’s still in NICU but all his organs are perfectly working. The team did a great job,” she flashed a smile with a slight nod.

There was a raucous round of applause as she shook each team member’s hand with gratitude.

“Can we have a word from the brave uncle?” one journalist enquired.

“Unfortunately, it’s been long three days for the family. They will publish a statement when they’re ready,” Dr Butler said.

Headlines had been made but Sthembiso wasn’t the only one feeling torn apart after everything was done and over with, Dr Butler had to take off the surgeon’s coat and deal with it as human. Mr Hlongwane, as she had referred to him from the first time they started talking over the phone, owes him a detailed explanation for what they’ve done.

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He should be with Vumo, finding ways of consoling her, but he's buried in his car in the hospital parking lot allowing his conscience to cut through his chest and giving him a reflection of every sin he's committed. Sikelela would've handled things differently if he was given a chance, Vumo too. Mkhonto just appointed him to do this because maybe he's heartless. Maybe that's why he doesn't have a child of his own and his wife cheated on him, because he's capable of committing such act and still breathe like everything is fine.

If Sikelela and Vumo find out he was behind this they will never forgive him. He's watched Vumo bond with Nkanyezi, praising his strength and asking him to be his brother's pillar but to never let that weigh him down. Under his instruction today, Nkanyezi gave up his life for his brother. Sikelela never got to meet him, his little copy, that's going to leave a huge gap in his heart.

He's obviously going to watch the other twin grow, although he's still in NICU and awaiting artificial skin grafting to cover up his stomach but the doctors are now positive that he's going to live.

A knock on his window- part of him wants to scream and block his own ears.

He rolls it down, it's Dr Butler with her purse clutched under her arm.

“I need a lift to Rock Thai Sushi,” she demands opening the door and letting herself inside the car.

I’m not your personal driver would’ve been fit, but she’s put a lot on the line for him.

“You’re hungry?” He starts the engine and takes a single glance at her.

“No, I’m curious,” she says, her ocean blue eyes fixed on him.

“About?”

“You don’t think you owe me a detailed explanation, Mr Hlongwane?”

“No, I don’t. I’m paying you.”

She chuckles in disbelief. She dedicated her three days into this surgery, leaving the comfort of her house in Everton and her private practice operations, making harsh sacrifices along the way.

“You think this is about money?” Her whole face is pale. She deserves more than half a million, money cannot pay for what she’s gone through emotionally.

“Alright Giana, my late father passed the message through a sangoma that I have to do what I did to break the chain of family curse that has been passed down from generations through particular genes.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Of course it doesn’t, you’re white,” she says.

“I’m not white, I’m Irish.”

He shoots a glance at her then his brows furrow.

“You don’t have red hair.” This short drive is giving him the fresh breath he needed, even this petty back and forth.

“Irish doesn’t mean red hair, it’s an ethnicity,” she sounds pissed.

“What made you leave Ireland?”

“I didn’t leave Ireland, I was born here,” sounds a bit defensive.

“I’m still waiting for an explanation.”

“I’m tired of speaking English. Ngingena ngakuphi la?”

“This way,” she shows him.

He’s a bit surprised and impressed. It’s a sushi place, he’ll wait in the car and drown in his sorrows again.

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SIKELELA

Hubo is staring, he’s staring right back. There’s nothing new he’s going to say, which is what pisses him off because they now know each other very well.

“The security guard said people heard an argument before those guys stabbed you. So you’re telling me you cannot even

remember their faces?”

“Nope,” he says.

“The doctor said your memory is fine. Why are you protecting them? If you want to handle them yourself just say so, I will back off.”

“Hubolethu!” he blows out a sigh and signals for him to give the phone from the charger.

“Who are you calling?” Hubo asks passing the phone to him.

“Sguqa, he should’ve said something by now,” he says.

Hubo is pissed but he has to understand that right now the twins are more important than revenge.

“Let me get some fresh air,” he walks out with his veins throbbing. Why can’t Sikelela just give him the names?!

It rings to voicemail the first time. He tries once again and this time Sguqa answers.

“Hey Sikelela,” his tone gives Sikelela no hope.

“What is going on? I’ve been waiting for you to call me.”

“I was about to call,” he says clearing his throat uncomfortably.

“One twin survived.”

Sikelela exhales heavily, “I guess a part of me prepared for that. How is Vumo?”

“I haven’t seen her after the second surgery, I’m scared. She bonded more with Nkanyezi, she was positive he was going to

make it and now he's gone."

"The stronger one?" Sikelela hasn't met them yet, all thanks to the Gumbi guy.

"Yes, unfortunately. A lot happened but that will be addressed to you by Giana."

"Who is Giana?" Sikelela asks.

"The specialist I hired. Look Sikelela, I'm sorry, I wish I had the power to save both of them."

"It's fine bhuti, I just need to get there as soon as possible."

"You're still in the hospital, Sikelela!"

"Don't worry about that." He drops the call and gets off bed, standing on his feet and pacing around his bed to test his strength.

Hubo walks back in, drinking a can of Red Bull, looking all charged up.

"What did he say?" he asks.

"Only one survived. I guess that's a combination of good and bad news," he says.

"Which one survived?"

"I've never met them, you know that. But Sthembiso said it's the other one."

“They’re both the other ones,” he releases a sigh of frustration. “I guess Vumo got what she wanted.”

Sikelela frowns, “What do you mean?”

“Never mind. Why are you standing?”

“Because I’m about to leave. My family needs me.”

“Don’t tell me you’re thinking of discharging yourself and going to Cape Town!”

“That’s exactly what I’m doing.”

“Your whole right side is stitched,” Hubo says.

“That’s nothing compared to what they went through. I need to fetch my boy’s body, a few knife wounds from that fool Mthokozisi cannot stop me from being a father to my...” He clenches his jaw, badly wanting to knock himself with a fist.

“I need his address,” Hubo says.

Now this, phewww!

SIKELELA

CHAPTER 40

LONDEKA HLONGWANE

I'm not used to the call saying 'I'm outside, open the door'. I like people to notify me before showing up but clearly the Zulu king is not about that life. I clear my clothes from the couch and hurry to open the door.

Okay, maybe he can show up at anytime if he wants. He's looking like a snack in that casual T-shirt, slimline joggers and leather slingback sandals. He looks very relaxed; good weekend vibes.

"Am I welcome in?" he asks smirking.

"Yes," I step aside making a way for him to walk in. Then I follow after him, appreciating the legs that God gave him. I wonder if I can take him to the beach, other couples normally go there on summer hot days.

"When are we going to the beach?" My mouth shoots straight and asks.

He sends his arm behind, links it around my waist and pulls me. At least I got a man who's a head taller than me, I love lifting my eyes to his face from his shoulder.

"I only go to the sea under instruction, MaHlongwane."

Of course he does. I'm a bit disappointed but this is one of those things I have to understand and accept because he cannot

change them.

“Unjani?” he asks.

I sit on his lap and exhale heavily. I’m not tired, I had a very good night, but when a man is around you fake everything.

“Tired,” I say.

His hand rubs my back, I throw my head back and release a fake sigh.

“Is Ntuthuko overworking you?”

Yes, he does. I have to take over hundred pictures only for him to choose three. But that’s not the case here.

“I’m just tired,” I say.

“Do you want me to massage you?”

“Not really. I want to sit like this.”

He chuckles and turns my face towards his.

I get my morning kiss at 9am. I’ve missed these lips, I plant soft kisses on them until he chuckles and pushes me back.

“I heard something,” he says.

My brows gather into a frown.

“What did you hear?” I ask.

“That you are not happy that we haven’t had sex and you think I might be hiding my whack performance.” Wow!

I understand that Mela is a mutual friend or whatever but that doesn't mean she must take things I say to her confidentially to her other friend. She's not going to get away with this, I know of her secrets too.

"I didn't say that," I deny with a straight face.

"You're not a good liar. I'm here to ask you something, not because you said that."

"Is it a bad thing?" I ask.

"I'd like you to come and see where I come from."

Excuse me, no excuse him! Where he comes from is where MaNgcobo married at, right?

"And meet your mother again?"

"This time as my girlfriend, please," he says.

I move from his lap and sit on my own. Yimani MaZulu amahle, he actually wants me to go and meet his mother who hated me at first sight. He wants me to poke a snake when it's peacefully coiled inside its hole.

"No, baby no!" I say.

"I thought you knew my intentions from the very first beginning. I need you to come home, where my umbilical cord was buried, for me to be free. You know I'm a spiritual person, I cannot just act however I want without making my people aware of the position I'm in."

"Are you trying to say I need to come to your father's house

before I can have sex with you?”

“Because I love you, Londeka. Just you stepping inside the Zulu premises and sharing a bath with me is enough. I can do this otherwise but I want to do it right.”

I’ve gotten to the point where I trust his word but I’m not having a good feeling about this.

“Why do we need to share a bath?” I ask.

“If we are willing to exchange sexual fluids, why should we not share a bath and scrub off our bodies in one bath?”

I see what he’s trying to do, typical man. But I’m clever than his tongue game.

“Sharing a bath is normal but the fact that you asked me it means that the bath you’re talking about is not normal. Explain or I’m not coming.”

A deep sigh!

“Okay, it’s something like a process of getting cleansed so that we can start our journey refreshed in body and spirits,” he says.

For his honesty I will do it. I do need cleansing for my personal reasons, I’ve associated myself with too many demons in this life.

“When?” I ask.

“Tomorrow.”

Whaaat?!

“You can’t tell me today and expect me to be ready tomorrow. I

don't have proper clothes, my nails are ugly, my hair needs neutralizer to restore pH balance, you can see it's now brittle."

"How much do you need?"

He thinks this is about money- not that I'm excluding it- but it's more about time.

"R3000 and two days," I say.

"Ntuthuko can organize all that in one day. You just need to give him your sizes and the list of everything that you want, then later tomorrow we can leave."

"Ntuthuko is busy," I say.

He takes out his phone and dials and puts it on loudspeaker.

Ntuthuko please don't answer!

He answers, there goes my prayer.

"Mfano," he says.

"Fuck you. I need your help."

"I charge per hour," Ntuthuko says.

"Fine. Londeka is going to send you sizes and other details, she wants "proper clothes", a hairdresser and..." He looks at me. I'm just dumbstruck. "She will tell you if there's more."

"No problem, you know I swing both ways. Consider it done."

Swing both ways? I don't know if I'm over-reading this because of what Sthembiso said about him or he jokingly hinted on it.

Sgcino drops the call and looks at me with a grin of victory.

“What’s your excuse now?”

“None,” I shrug.

“There’s another request.”

Oh Lord, he doesn’t stop. You give him the hand, he wants the whole arm.

“You have to come from your home to mine. Not from a flat.”

“Why?” He should know by now that you don’t ask me something and not give a reason behind it.

“Because I’m asking you to,” he says.

“I don’t have petrol,” I say.

“I will drive you home.”

“No, I want to take a taxi.”

“Fine, I will give you a taxi fare.”

Mister Solution!

I can’t believe I’m about to travel all the way to the north of KZN for him to start having sex with me.

“Do you need a drink?” I ask standing up and stretching my arms.

“I need food,” he says.

Who created men? I drag myself to the kitchen and look for fresher leftovers to warm up.

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He insisted on driving me home. Thankfully it was broad daylight, I didn't have to worry about him having another ghost-talking episode with my dead family members. Sthembiso's car is parked on the yard. I know only one twin survived, according to me that's good news. Some twins born that way don't survive at all. I leave my bags in my room and go on a greeting tour. That's what you do here if you don't want any court hearing, you tour each and every kitchen greeting and telling them you eat well where you stay. I go to MaJiyane's kitchen last, as much as she's part of the trio, she has that modernized character of the youngest wife. Her kitchen is always stocked with good snacks.

She's with Hubo, I walk in and go to the fridge before sitting with them on the table.

"Please grab a spoon for me," I say to Hubo.

He does so without debating, so much growth!

I dig into the yogurt and look at them. Why are they suddenly quiet?

"Who are we killing?" I ask.

"No one, yet. I'm still trying to trace him down, he's not on social networks."

"What's his name and what did he do?" I'm not going to do anything about it, I just like getting involved.

"Mthokozisi Gumbi. I don't know why Sikelela is protecting him, he

almost killed him.”

It’s the one who stabbed my twin! He needs to be found.

“He’s originally from Ulundi, Mhlahlane. But only his sisters live there, I need his current location, social media would’ve made that easy.” He’s scrolling down his phone looking frustrated.

I wish I can help but I can’t even locate my own G-spot, how am I going to locate a whole stranger.

“Wait a minute,” MaJiyane breaks her silence.

We look at her. She looks pale.

“You said Mhlahlane?”

“Yes,” Hubo says.

“What’s his name?”

“Mthokozisi Gumbi.”

“Maybe this is just a coincidence. It’s just that Thobani has been bothering me about his roots. I never thought I’d be in this position, Hlongwane gave him everything,” she says.

Thobani was four years old when his mother and my father got married. We all knew he wasn’t biologically our brother but we grew up together and did everything as a family. He calls the Hlongwane surname, reports to our ancestors and holds a position of a younger son in the family. With all that, I didn’t expect him not to want know his true origins. It’s only natural as an African child.

“Was Gumbi from Mhlahlane too?” Hubo asks.

“Originally, yes. His son was Mthokozisi too. But it could be just a coincidence, I’ve been stressed a lot lately. Maybe I made a wrong decision, I should’ve left a thin link for him, even if it was just him knowing his siblings as he grows up.”

Now I’m worried too, what are the chances of this just being a coincidence? If it’s not, how is Hubo going to avenge Sikelela by going after the only possible link that’s going to bring peace to Thobani?

“Ma what are you saying?” Hubo is shocked just as I am.

“I wish Hlongwane was still here,” MaJiyane is in her own world. Boy children are said to be the most difficult to raise, now I understand why.

I leave the kitchen and go to Sthembiso’s rondavel. The door is slightly open, I guess he’s taking a nap or he doesn’t want to be disturbed.

I knock twice, he’s not answering, so I let myself in. He’s snoring in the bed, unfortunately my news cannot wait. I sit below his feet and shake him.

He lifts his head with a groan and rubs his eyes. He must be regretting why he agreed to give our relationship a chance.

“What?” He looks tired.

“Wake up, there’s something I need to tell you.”

“Can’t it wait?”

“No, I will forget.”

He grunts and stretches his arms. His joints pop like Diwali fireworks. I hold back my comment, because- ‘Londeka watch what you say’.

“This better be good,” he’s sitting up and leaning against the pillow.

This is just revenge on Mela. If she spills my secrets to Sgcino, I’m also going to spill hers to my brother. An eye for an eye!

“Mela wants you,” I say.

He frowns, “Wants me for what?”

“You know she has a crush on you, so she still thinks you’ll ask her out when you’re done mourning.”

“Oh Lord!” He rubs his face and yawns. “What exactly does she see in me?”

“A hero,” I say.

His eyebrows snap. Now this is not part of the revenge, I trust him with this secret.

“Mela was sexually abused by her uncle as a child. Her parents and Busizwe didn’t do anything to help her. She needed a hero and one day you proved to be one. I can’t remember what got me into an argument with one of the boys in my class but you walked in coming from senior classes and hit them. She’s been crushing on you ever since primary school.”

“That’s not normal,” he says.

“Yeah, it’s not. So are you ever going to make a move on her?”

“What? No. She’s a child.”

“I’m not a child,” I say.

“Are you Mela?”

“We are almost the same age.”

“But you are not a child, uqomile wena angithi usunendoda?” Now he’s being extra.

“You have to give her clarity,” I tell him.

He doesn’t comment on that. Maybe I shouldn’t have talked about this.

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Saneli comes to my room to tell me that MaXulu is asking me to put my shoes on and come to the kitchen. I’m trying to rest, that’s what everyone does when they’re home, tomorrow is a big day.

I walk in dragging my shoes, trying to express my displeasure every way possible.

“You’re dressed, good. I need you to hurry and go to the supermarket and buy me chicken food.”

First of all I’m not dressed, I’m wearing leggings and Thobani’s old matric T-shirt. Secondly, I’m a Skinture ambassador and signed

model at House Of Elites, I can't be sent to town to buy poultry feed.

MaXulu fishes R150 notes from her purse and a handful of coins from the black string bag. I shouldn't have come here at all.

"Ma, people pay to see me walk, I'm the face of the biggest skincare brand in Africa," I say.

"What does that have anything to do with chicken food?"
MaDlamini asks with her eyebrows raised.

"Yeah, how does it change that my chicken don't have food for tomorrow?"

Is it necessary for them to agree with each other all the time and gang up on people all the time?

I grab the money and storm out of the stupid kitchen. It's 4pm, the supermarket is almost 15 minutes away and I didn't come with my car. Hubo has left, he never stay home for more than an hour without a valid reason. Sthembiso won't allow me to take his car, my father's cars are not here. This leaves me as a taxi passenger, phewww!

I quickly change into my new cotton jumper dress and brogue boots and head to the road. Luckily I don't stand too long before the taxi comes. I get a seat next to the window, now I can think about every bad thing that has happened in my life, that's what this seat is for.

I'm trying not to think about meeting MaNgcobo again tomorrow. I cannot prepare for that, I've never had someone hate me for no reason, I usually give people something to hate me for. I drop at the supermarket and head straight to the wholesaler.

I'll need energy to carry 10kg poultry feed to the taxi rank. So I count the change to see if I could get something to eat, there's a cozy eatery at the corner, they sell burgers and kotas. I will afford a burger and a drink with this change.

I put my sunglasses on and adjust the scarf around my face- low profile things- and I head to the eatery.

I need to be at the rank and catch the 5pm taxi. I eat quickly and leave quietly, by cat footsteps.

I recite a silent prayer as the taxi rout out of the rank stand. It's still going to tour around Mashoba dropping these people and their luggage off. But I'm safe now and the delay is going to spare me the headache of preparing dinner with MaXulu.

I must've dozed off when they pumped tyres at the garage. I hate that about taxi drivers, they don't fill up the taxis and pump tyres before they load. I'm woken up by an old woman who asks where I'm headed to. I realize I'm the only one left in the taxi.

"I'm going to KwaHlongwane, emaTruckini," I say.

The driver adjusts the center rear-view mirror and looks at me.

WTF! How did I not see him all this time?

I wouldn't have gotten into this taxi.

Wouldn't I have though?

I clear my throat and shout my stop, "KwaHlongwane."

He's a driver, he drives the public and I'm the public.

He doesn't say anything, he waits until the old woman offloads all her shopping bags and drives off.

My stop is still five minutes away, I plug my earphones and close my eyes. I don't know why I'm not scared of him, he can hurt me if he likes, I don't think he cares that much about me being Mela's friend.

Why is he stopping now? I open my eyes.

Oh, I have arrived at my destination.

"R23 plus R2 for the 10kg," he says.

Wait a minute, I have to pay? The burger, I completely forgot about the taxi fare and this thing of village taxis and paying once you've arrived at your destination doesn't help.

"You should've reminded me about the taxi fare," I say.

He turns his head with a frown. Now he's intimidating.

"Do you accept EFT?" I ask.

"Can I cash in with EFT?"

I don't know what that means.

“Ewallet?” I ask.

“R25, cash.” He turns off the engine and leans back on his seat.

I don’t have cash, the change I got from the bag of poultry feed went to my burger. I had totally forgotten about the taxi fare.

“I will call my brother,” I tell him.

He doesn’t say anything, I guess he’s willing to wait.

I call Sthembiso, Hubo would be a bad option. I’m giving him every reason to regret this relationship.

“Londeka,” he answers.

“Bhuti, I’m in a taxi parked on the road. I don’t have taxi fare.”

“How did you get in the taxi without money?”

“I forgot. Please come and get me, it’s Mela’s brother’s taxi.” He gives me a look from the front.

“Londeka are you mad?!” Sthembiso roars.

I drop the call and release a sigh.

Minutes later he’s walking out of the yard. Busizwe pulls his gun and places it on the dashboard. I’m not a fan of gun, it took my father’s life. I pick the poultry feed bag and climb out. I wait by the door, silently praying for this to go smooth.

Sthembiso arrives and hands me the R50. I rush to Busizwe’s window and pay him.

“R5 for making me wait,” he gives me back R20.

He’s now trying to be a millionaire at my expense.

“I’m keeping the change,” I tell Sthembiso.

“Okay, now go,” he says.

My eyes widen. Why is he staying behind? With a man who’s placed a gun on his dashboard.

He pulls out his own gun and opens the taxi door and climbs in.

“Sthembiso, noooo!” I exclaim.

“Go Londeka,” he tells me and turns his head to Busizwe. “You need to step the fuck up!”

I’d love to listen to the conversation and become a witness of whatever happens next, but I’d be dead if I get blood stains on this jumper dress of mine that I bought cash at Edgars.

SIKELELA

CHAPTER 41

“Please get out my taxi, mfana kaMkhonto,” he says this as calm as he could be. It takes breath exercises for him to be this calm at this moment.

“Busizwe, it’s funny how you’re a superman in every issue that doesn’t concern you but fail dismally to deal with things that need you.” Sthembiso places his gun on the dashboard too, he will take it when there’s a need.

“I’m working, get the hell out of my taxi,” Busizwe warns for the second time.

“You don’t have any taxi. I want to advise you as your father, njengoyihlo.” He’s intentionally being spiteful; ruffling his feathers.

Busiswe exercises more breaths. Clearly this was just a set up, Sthembiso used his sister to get him.

“You know if I was rotten like you and didn’t have the brains to mind my own business, I would’ve hurt your sister.”

Hearing Sthembiso mentioning his sister makes his blood boil. He fights, unfairly and nastily at times, but he never involves women.

“Don’t talk about MaMshengu,” he says.

“How can I not? She has a crush on me. Not just a healthy crush but you failed her so much that she found comfort in fantasizing about being protected by a son of the enemy.”

He looks away. If there's one thing to dismantle his ego it would be bringing up issues of Mela's childhood. He's not proud of himself.

"She doesn't have any crush on you," he's not bold as he's been.

"Fine, deny it. But she's going to get over the crush she has on me some time and she'll start having a crush on someone else. Someone who is not me. And do you know what men do to young vulnerable girls out there?"

"I don't," he says.

"Because you can't read. It's always on the newspapers; girls speaking up about the abuse, slavery and all sort of things they suffer in the hands of the men they love. Your sister will be a victim if you don't step the fuck up."

A droplet of sweat rolls down his spine. He clutches his hand on the steering wheel, at least it cannot shake there.

"Sguqa, you're the last person to tell me what to do. How is this any of your concern? Focus on your mother's parrot."

"I only care because she's my sister's friend and this bothers her. Why are you scared of your uncle?"

Mela shouldn't have talked about this. His subconscious instantly bites him as this thought crosses his mind; Mela has the right to vent to whoever she wants because her own family failed her. Right?

"What do you want?" he asks turning his blood-inflamed eyes to

Sthembiso.

“I want you to step the fuck up and to tell me why is it so difficult to punish your uncle for what he did, yet it was easy to just kill a businessman with three wives and kids,” Sthembiso says.

Flashbacks of his father’s funeral and every torture his family has been through because of this guy and his family makes him furious. He pulls his gun from the dashboard and holds it with his hand. If Mkhonto was around he wouldn’t have been the one to kill Sikelela’s son. He wouldn’t be in this position he’s in right now. “In fact why did you kill my father Busizwe?”

“Don’t raise your gun at me. Your father destroyed my family. The uncle you’re talking about was his right-hand man, he did what your father said.” Busizwe’s voice rises too. Mkhonto was not a saint. His father almost died because of him.

“Did my father tell him to abuse his own niece?” Sthembiso asks. He’d hardly stand up for Mkhonto but on this one instance he will, because his father had daughters too.

“I’m not talking about that. It’s a family matter. You’re asking why we killed your father. You want closing, right?”

“Closure,” Sthembiso interjects with corrections.

“Whatever you call it. Your father was a greedy, selfish...”

“That means the same thing,” Sthembiso cut him again, adjusting on his seat. “Say something that makes sense Busizwe.”

“Maybe if you shut up and open your ears I’ll be able to say it. But

clearly your muscles are bigger than your listening skills," he snaps, annoyed to the core. He hates it when people make him feel like he's the dumbest man on earth.

A moment of silence passes, he takes in a sharp breath and continues,

"He wanted my father dead because he knew of his little dirty secrets."

"What secret?" Sthembiso frowns. As far as he knows Sikelela was the only secret he didn't know of.

"That he was sleeping with his daughter in the office," Busizwe says.

"W-hat? Which daughter?" His whole body tenses up.

"The parrot that looks like him."

"That's a lie! Are you mad? My father was nothing like your uncle, uMswazi." Sthembiso is in disbelief. This is one thing he'd defend his father from with his last breath. He was everything but not a rapist or women abuser.

"Mswazi actually learnt from the best. Unfortunately he couldn't betray your father, so he leaked the information to my father who then threatened to expose your father if he didn't help him with money."

"That's bullshit! My father would've never done that to Londeka. Mswazi is a sick old man, your father was very stupid to fall for his tricks."

“If your father wasn’t capable of doing that, then explain to me how he was able to be friends with Mswazi after everything he did to MaMshengu?”

“He didn’t know anything Mswazi did behind doors.” He’s sweating, his heartbeat is rolling drums, his muscles are twitching and aching.

“Things then spiraled out of control. Your father started threatening and sending people to kill both Mswazi and my father. That’s when we retaliated and struck before he got neither of them.”

Sthembiso looks around the seats and spots a Powarade. He opens the bottle and gulps all of it down his throat without asking.

“So you’re trying to tell me that your uncle managed to rape your father’s only daughter and then distract him by saying his rich friend was doing the same to his daughter and your father could get rich too if he used that to his advantage?”

Busizwe doesn’t answer; it’s one of those so-called deep interpretations that leave him unsure of his intelligence.

“Fine, your father fell for that trick. What was your excuse for not standing up to your uncle for your sister?” Sthembiso asks.

“I kicked him out, that was the only thing I could do under circumstances, so don’t sit here and judge me like your sister didn’t experience the same,” he says.

A deep breath! Sthembiso nods slowly. “Okay I hear you. What did your father have?”

“Mkhonto’s pictures with his daughter in a compromising position.”

“I need them,” he says.

“And why would I give them to you?”

“Because they’re no use to you now, Mkhonto is dead.”

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The taxi comes back and parks a few yards away from the Hlongwane homestead. Sthembiso calls Londeka to come out. It’s late, almost dinner time, but he won’t be able to sleep without getting to the bottom of this. Mkhonto had the tightest relationship with Londeka out of all the siblings, it was a pure father and daughter relationship. This is something he’s going to prove tonight in front of Busizwe, with these pictures of Londeka sitting on Mkhonto’s office desk wearing only underwear.

Mkhonto was shirtless and barefoot in the same office; that’s only how far the Mshengus definition of compromising position go. Londeka must’ve been around 19 or 20 when these were taken. Anyone who didn’t know how close they were could’ve easily misinterpreted the situation. But Mswazi wasn’t one of those, he knew exactly what he was doing when he fed his brother false information. He knew it would end in blood.

“Get in,” Sthembiso instructs.

Londeka frowns. They're sitting together inside the taxi with their guns but they haven't killed each other. Someone needs to explain this using the Harvard referencing style!

She sits behind the front seat with her eyes widely open.

"I found these," Sthembiso says passing the brown envelope to her.

Busizwe dislikes her regardless of her being Mela's friend. He naturally doesn't like spoilt-brats. But he's not comfortable about this moment, knowing the struggle his own sister has gone through, he doesn't want to be the one to revive Londeka's painful memories.

"What is this?" Londeka is opening the envelope with confusion. Then she sees the pictures, her frown disperses, a smile cracks widely from her face. "Where did you get them?"

"From an old friend of Hlongwane," Sthembiso says.

Busizwe is a bit confused.

Londeka hugs the pictures on her chest. "You know what, maybe you were right, I'm a spoilt-brat just a little bit. I stopped a whole committee meeting because I wanted to swim. Daddy had to hire a portable swimming pool, erect it within two hours behind the store, postpone the meeting and go swim with me," she's laughing.

"Wait, your father never..." Sthembiso cuts in before Busizwe could finish asking. He can't have Londeka hearing these allegations.

“He never disciplined you, that’s what he’s asking,” he says.

Londeka frowns, “I was born discipline. Are you two best friends now? Tim and Tom?”

“I wanted to give you the pictures, tell MaXulu I’ll be home late.”

“Hhayi-bo Tom, you’re not going to tell me about your new friend Tim? He took my R5 earlier and claimed that it was for...”

“Go Londeka,” he says sternly.

She sighs and leaves with her pictures safely tucked against her chest, reliving the daddy’s princess bubble all over again.

The taxi door closes, a moment passes then Sthembiso turns to Busizwe.

“It was a distraction, a dirty game and a twisted trick of getting your father dead. He knew that Hlongwane wasn’t going to take lightly to anyone holding pictures of her daughter in underwear only. Because your family loves money and would choose it over everything, even the sanity of a young innocent girl, he was able to turn these two family against each other while he got away with his crimes. It was a cooked up story, you saw Londeka’s reaction to the photos, they’re just good memories.”

“I need to see him,” Busizwe says, pulling his gun from the dashboard and sliding it behind his seat with his jaws tightly clenched and veins pulsating visibly.

“Don’t go without her,” Sthembiso says.

He frowns.

“Huh?”

“She needs answers from him too, you owe her that much.”

It doesn't change that he doesn't like Sguqa and his big muscles but...

“Thank you,” he says.

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MELAMINA MSHENGU

To be late and having unannounced guests early in the morning, that's me. I almost trip on my toes rushing to open the door.

Oh, it's my brother. I'm not sure if this is a good or bad thing.

“MaMshengu,” he's walking in. Great!

“Hey,” I'm clearing my throat hoping he'll realize that he arrived at the wrong time.

“Are you well?” He turns and looks at me.

I nod multiple times.

“Yeah, yeah I'm fine.”

“I'm not fine. We have to go somewhere,” he says.

“Now?” My eyes grow wide.

“Yes, I have to be at the rank by 10am.”

And I have to be at work in thirty minutes.

“Can’t it wait?” I ask.

“I’m afraid no. Put on something comfortable and flat shoes.”

“Busizwe, I mean bhuti, I have to be at work. I can’t just take a day off without telling anyone.”

“It’s an emergency MaMshengu.” It doesn’t look like he’s willing to change his mind or negotiate this with me. Let me not be stubborn for once, I will call Sgcino and let him know.

A taxi front seat, okay. At least there are no passengers. This trip caught me by surprise but I could’ve grabbed my USB, now I’ll be subjected to Steve Kekana all the way to wherever we are headed.

“Your snacks are there,” he points at the Spar bag between the seats.

This is the first exciting thing about this trip. I open the plastic bag excitedly, only to be welcomed by a bag of Smoked Beef, a packet of Lemon Creams and P.S chocolate slab, just to mention a few.

“Umh, thank you,” I say putting them back inside the bag.

He glances at me and frowns.

“What’s wrong?” he asks.

“Nothing, I’m just...thank you for the snacks. It’s just that nobody buys most of these nowadays. They’re outdated,” I say.

“Oh, I didn’t know that.”

Maybe Londeka was right, his taste is a bit outmoded. Maybe it’s time I get to know his fiance better, she has a lot of job to do here.

We are taking the N2, this means we are going home.

“Is everybody alright?” I ask.

“At home? Yes, everybody is good. We are visiting an old relative in Phathane,” he says.

I don’t like visiting old relatives who never visit me. I’m going to watch Netflix and binge on my Smoked Beef and Lemon Creams.

It’s been a long journey, I silently thank God when he stops outside a brick house that stands next to a collapsing rondavel. I adjust my dress and tie my braids on top of my head and put my sunglasses on.

Whoever lives here is a bachelor. You don’t have to get inside the house to know. There’s laundry on the line; the shirts are hung by their sleeves, trousers by waists and colours mixed between each other. I hold back from running to the line and arranging everything.

“Who lives here?” I ask, following behind him towards the open door.

“Your father’s brother,” he says.

I stop, frozen to my toe. Did he just say my father’s brother?

“Come,” he grabs my arm.

I pull back and take a few steps back. He cannot take me to that man. He knows what I’ve been through, I have opened up to him about everything. He’s got no excuse now for not understanding me. I spoke to him face to face about it, I didn’t write him a letter.

“I’m not going in there,” I tell him.

He comes to me and puts his hands over my shoulders.

“I’m not going to let him hurt you. He’s never going to touch you again or breathe the same air as you after today.”

No, I shake my head. I don’t want to see his face, I’m doing okay with him staying here, in a place I’ve never been to before, keeping his distance away from us.

“Hold my hand,” he says.

I take a deep breath and hold it.

“I’m here,” he assures me.

Another deep breath! Okay, I can do this. I don’t have to be scared of him, he should be scared of himself because he’s the one who’s a monster.

I’m reminding myself every positive thing my friends have told me over the years. Words that made me feel like a warrior at some point in my life.

He’s sitting on the single bed with a bowl in his hand. His head is

grey now, he's old and wrinkled. When he sees us he smiles and stands up. The wicked smile hasn't changed.

"What a surprise! Busizwe, why didn't you tell me you were coming?"

"As you said, surprise!" Busizwe is standing, there's a bench behind us, I guess we are not here to sit.

"Mela, you've grown."

I was hoping he wouldn't say anything to me. The wicked smile on his face makes my armpits sweat.

"She's a big girl now," Busizwe says patting me on the shoulder.

"Please sit, I will send the boy to buy you a cold drink," he says taking a step towards the door.

Busizwe lets go of my hand and blocks him from exiting through the door and closes it.

Being in a locked house with him inside should freak me out. But no, this time he's the one freaking out and I'm somehow pleased by that.

"Sit on the bed," Busizwe instructs.

He does so without putting up a fight.

Busizwe looks at me, "What do you want to say to him?"

I have a lot to say. I dreamed about the day when he'd be this powerless in front of me so many times in my life. But now my words are jumbled up, I cannot say a single thing to him.

“Or rather what do you want to do,” Busizwe asks.

What do I want to do? He’s looking at me, his eyes have wrinkled, he’s no longer that man who wore expensive colognes and Fedora hats. That man who threw misplaced English adverbs in his speech and drank Scottish whiskey on Fridays.

“I want to spit on his face,” I say.

Busizwe’s brows snap, I see his face changing to something I don’t recognize within a blink of an eye.

“Did he spit on you?” he asks.

“Yes,” I nod.

There’s a thunder, I close my eyes and ears as it cracks loudly in the room. When I open my eyes someone is coughing blood, that was a slap.

“Spit on him,” Busizwe permits.

I freeze. I cannot do it. I cannot spit on someone’s face, that’s not me.

“Can we talk about this?” He’s still talking, I guess the slap Busizwe gave him was not enough.

“Slap him again,” I say.

Busizwe doesn’t need to be told twice, this time the slap sends him crashing on the floor. I love seeing him this powerless, curled up on the floor like an old rug that he is.

Busizwe stomps on his cheek with his tekkies. I’m still standing

against the wall with my hands hugging my own shoulders.

“Wadodiswa yimina Busizwe, stop this.” He’s begging and whimpering like a wounded dog.

I don’t know what he means by saying he made Busizwe a man, what I know is that he just unleashed the wild animal I’ve never seen even at the zoo.

Five minutes later I’m still standing and watching. This is not me, a normal Melamina wouldn’t be standing here and watching this bloody scene. I’m scared of blood but his has a calming effect on me.

“Call the police, I’m going to be your witness,” Busizwe says.

I’m taken aback by that. He just rearranged this man’s whole body and face, now he wants the police to come. I think he might be arrested with him and charged for taking the law into his hands.

“MaMshengu call the police, now!”

Breathe Mela, think...breathe.

“No, I don’t want to stand in court and try to convince people it happened. You believe me, that’s all I wanted,” I say.

“Thank you, mntanami,” the monster groans on the floor.

I’m not talking to him and I’m not doing this for him.

Busizwe stands with his sleeves rolled up and fists stained with blood.

“What about him? We are just going to let him go?”

“Alikho iqili elizikhotha emhlane bhuti. He will meet his mates one day.”

He glances at him on the floor, a grin teases his face and disappears in a split second. Then he looks at me and nods.

“You’re right. He will meet his mates.” He sounds very sure about this, unlike me who just predicted.

We leave him lying on the floor coughing blood. I feel like Undertaker leaving the arena with a new belt. I climb inside the taxi and turn up the music, Busizwe stands outside and smokes a cigarette.

After a moment he climbs in and lowers the music volume.

“Just a moment,” he says and takes out his phone.

He’s calling someone, I’m hoping not the police because I don’t think I’m emotionally fit to stand in court and tell the judge how it all happened.

“I have the address,” he tells the person on the phone. I guess the mates aren’t too far away.

I can’t wait for the funeral!

He ends the call and doesn’t start the taxi, instead he pulls my hand and looks at me.

“I’m sorry,” he says.

I nod. I shouldn't have blamed him for what someone else did to me.

"I'm sorry that I wasn't a good brother and I'm sorry our father wasn't a good father to you. Well, actually to all of us. We failed to set an example and protect you and make sure you never feel broken. I want you to love yourself enough that you don't seek pieces of yourself from anyone. Find a man that you love, not a man you need."

Which other black girl has ever been permitted to find a man by her big brother? My cheeks are aching from the wide smile I have on my face.

"But only after I have done umemulo for you and I don't want a hooligan. He mustn't drink or smoke, he must know the Bible from the front to the back and never miss a day in church."

Oh, there's an exhaustive list of conditions compiled by a man who only went to church for the organized baptism ceremony thirty years ago.

"Okay, when am I sending invites?"

"Soon," he turns on the engine.

This day cannot get any better.

SIKELELA

CHAPTER 42

VUMO

She's cried, now it literally feels like she has no tears left, her chest is always dry. Within a few days Nkanyezi was able to create memories that will last forever in her heart. He made her a mother in a way that nobody could understand. He was only a few days old but the strength he had in him made him a true star.

Sthembiso left, he has a life. She appreciates everything he did for her; his presence and money. He sacrificed a lot. If there's someone Nkanyezi took after, aside from his striking resemblance of his father, it would've been Sthembiso. Their big hearts; how Sthembiso willingly put everything on hold to make sure the twins were separated and Nkanyezi keeping his brother alive until the surgery and then leaving his heart for him.

"He's living through his brother," the counselor told her this morning when she went to see Twin B. She believed it at that time but coming back to her bed and deeply thinking about it she realized there was no truth in that. Nkanyezi is gone, he was his own person and he left with everything that was his except one organ, the heart. He's not living through Twin B or anyone.

"I lost him, that's it." She's talking to herself, it's a new habit she's developed through this loss.

Someone clears his throat. She looks up startled thinking it's

Prudence and her drama again.

But it's a man she's been crying for, asking herself why he wasn't coming to see her. But she finally made peace with it, excusing it with possible financial hiccups.

"Vumo," he says.

She nods in acknowledgement and slides into the bed pulling up the covers.

"I heard about our son," he comes closer. He's not walking normally, he's bending to his right side which raises her eyebrows.

"Are you okay? Take the chair there and sit."

He pulls the chair and sits with a low groan. He's here, without Hubo's or the hospital's approval. Cebile will be mad but she will have to understand that he needed to be here.

"Your boyfriend almost killed me," he says adjusting on the chair.

"My boyfriend?" she frowns.

He unbuttons his shirt and shows his six stitches from under his right arm to his waist and arm.

She gasps, if her chest wasn't so dry she would've dropped a few tears, what she sees is gut-wrenching.

"This is why you couldn't come?"

He nods, "Yeah, but I'm here now, our son is going to have a proper send-off."

"Mthoko did this?" Her hands are trembling. Mthoko was violent

with her but she somehow found ways of forgiving him because of his quiet character and blame the alcohol instead. But what he did to Sikelela proves that one day she was going to leave that house in a body bag.

“Did you report to the police?”

He chuckles, “Hhayi bo Vumokuhle!”

“He committed a crime. What if he killed you? What would’ve become of Twin B?”

He thought about that too, that’s why he’s taking his time and not just running after Mthoko like a hothead. When he gets him he will punish him for every sin he’s committed under the sun.

“I didn’t die, so let it go. How are you feeling?” he asks.

She exhales heavily.

“I think God is punishing me. Right now I’m scared to even bond and get attached to Twin B because I feel like anything that my heart loves the universe destroys. Nkanyezi wasn’t sick, he wasn’t going to die. I looked at him before the surgery, I could feel that he was coming back to me. And out of nowhere he was having swollen brains and dying. No, no ways, just no!” She’s shaking her head vigorously, her eyes are red and swollen.

“I didn’t meet him,” Sikelela states with regret. If it wasn’t for Mthoko he would have something to say about Nkanyezi too.

“He was going to look like you,” Vumo tells him.

“A mini-me,” he chuckles. “But we will see him through his

brother.”

“They’re not identical,” she says.

“Oh, I thought they were since they were conjoined.” He feels stupid.

“No, they’re not,” she says popping her fingers.

He glances around and exhales deeply. Why is the nurse not coming now?

“They said I could see him,” he says.

Vumo clears her throat, “Oh you spoke to them already?”

“Yes, I was thanking them for everything,” he says.

“Umh, Sikelela there’s something I need to tell you about Twin B.”

He frowns, his heart races straight away. He’s had enough heartache this week.

“He...umh...Hubo is your brother, which is something I didn’t know until...I mean he’s your blood, Twin B’s blood as well. But it doesn’t mean there’s a possibility of him being a father regardless of the few resemblances they might share.”

“Yeah, I know.” This is confusing for him.

“So you won’t freak out if he ends up looking like Hubo?”

He frowns, “No. Why would I?”

“Because of the past,” she’s ashamed saying this.

“Hubo is my brother, if there was a possibility of him being a

father he would've told me. And besides, I trust the ancestors' message and their voice."

Alright, not exactly the narration she expected.

"You've known Hubo for less than a year and known me for four years. But you trust him more than me?" She thought she was done arguing and snapping and all the crazy shit she's been doing, but this one is shocking.

"Do you really want us to go there?" Sikelela asks.

She shrugs, "No, it's fine."

He checks the time on his wrist-watch and grunts in frustration.

"So I won't be there for the funeral?" Vumo tries to break the ice.

"Twin B needs you here," he says and thinks for a minute then looks at her. "We can't keep calling him that. He needs a name."

"I named Nkanyezi, you can name him," she says.

"That's a nice name you gave him. I was happy when I heard," he's smiling.

She smiles back; genuinely for the first time in months.

"I tried," she says.

"I heard that the stars remain in the sky during day and night. But we cannot see them during the day because the sun overpowers and dims their light. So our Nkanyezi is always going to be present even though we won't be able to see him because of iLangaletu whose light is more bright and powerful in the naked

eye. Hopefully in our dreams at night our star will come out and shine again.”

“Thank you,” she’s crying again, for the gazillion time today.

“For what?”

“For coming and giving him the name and saying that. I feel so broken and empty. At times I ask myself why didn’t God save Nkanyezi and take me instead. Not even because of this or you; you had every right to be angry at me. But my father Sikelela, aren’t fathers supposed to discipline and love their children with their flaws and all? I lost a man, a home and a father all in one day. And I dragged my sister and my mother in my mess with me.”

“Do you think he’s going to allow us to bury Nkanyezi?” He shouldn’t have asked her this question, that’s for him to figure out. “I’m sorry, you should be resting and not worrying about that.”

He passes his face towel for her to wipe the tears.

The nurse walks in to tell him Langa is ready to meet him. Vumo’s emotions are still very high, she hasn’t stopped crying, so this can’t be mom and dad seeing their son together for the first time moment.

“I will be back,” he says leaving her with the nurse.

His phone rings as he exits the room.

It’s the number he cannot recognize; he answers by clearing his throat.

“Old frenemy,” says the person on the line.

“Who am I talking to?”

“Don’t drop. It’s Mela.”

He stops walking, different emotions taking over him.

“What do you want?” he asks.

“Londeka said you’re not petty but your attitude tells me otherwise right now. You said we could be friends, so friends check on one another,” she says.

He scoffs, “I’m not short of friends Mela, I never said I want to be your friend, I said I love you and you said you are in love with Hubo.”

“Whaaat? I never said I’m in love with Hubo. You mean your brother who fucks everyone? No, thank you very much,” she even sounds offended.

“What do you mean?” He’s now confused.

“I was talking about Sthembiso.”

This is now funny, he holds back his laugh.

“You mean Sguqa, my older brother?” he asks.

“Yes,” she says.

“Is it the big muscles? I can go to the gym too.”

“You mean you’d pause being a father and go to the gym?” That tone is different.

“I can do both, can’t I?”

“If the babymama is not crazy, I guess so.”

“Can I call you later? I’m seeing my son in a few minutes for the first time.”

“Yeah, you can. Don’t get me in trouble with the mama, tell her we are just friends.” He cannot miss the underlying tone again.

He drops the call with a slight head shake. He hasn’t thought of it being dramatic as she put it.

His heart starts rolling drums as he gets closer to the sleeping Langa. His tiny body has miraculously gone through a lot. The stitches he has on his right side are nothing compared to the two surgeries this boy has undergone.

He’s not big on baby-talk but one way or another he has to say something to his son. He needs to know that daddy is here and he’s NEVER going to abandon him like Mkhulu Hlongwane did to his father and Mkhulu Ntuli did to his mother.

“Langaletu, your father is here. I know at some point you must’ve thought your father was that big muscled guy who’s making Melamina’s heart twerk instead of mine...” For fuck’ sake! He clears his throat, “That’s your big uncle, he’s a very good guy. Soon you will meet Huboletu and Thobani. Hopefully you won’t meet Mthoko, ever. You are going to have enough fathers in your life, you don’t need a stepfather. Then you’re going to meet your grandmother, oh dear son! Thank you for joining me on this journey, whatever you do always remember that life is Cebile

Dlamuka's show and you and I are just bystanders. She's going to tell you which food is your favorite and convince you that you like pumpkin even when you tell her you don't. I'm sure you'll grow up and hear about your grandfather, Mkhonto. Your grandmother probably has that part of her life written somewhere word to word and curse to curse. And unlike me, you'll have aunts. Some who don't necessarily stop talking but you'll love them anyway." That's too many stories for a baby who's not even two weeks old; he takes a brief pause.

"I'm going to be what nobody was to me; a good father," he says. "I'm taking your brother home tomorrow, he's not dead, he's just sleeping the big sleep and will always look over you and your mom."

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STHEMBISO

Sikelela's uncle has decided to distance himself from this burial arrangement. Earlier today he accompanied Sthembiso to the Ntulis to plead with Vumo's father to accept Nkanyezi's body for the burial. That didn't go well, Ntuli is convinced that conjoined twins are a sign of bad luck and he refuses to let such into his home.

Dr Butler's assistant calling him and asking for a meeting wasn't what he needed today. Had he known that she was this annoying

and unprofessional, he would've hired another specialist. He knows what this meeting is about; she obviously has more questions about why she did the job that she did. Annoying!

But he's in Durban anyway, so he will get this over and done with.

He calls her directly, not through the assistant.

"I'm heading to Musgrave right now," he tells her.

"Mr Hlongwane, I thought we were meeting at 1pm."

"This is the only time I have, I'm not sleeping in Durban."

"But I'm not in Musgrave right now. I'm kind of busy in the house, unless if you don't mind driving here. It's like...30 minutes away," she says.

"You mean I must drive to Kloof?"

"We can postpone to tomorrow if you're in a hurry."

Tomorrow is Nkanyezi's burial, hopefully.

"Fine, I'm coming, send the address."

Note to himself; always do annoying background check before getting into any agreement with doctors. Well, paediatric surgeons. Find out how annoying the person is from the scale of one to ten, before associating yourself with them.

Beside the lavish properties, Everton is very leafy and harmonious.

He understands a thing or two about Giana's financial level.

Personally, he'd never live in such a secured place because he's

from the chaos and chaos follows his shadow everywhere he goes.

Her house is what he expected when he drove through this upper-class suburbs. Rolling green grounds greeting you a distance away from the premises. An electric gate, welcomed by a sparkling pool, a double-door car garage and what looks like an extra one for boats, and a colour splashed garden leading to the house entrance. That's how Irish people live IN South Africa.

She's welcoming enough to get him from the door with a glass of wine.

"Come in," she says.

In his culture you let people sit before offering them a drink, but whatever works in Ireland.

"How are you?" he asks.

"I'm good," she's barefooted, wearing what looks like her granny's hand-me-downs. Londeka would have so much to say about this style of dressing.

"Please have a seat," she's pointing him on the couch facing the balcony in an open area that's scantily furnished but looks just as lavish. "I'm going to put on the heat and come back. I'm without a chef, so it's kinda crazy."

Those are kind of problems every black person wishes to have. He cracks a smile and sighs as soon as she turns her back. What wine is this? It tastes like a cough syrup.

She's back, tying her hair into a ponytail.

"So I've been nominated for the honoree award in National Medical Awards. Not exactly nominated but selected for the award. It's one of the biggest categories," she says, not excited but panicking.

"Giana please don't tell me that you called me here to ask for congratulations."

She rubs her nose with frustration. It turns red immediately.

"Mr Hlongwane, I'm selected for the award because of the "outstanding job" that I did. And I have to deliver a big ass speech discussing the challenges I faced and how I overcome them and be this big idol for the day who..."

He chuckles, "Okay, relax. You're selected for the award, cheers to that!"

He raises his glass for a toast and she just sighs.

"You have to tell me the truth, maybe I'll feel less guilty," she says.

"Giana at some point you need to be professional and continue with your life. I told you what I could tell you, at the end of the day this is my family matter, I only needed you for the job."

"You inserted me in your family matters. I'm as involved as you are and for that you owe me the truth."

Sigh, deeply sigh!

“How do you feel after everything?” she asks.

“I haven’t had time to feel anything. There’s a lot going on.”

“Lucky you, I’ve had all the time to feel horrible. I’m a mother too.”

He frowns and looks around.

“They’re at school?”

“No, they’re in the cage. Two puppies.”

Did he just compare the twins to her two puppies? The cough syrup wine! He takes a small sip and nods.

“Just tell me so that I can understand. Why was the other twin more important than the other? Is it something to do with witchcraft?”

We Jesu, why did she leave Ireland? He silently says to himself.

Before he can answer, she furiously stands up.

“If that’s the attitude you’re giving me, Mr Hlongwane, then I regret agreeing to do that job.”

Oh shit, he said that loud, didn’t he?

“Giana look...”

“I’m out of here,” she’s storming out.

He runs after her with the cough syrup in his hand.

“You can’t be out of here, this is your house, let me be the one who leaves.”

She walks out of the door and slams it behind her.

When he gets to the door he cannot see where she disappeared to, this is a big yard. The only thing he can see is the smoke coming from the kitchen. Great, just great! On top of everything he's gone through today, he has to deal with an angry white woman.

Not just her only her, but her burning pots as well. But this is not going to be like old white supremacy days; black boy slaving for a white woman. No, he's going to turn this meat and take the garlic rolls out of the oven, then he's going to serve himself like a special guest.

Thirty minutes later the Irish drama is over. She walks in, finding him comfortable in her kitchen with chicken chewed bones scattered on the plate in front of him.

"You're back," he says with mockery.

She grabs a bottle of wine and pours in the glass until it spills on the counter.

"Whoah! Are you okay?" he asks.

She sips silently.

Okay, the drama is not over.

"Whether you believe it or not, what I told you is the truth. Only a Hlongwane can fully understand what that sacrifice means for the family moving forward," he says.

“So I have to be a Hlongwane to understand?” she asks.

He chuckles, “Maybe, you already know our secrets.”

She scoffs and slightly rolls her eyes.

“So what’s been keeping you so busy that you haven’t had time to deal with your emotions?”

“The burial arrangements,” he says.

“He’s just a little baby, what’s hard about burying him?”

“I don’t have enough English to take you through it.”

Just as the conversation was starting to flow, he had to be the typical Mr Hlongwane!

She takes her phone out and quickly scrolls down with her eyelashes flapping in anger.

“Here,” she says giving the phone to him.

He frowns, “What must I do with your phone?”

“Tell me in your language, there’s a translator there. I’m tired of you using language as a barrier to hide things from me.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yeah, talk to the speaker, I will wait.”

Oh Jesus, cross over right now!

“Okay fine,” he gives her phone back and reactivate his English bundles.

“So the twins’ grandmother wasn’t married to my father, neither did my father pay the damages to the Dlamuka family, so we cannot claim the twins as the Hlongwanes. That’s problem number one. Number two; Sikelela has not married the twins’ mother or paid to have them to the Dlamuka surname either. It was a very confusing pregnancy, things didn’t happen the way they were supposed to happen. So it would be against culture to bury Nkanyezi as a Dlamuka. He is, by culture and tradition, a Ntuli at the moment and that’s where he should be buried at. Problem number three; the head of the Ntulis believes that conjoined twins are sign of bad luck, he refuses to let the burial take place at his home. That’s what stressing me, tomorrow Sikelela is coming back with the body and I haven’t been able to solve this issue.”

She wanted the details, but phewww!

“So if the problem is the damages, why can’t you pay them to the Ntuli family right away and bury the baby at the father’s home?” she asks.

“Paying the damages doesn’t really mean the child now belongs to the father’s surname. But even so, we can’t, because paying the damages means one cow has to be slaughtered on the day and slaughtering is forbidden during the mourning period. The Ntulis cannot accept the damages before the burial,” he says.

“This culture thing is...black people love complicating their lives,” she says throwing her hands up.

His eyebrow furrows, “Giana, don’t be Karen.”

“Who is Karen?”

“Just don’t speak on people’s culture.”

“Okay, sorry. How about I go to Ntuli and explain to him how twins get fused together?”

He chuckles, “He’s a very stubborn man, I don’t think he’s going to listen to a stranger.”

“I’m a doctor and I’m ‘white’,” she quotes it with her fingers to mock him. “Which man wouldn’t listen to me, except you?”

Oh right, maybe it’s not a bad idea, she might be a better negotiator than him because of the privileges she holds.

“I’d be happy if you can do that for me,” he says.

SIKELELA

CHAPTER 43

LONDEKA

Sgcino has a good job, he's an import controller, I expected the home he comes from to be this organized and modernly-built. Well, given his mother Queen Elizabeth's attitude as well. It makes sense for me to be stepping inside a rondavel that's double-roomed inside and exquisitely furnished.

One side has the L-shaped sleeper couch, a glass coffee-table and 'decorating' bookcase neatly stacked with books that looks like they've never been touched before. There's a vase with fresh flowers on the table, which is weird, isn't this a bedroom of a guy who doesn't stay at home?

He moves me to the bedroom and asks me to unpack my bags and put my clothes in his wardrobe. I'm not going through so much admin, packing and unpacking, we are leaving tomorrow.

"So what's expected of me?" I'm standing in the middle of the room with my arms folded and lipstick fading due to the constant lip-rubbing. I'm hell-shit nervous.

"Nothing," he says with a smile. He looks genuinely happy.

"Okay then get me water, I'll bath and sleep," I say.

"I didn't mean nothing as in you just have to sleep. Ma is going to come and greet you, she might have some company. Then

abafowethu will come to shake your hand, bazoxhawula.”

New information, breathe Londeka.

“Abafowenu?” I didn’t know he had brothers, I only know of the cousins.

“Yeah, the guys I live with this side.” That means a number of village men. Obviously I wouldn’t know anything about that, I don’t come from the united village where one calls village men ‘brothers’. Those ones, back in Mashoba, fight anything that’s out of their clan. My family and Mela’s are just perfect example of that.

“Do you think they’ll pat you at the back and say you chose well?” I ask.

He chuckles, “Don’t know, don’t care. Please make yourself comfortable, I have to greet the families.”

“Families?” Anything he says freaks me out, my nerves are all over the place.

“My mother and whoever she’s with in the kitchen. Then my underground family.”

I release a huge breath and nod. He turns back to me.

“Hey,” he pulls my arms and wraps them around his waist. “This is your home, there’s nothing for you to worry about.”

There’s nothing for me to worry about? He’s got amnesia, clearly.

“There’s your mother who doesn’t like me, Sgcino,” I say.

“She also came here for love. Uqomile naye layikhaya, don’t let her scare you.”

That makes me laugh. He’s right, why am I stressing about someone who also came here for a man? I’d appreciate her approval but it’s not something that would give me hypothermia if I don’t get.

“I love you, okay?” He perks me on the forehead, gives me a reassuring look and then walks out.

I’ve been so nervous that I completely forgot confronting him about the truck situation that almost got me in trouble with MaXulu. We had a sour morning from Sthembiso’s failed attempt of negotiating the funeral arrangements with the Ntulis. Then out of nowhere there was a Nissan pickup truck driving in without permission. It was for me; there was a delivery from Cicci’s Boutique. I looked retarded being piled up with shopping bags while my whole family watched in confusion. Ntuthuko had a whole boutique sent to me. Then there was a lady with a pink vanity box climbing out and asking if I’m ready to do my nails, hair and face.

At that time I hadn’t told MaXulu that I was coming here. I still haven’t told her the whole truth, she thinks I’m at a friend’s event. I understand that he was simply honoring my requests; I said I’d need clothes, nails done and something done on my hair before I could come here. But he listened to Ntuthuko, a well-known exaggerator, and ambushed me in front of my whole family.

Anyway back to the fancy rondavel, I cannot see any pictures of his wife. Not that I was hoping to see one, but is it not weird? There's a room I haven't entered in his townhouse, that's where he probably stored their memories. But here, I expected to find at least a kist she brought when she got married, some pictures and maybe some of her accessories. I want to know if we have anything in common, like what made him choose us.

I'm wandering around, doing what every girl does in a guy's room. My FBI mode is deactivated immediately when I hear someone clapping behind me.

"Ufika nje usuthwala izindlu zalayikhaya?" It's the one and only's discipline of Satan. I mean, my precious future mother-in-law. Ukuthwala indlu simply means standing in the house doing nothing, which is considered uncultured behavior in the Zululand.

I can't sit on the couch, she's taken all of it with her bunch of friends. Where am I supposed to sit?

Guess who walks in with a reed-mat, just as I'm thinking about my options?

"Hi," she smiles, laying it on the floor and sitting comfortably.

Eyes are all on me. It takes everything in me to humble myself and sit next to her. My fingers are slightly shaking, I don't know why Sgcino would do this to me.

One of the women breaks the silence with a chuckle and asks MaNgcobo, "So this is your makoti? Owakwabani?"

"Hlongwane, I hear," MaNgcobo says. She could've been a bit descriptive but I guess 'she doesn't know me'.

"Londeka Hlongwane from Mashoba village," I say. I have no problem introducing myself.

"We are happy to meet you," obviously that's not MaNgcobo but one of the women.

"So how did you meet Mfano?" she asks.

"In a club, I got into a fight with one of his colleagues, a friend now, and he stopped us and drove me home." Not one of the greatest love stories but I'm no Cinderella.

"In a club?" MaNgcobo frowns.

What did Sgcino tell her? That he picked me from a reed-dance?

"Yes," I say.

"So you're one of those loose girls who drink and sleep with strangers?"

There's a chuckle next to me.

"I wouldn't say that," I say.

I can hear their silent whispers, I'd be lying if I say I'm offended by their reaction in anyway. MaNgcobo tried to embarrass me as soon as she stepped in here.

She stands, adjusting the scarf tied over her shoulders.

“Makoti please come and dish for oMaMkhize before they leave,” she says.

The makoti she recognizes stands and leaves with them.

If I don't speak to anyone I swear I'm going to start punching walls.

I call Mela, she knows this devil better than me.

“Nsundu wife,” she answers with ecstasy.

“Don't call me that. Your friend has his late wife's sister who's nominated to become his next wife by the family here. Does he not know me?” I'm pacing around the couch.

“Babe, don't let them get to you. Sgcino loves you, they just need to accept it. She can come there, flaunt her hips, scrub their roofs and...”

“Mela, I have a confidence higher than her high-heels. What annoys me is Sgcino not telling me what I'm coming into. He knows how I am, I'm allergic to disrespect and I surely can raise his mother's BP if she keeps coming for my peace.”

“Okay, you need to calm down. Sgcino is the only important person for you there, carry yourself the way you'd want him to carry himself in your mother's house.”

I exercise a few breaths. “Alright, I'm good now.”

“That's my friend. There's something I need to tell you when you come back.”

“Just tell me now, I desperately need some good news.”

She laughs, “Trust me, this one is worthy being told over drinks and celebrated.”

I hope she won lottery so that she can buy me a new life.

A cute girl with flawless chestnut skin and short afro walks in with a tray of food. She’s in her early teens, almost resembling Ntuthuko.

“Do you need anything else?”

Yes, kill your grandmother or whoever MaNgcobo is to you.

“No, thank you baby,” I say.

That’s exactly what she was praying for; she happily runs out.

This food was prepared by Vuyo, probably. You can tell how the rice is dished, like a burial mound. She wants me dead. I’m not going to eat, I don’t have a death wish.

I leave it on the coffee-table and go lie in the bed. Sgcino is probably catching up with his mother and recognized makoti, I’m hating every moment, if I had my wheels I’d be on my way back home.

There are multiple male voices approaching. I immediately sit up, waiting to hear the door shift but the noise suddenly dies down.

After a minute the door shifts, there are footsteps, he’s coming in.

“Hey, you are here. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m good.”

He looks into my eyes for quite a moment. I don’t give anything away.

“My brothers are here to see you, please come to the sitting for a moment.”

I get off bed and fix my dress. As I walk past him he grabs my arm, turns my face to him and stares into my eyes. “I didn’t know Londeka. We will talk about it later.”

I don’t say anything, I pull my arm and walk away.

The men are nicer than women. I find myself smiling at the advices they’re giving me on how to deal with Sgcino. He’s also here laughing. I make sure we don’t laugh at the same time; that’s how petty I can be.

They leave, promising to see me again when Sgcino sends them to Mashoba for lobola. My smile disappears as soon as they walk out of the door. I get up and go back to the bed.

He’s following with the food I intentionally left on the tray. He puts it next to the bed and sits.

“Are you angry?”

That’s a stupid question.

“I was shocked when I walked into her and my mother in the kitchen. But I have to understand that there was a relationship between two families and they’re not going to stop because I’ve found love elsewhere.”

“You think this about your mother’s friendship with your next wife? No Sgcino, it’s about the disrespect from you. I don’t care if she’s your mother, set boundaries Sgcino, fuckin’ boundaries! Keep your wife’s sister in your life but have boundaries set. Make your people respect me or I’m going to leave.”

“You’re going to leave?” he asks.

Obviously that’s all he took from everything I just said to him.

“Yes, I will leave you Sgcinumyalo. Love is not enough, I need peace and a healthy environment. I grew up in a home where both my parents had their favourites between me and my brother. Guess what, it turned us against each other. One thing I’m not going to do is move to the next step of my life and still fight to be someone’s favourite. That’s bullshit!”

“You don’t have to shout, I can hear you,” he says.

“Then make me something to eat and give me bathwater, I want to sleep,” I say.

Luckily he doesn’t nag me about the food that was already prepared and dished by Vuyo. He leaves with the plate untouched. I bury myself in the bed and release a low groan. What a nightmare!

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I feel someone's hand on my shoulder and sluggishly open my arms. The light shines straight into my eyes, I grunt in irritation. I was angry when I dozed off, I don't know what time it is but my body tells me it still needs more sleep.

There's a man sitting next to me and staring down at me.

"Is it morning?" I ask.

"No, it's 11:33pm."

Then why am I being woken up? He can read my frustration and confusion.

"I'm sorry to disturb you," he says.

"Whatever!" I'm turning to the other side.

He holds me, "Can we talk Londeka? Without screaming."

"Now?" I ask.

"We can't leave tomorrow without doing everything we came here to do. Unless if you've already decided to leave me."

Yawn.

I pull the blanket to my chest as I sit up.

"Talk," I say.

"Maybe I've been scared to set boundaries with Vuyo because of guilt. I feel like even though I don't marry her I can make sure she gets to live her best life. It was just the two of them from their

mother and I killed her sister.”

“But how is that going to work Sgcino?” I’m calm now.

“I’m going to marry you,” he says

Wow! So he has long-term solutions to a short-term problem.

He takes my hand into his and plants a soft kiss on it. I should be having butterflies right now but all I can do is sigh.

“I don’t cheat and I’m not a fan of polygamy. You just need to trust me, I will work on my weaknesses too.”

“What about your mom?” I ask.

“I will talk to her.” His tone is not convincing. I think his umbilical cord is still attached to his mother and she takes full advantage of that.

“I love you Londeka, I really do. I will choose you any day, everyday.”

I nod, “I love you too.”

“Let’s continue what we came here to do. Asigeze.”

“Bath at this time?” My eyes widen.

“Yes,” he says.

“Please tell me the water is at least warm.” My skin is already shivering.

“Come on, I will make you warm.”

I’m tempted to roll my eyes. He strips his clothes off and pulls me

out of bed. I should've paused my anger and got this done earlier, I have to do it in the deep hours of the night.

"Do you need help?" he asks.

I instantly shake my head and start undressing. Then I look up with my eyebrow arched.

"We are doing it here, right?" I'm not seeing anything in the room. No basin, no water.

"This is a village Londeka, surely you don't expect me to have a bathroom inside the house."

"So I'm going outside naked?" Somebody kill me now!

"Well, there's a towel."

I suppose that makes this whole situation better, a flippin' towel!

People get accused of witchcraft for things like these. We are wrapped in towels, I'm holding a torch, him a basin and a bucket of cold water, and we are heading to the outside-built bathroom. I hope this proves to him that I'm worth girlfriend monthly allowance because I wouldn't do this for anyone in this world. I'm trying not to think about the dangers of walking with him outside at night. I'm sure he's not thinking about it either, the goal today is to get cleansed from whatever past spirits we may carry.

He goes first; splashing cold water on his body like it's the most normal thing to do in the middle hours of night. He's not even

shivering. It takes me five minutes to get ready for cold water. Eventually I have to get it done, we bath together, he's mumbling things as we do so. Things I want to laugh at but I can't because this is a very serious moment.

He instructs me not to dry and just wrap a towel around and walk back home without looking back. I want to jump into bed right away but I can't do so, I'm still wet. He walks in after me and closes the door.

He gives me a robe to put on. I guess I can now get into bed and carry on with my sleep.

Or not...

Candles and a lid of burning with Lotus incense sticks.

"Another cleansing ritual?" I ask.

He chuckles, "I do this every month. It's good and refreshing for your brain and soul."

"I'm always refreshed in soul and mind," I say.

At least we are doing this one inside the bedroom. On the floor, though.

"This is about gathering your spirits, clearing your thoughts and recharging your soul," he says.

I'm following his lead. He crosses his legs, I do the same. He places his hands flat on his thighs, so do I. He closes his eyes and deeply inhales the revoking scent coming from the lid. For a

minute I just watch him, I'm not sure where his mind is at right now but clearly not with me. I will take this as meditating, I close my eyes and pray I don't fall asleep before the finishing point.

"Thank you," he says.

I almost open my eyes. How did he know I just closed my eyes?

Then there's a voice, from a speaker or something, I don't know what is it, I didn't see anything.

"She let go of the fear

She let go of the judgements

She let go of the influence of opinions swarming around her head

She let go of committee of indecision within her

She let go of all "the right" reasons

She let go of all the memories that held her back

She let go of the anxiety..."

My mind drifts, as my heart starts letting go something in my soul moves. My head clears off every unwelcome thoughts and opinions, I create space for positivity and new spiritual journey. My claws are deep in my spirits, connected like a cable. But I'm getting sleepy here, this meditation will end with me on the floor.

I feel his arms wrapping around me, lifting me to the bed and

tucking me in. I feel his lips planting a soft kiss on my forehead and him sliding in next to me and releasing a deep breath.

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I wake up feeling refreshed; in body, spirit and mind. At the end I didn't feel like I was doing any of it for him or the relationship, but myself. The downside of it though is that he's not next to me when I wake up. I don't know where he is, he didn't leave a note or anything, and his phone is here charging. And I thought we've turned a new leaf in this relationship where there won't be any fights necessary, just mutual respect.

At least the bathroom is behind the house I'm in, I don't have to march to the other side of the yard and attract unnecessary attention. I make it snappy, before people wake up, then I get back in the house, dress up and mentally prepare for war.

Two hours pass, the sun rises and there's still no sign of my boyfriend. MaNgcobo has woken up, I can hear her voice loudly chatting to someone about how unpredictable death is. I guess someone they know died.

There's a knock at the door. Sgcino wouldn't knock, would he?

I open and it's his niece that I met yesterday with breakfast. She's nice, I don't remember doing this for any of the Hlongwane boys. If they bring girls they're solely responsible for them.

“Thank you Olwethu. Do you know where your uncle is?” I can’t believe I’m asking my boyfriend’s whereabouts from a child.

“He went to the cattle-dip,” she says.

Wow, so cows are more important than me.

“Oh, okay. Is Aunt Vuyo still around?”

“She left this morning but Gogo said she must come back again to visit.” TMI!

“That’s nice.” Nice my foot! I lose appetite right away but I’m going to pray there’s no poison in this food and eat to stay alive.

I eat and put the empty plate on the table. I can take it back to the kitchen and help here and there, but I know my rights and I have no reason to help in MaNgcobo’s kitchen.

As if it’s going to make me feel bad, she decides to come and collects the dishes herself.

“Now you can go back to bed and relax madam,” she says. How spicy! There’s no “good morning”, “how you slept”, nothing.

“I might just do that,” I say.

She raises her eyebrow. “So you’re proud of being served by an old woman like me? This is why I don’t accept girlfriends in my house, I don’t have a maid to look after them when their boyfriends decide to leave them and drive with their future wives to town. Only recognized Zulu makotis are welcome here.”

“Sgcino drove with Vuyo to town?” I’m about to kill someone!

“Yes. Are you surprised?” She smirks.

So Olwethu is a little liar, I should’ve known.

“Yazi MaNgcobo, I came here to get cleansed and revive the angel in me. I just changed last night but you and your son are pissing me off, now I will have to start the whole spiritual journey thing all over again.” Maybe this whole positivity and letting go thing is not for me. Look at me, I was spiritually reborn last night and a few hours later I’m about to be the devil everyone knows.

“You came here to get cleansed? Mfano did that with you?” She seems perplexed by that.

“It doesn’t matter now, does it? Your son is about to wish he never left your womb. I’m everything but a fool.”

“You will not do anything to Mfano, in his home. Don’t test me, you don’t want to see my true colors.”

If she has more colours than she’s already portrayed I guess she’s a mother of all chameleons.

“Is that a threat? I will write myself a note reminding myself to be scared,” I say.

“This is why I didn’t like you the first day I saw you, I could see right through you. You don’t have any respect for yourself and your elders...”

Footsteps!

(Poem Cred: Safire Rose- She Let Go)

SIKELELA

CHAPTER 44

STHEMBISO

Sometimes you find help in the most strangest places- so profound. Today he has a white woman coming with him to the Ntulis to negotiate the burial arrangements on his behalf. She's been complimenting everything; forests, live stock, people pushing wheelbarrows of water and dirty kids waving at the car. It's like she's out in Africa for the first time, very impressed by the true reality of it.

"I'm going to grab something and come back," Sthembiso tells her.

Something means a gun but she doesn't know it yet. They've had some of the most weirdest moments in the short time that they've known each other. Sometimes he can't tell if she doesn't like him or just pissed about everything he's put her through. Either way, her tantrums don't scare him, if anything he finds them entertaining. He doesn't even get a chance to be uptight with her.

"Is it not rude to stay in the car and not come out and greet as a guest?" Today she's in one of the best moods he's ever seen. Almost two hours of drive with no argument and drilling questions about the twins.

"No, it's fine," he says and leaves her admiring the surroundings.

All he needs is to get into his bedroom and take his gun under the mattress. He may have shared one moment with Busizwe but nothing erases the past yet.

The mothers don't need to be greeted because they're chatterboxes. But maybe bumping into one of them would've been better than bumping into Hubo.

He stops and asks, "Where are you off to in such hurry?"

"I'm going to see Ntuli again," Sthembiso answers walking past him.

He strides along. "You think he's changed his mind?"

"I don't know Hubo, all I know is that Sikelela needs to bury his son later today."

"Maybe we can bribe him? Offer him a certain amount of money and not pay or pay and go collect it after the burial."

Sthembiso stops and looks back. "Where are you going?"

"Aren't we going to the Ntulis?"

"No we are not, I am."

Hubo walks past him and heads towards the car with his hands adjusting his cap.

"I'm not letting you go alone. Nkanyezi was my nephew too. And I have to support Sikelela, you know. He has a lot on his plate, imagine if he arrives with the body and both of us haven't managed to do a simple task as asking a wrinkled pensioner to back off with his crazy..." He's nearer the car and noticing a white

woman standing outside and staring at the mountains. He looks back to Sthembiso, "Tourist?"

"No, Dr Butler, she's coming with me... now with us."

He's even more confused.

He frowns, "To do what?"

"To talk to him," Sthembiso says.

"The only thing a black man wants to talk about with a strange white person is the return of the land. This is a dumb idea. Is she your...girlfriend?"

Giana clears her throat. Sthembiso just looks at her and signals for her to get inside the car.

Hubo grabs him by the jacket before he gets into the driver's seat.

"Hlongwane, I understand that you are the oldest and you can do whatever the heck you want and you're not afraid to do so against everyone's better judgment. But a white woman! You're bringing the Great Britain to Mashoba, that's not going to work."

"We are not dating, relax. We just have a professional relationship," Sthembiso says.

"Right, so professional!"

"Can you shut up?"

The drive to the Ntulis is rather awkward and filled with meaningless brief conversations between Sthembiso and Giana.

Hubo took the advice and shut up, he's just staring at them and mentally recording everything for other siblings. What a time to be alive, he whispers to himself.

Sthembiso's scowling gaze meets his face through the middle rear-view mirror. He needs to shush.

They all go in, Sthembiso leading the way. Ntuli is also a polygamist, he only got rid of one wife and now he stays with this young one who has pink cheekbones. Gentle Magic ain't gentle no more!

Hubo is staring at her, her hands don't match the complexion of her face. Sthembiso swiftly pushes him to the back before he makes any comment and greets the woman as humble as he could be.

"Ubaba ungaphakathi," she looks a bit uncomfortable. It must be Giana who's been smiling the whole time. It's not a real smile, it's just a flashing of teeth.

Sthembiso turns to her, "We can go in."

He takes off his shoes and leaves them at the door. She does the same and follows.

The man is relaxed on the chair, you wouldn't tell he just lost his grandson. There's a jug of amahewu in front of him. He's got zero worries; no fucks are given.

"You again!" He's looking at Sthembiso with displeasure.

“Mphemba today the baby’s body is coming. We can talk and rectify other mistakes after the burial, please.” Sthembiso is begging again.

“I said no and I explained my reasons to you yesterday. What you’re doing now is disrespecting me in my house while your so-called brother denied damaging my daughter and ran for the hills.”

Hubo chirps in, “He didn’t run. Sikelela doesn’t run from his responsibilities.”

“If he doesn’t run then where are my cows?” Ntuli raises his eyebrow.

“That will be rectified Mphemba,” Sthembiso says.

“I’m not allowing cursed twins into my house. There’s nothing else I’m going to tell you. Vumokuhle’s mother has a home, her brother can allow them to bury ‘it’ there. Or you can take him to the government cemeteries.”

Hubo shakes his head. “You’re an ugly, wicked, evil and...”

Giana clears her throat and looks at Sthembiso.

“You can both leave,” she says, more like instruct.

“But you can’t speak to him alone. I have to be here.”

“Mr Hlongwane, I asked to come here, please give me some space. I will find you in the car.”

He frowns, “Giana!”

“It’s Dr Butler...Go.”

He hesitates for a moment but he knows better than to disobey her. The last time he did, she stormed out and left him with burning pots.

They're sitting in the car outside with their eyes fixed on the yard.

"Why are you panicking? Is she bipolar?" Hubo could've chosen any time for his stupid questions, not now.

"She speaks English, Ntuli speaks Zulu, how do you think they understand one another?" Sthembiso is sweating bullets on the seat. Hubo is sitting behind him relaxed.

"I think it's going to work. She's white and she's a doctor, her word is the gospel truth."

Sthembiso chuckles, "That's very shallow but I hope it works."

"So why she's solving problems for you?" Hubo turns his eyes to him.

"For me? I have my own problems, these are family problems because they affect all of us."

"But she's not helping us, she knows you and she came with you here. What's the story between you two? Are you even cleansed to be dating white women?"

A sigh! "We are not dating Mahubo. I'm not you, I don't sleep and wake up and decide to date someone. Maybe she's sent by the ancestors to help."

"Yeah, to help you," Hubo emphasizes.

Before they could argue any further, Giana steps out of the house accompanied by Ntuli

“And then? BFFs?” – Hubo.

Sthembiso is confused; his brows are snapped.

Giana is not even coming to the car but walking around the kraal with Ntuli and giggling. Five minutes ago that man was colder than ice and now he’s taking white people on a kraal tour!

“That’s not normal,” Hubo says.

“I know, it’s strange mfanakithi.” Their necks are stretched.

After a brief chat with Ntuli pointing the mountains, they finally shake hands and depart. The wife stands outside the kitchen and waves goodbye at Giana.

Sthembiso opens the door for her. Hubo is curiously waiting at the backseat.

Once they’ve all settled in their seats Sthembiso asks how it went.

“Now he understands that conjoined twins are not a curse. He will be waiting for the twin to arrive and do every necessary ritual for him. But the grandmother needs to be present, he asked.”

Finding Vumo’s mother, that’s easy for Hubo, he always finds people. This is great news, Nkanyezi will rest in his right place.

“Thank you,” Sthembiso says.

Giana smiles, “I told you I’m a good negotiator than you.”

“Well, I will give you that. I don’t know what you said and how you said it but you have helped us a lot as the Hlongwanes. I’m truly grateful for that.”

“Only if you could repay me with honesty.” Here they go again! He’s told her the truth, not all of it, but she’s the only one except Sgcino who knows the information that she knows.

“How am I being dishonest with you?” he asks.

She turns her eyes to him, suddenly enraged.

“Are you denying it?”

“Let’s not talk about that now.”

They share a look, minimal but loud, and then they cut it.

Hubo was listening and hoping to hear the end of the argument and they just shut it down with one shared look.

“So you guys are just going to stop and continue this argument when I’m not around?” This is frustrating, they shouldn’t have started because now he’s robbed of the ending.

“Maybe because you’re a child and this is an adults’ business that has nothing to do with you,” Sthembiso says.

“More like family business, right?”

Nobody answers him.

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LONDEKA HLONGWANE

Sgcino walks into that confrontational moment between me and his mother.

“What’s going on here?” He’s darting glances between both of us.

“Uphumaphi?” I ask him.

“You don’t have to answer to her, she’s not your wife,” MaNgcobo chirps in.

I don’t look at her direction, I’m not going to give her my attention anymore. I’m staring at her son, he’s wearing boots and winter coat, but his boots are squeaky clean there’s no way he’s coming from a cattle-dip.

“I drove Vuyo home,” fear flickers in his eyes as he says it.

“And left me in bed Sgcino?”

“I just wanted you to wake up and be comfortable, that’s all.”

I direct my eyes to his mother. “Do I look comfortable?”

“Well, no.”

“Good, then take me home.”

He’s quiet, looking at his mother. I’m on my feet, I want to leave right now.

“Can I have a moment with her?”

She throws a look at me and walks out.

I do the honors of closing the door on his mother's back.

"Why did you ask Olwethu to lie?" I ask.

"I didn't ask her to lie, she wanted to come with me and I lied to get her back in bed."

"So no children were allowed?" The plot thickens. This keeps getting interesting.

"I'm sorry," he says.

An apology is not something I want to hear. Not so fast.

"Do you intend to make her your wife?" I ask.

"No Londeka, don't be like my mother, I'm tired of explaining myself everyday. I'm not going to marry Vuyo, I don't see her that way and I'm not in love with her. How is that hard to understand?" He needs to calm the fuck down, I'm the only one who has the right to raise my voice and be angry.

"You act like you have great plans for her. Bringing me here and allowing her to serve me. Leaving me in bed and driving her home. Really Sgcino?" I don't even know what's still keeping me here. I'm one of the most dramatic people I know, why am I being so lenient on him?

"Driving her home was me trying to rectify my first mistake of allowing her to be here while you're visiting."

"Your rectification fucked up even more. Maybe you should ask me before you do things."

“Can I kiss you?” he asks.

He’s crazy, I didn’t mean he must ask me when I’m still heated up.

“No,” I say.

He smiles and walks closer. My brows gather into a frown. What is he trying to do, we are fighting here, not making up with kisses.

“Good morning my love,” he says.

“Sgcino that’s not going to help you. I don’t trust you, your hospitality sucks, your mother is a hater and I hate you with the square root of 9.” I slap his arm but he doesn’t flinch and holds me anyway. He smashes his lips against mine. I push him back and bite his lip. That seems to turn him on instead of otherwise; he wipes his lip with his thumb, smirks and takes two strides and gets me again.

There’s a wall behind me, he presses me against it and kisses me until I allow him to. I let him have his way, sneaking his one hand under my t-shirt and unhooking my bra. I’m kissing him back, my hand is tucked behind his neck, faint moans are escaping my lips.

He pulls back and catches his breath. “Only if you could trust me Londeka.”

He makes me not trust him but right now I just want to kiss him.

“Baby!” He’s pushing me after briefly kissing me back. I’m left panting and horny.

“What makes you not trust me?”

Is it time for this conversation right now, really?

“You don’t talk to me,” my voice comes out in almost-whisper.

“It doesn’t mean I’m cheating, sometimes I have to make decisions as a man.”

“I don’t care Sgcino, I need you to talk to me and be transparent.”

“Okay my love, I will do better.” Our lips reconnect again, his hands lift my skirt up and grab my hips- almost non-existent ones. It’s been what, months? I let out a slutty moan at the touch of a man and deepen the kiss.

“Let’s play,” he whispers against my ear.

I lift my eyes to him, my own eyelids are heavy on me.

“Play?” I ask.

He brushes his lips against my neck, he cups my breast and tweaks my nipple.

“A little game with our clothes off and your body against my body.” His moderated sexy tone is what breaks every bone of morals I have in my body. I hold his neck, jump onto his waist and wrap my legs around him. Off to the bed we go...

I’m lying on my back naked with my legs open. He’s towering over me butt-naked with his eyes appreciatively taking in my body. I’m confident, I’ve said my confidence is higher than Vuyo’s high-heels, but right now I’m feeling a bit uncomfortable. When you stare at something for too long you end up finding faults.

“Why would I want to lose you when I just got you Londeka?” He

doesn't wait for my response, he lowers his face to my neck and trail kisses down to my chest.

My back arches, I want his mouth fully latched onto my nipple, there's a tingling sensation his tongue gives me. "You're on birth-control, right?" He looks up to me from between my legs with his head resting on my boobs.

"I still want you to condomize," I say.

"Where's the fun in that?" With a sigh he reaches to the bedside table, under a booklet there's a packet of condoms. "We are not going to use this thing once we get married."

He always carelessly touch on the marriage subject as if it's not a matter of discussion.

We kiss again. His erection has grown, my eyes keep darting to his bottom and my nerves start scattering as I think of how long it's been since I was intimate with a man. I don't do Yoga, I eat no damn plain yogurt- my diet is actually not even healthy- and I usually bath my whole body, my vagina included, with hot water. You know this organ has a lot of theories, what if I'm loose? They say walls become loose if they aren't exercised for too long and we all know men don't understand that. They dip in, find the ocean and assume you've been on a fucking spree your whole life.

"Are you okay?" He's whispering against my eye.

My body is tense, I realize and nod with a nervous smile.

"I won't hurt you," he assures me.

That's not even what I'm worried about. His lips find mine while his fingers play on my clit. The kiss is distracting much, his tip balances on my opening. I almost freeze to death when he pushes in without a struggle. Yes I'm not a virgin but I'm not a borehole either. I need those sexual enhancing recipes from...

"Mmmmm! Ayyyyu! Eshhh!" His eyes are shut, jaws tightened and he's making those sounds men who thought they could handle the pussy make when they realize they actually can't.

I meet his thrusts from beneath but that doesn't work in my favor as I suddenly feel his dick deep in my stomach. I let out a scream, he pulls back and taps it on my clit. My body shivers, I dig my fingers on his back and beg for his best shot. He pushes in again and hits a certain spot.

"Babeeeee," I scream.

"Does it make you feel good?"

"Yeah baby, more than good, I want to..." My voice trails off. There's something on my toes, a stroke or something. It travels up my legs. His thumb presses on my clit, all my veins are on the verge of busting.

"Open your legs," he forces them apart and repeatedly hits me on that spot that makes me weak while rubbing my clit. I feel the sheets under my butt soaking in wetness before my vision becomes blurry. I'm literally pissing on his bed, I cannot even control myself.

He doesn't pull out regardless of my temporary situation, a soft

kiss lands on my lips.

“I love you, trust me I do.”

I know he does and I love him too. My eyes slowly open, I wish he'd have given me a break to catch my breath and deal with the pee I just released on his bed but my body is more than welcoming of him. I still want more.

He pulls out and smiles.

“Come to the top.”

Whaaaat? We have a problem! SOS.

SIKELELA

CHAPTER 45

SIKELELA

Before he left Cape Town with Nkanyezi's body, he went to say goodbye to Vumo. Maybe if they were both going to the funeral it would've been easy. But they had to separate ways; one with a late twin to KZN and one staying with the recovering twin. He didn't look at her as a flawed woman who once betrayed his heart, he lowered himself down on the chair and looked at the strong woman crying in front of him. The mother of his children.

He cleared his throat, "We are about to leave. He will be buried at your home."

"Do you have ihlahla?" She wiped her wet cheeks and forced her eyes to meet his.

"My uncle is here, thanks to Sthembiso for arranging a flight, I had forgotten about all that."

She nodded, "Okay then, if baba agrees I will visit his grave once Langa and I leave the hospital."

A brief moment of silence passed. He couldn't help but feel partly guilty about the relationship between her and Ntuli.

"Do you miss home?" he asked.

"I miss having a family. A mom, a dad and a sister, all under one roof. But maybe it's a good thing that my mother is no longer

there to see her husband happy with someone else. My pregnancy was a blessing in disguise.” She muffled her pain with a chuckle and released a low sigh.

“Vumo,” he called and took a brief pause before he continued. “Do you feel like maybe we rushed things? Future talk, marriage planning and getting serious too soon. Did I oppress you in anyway?”

She frowned, “No. Why do you ask that?”

“Because I’ve been thinking a lot lately. Maybe we made it impossible for you to feel your young and reckless years. Me and your parents. I had goals I wanted to achieve through you, so did your father. Maybe nobody ever stopped and asked what Vumo really wanted.” He took another pause and lifted his eyes to her. Hers instantly teared away.

“I didn’t tell you about my father, among some things I kept from you. I just wanted you to help me rewrite history and prove wrong a man who didn’t even care about me. So I want to know if you ever felt like I wasn’t giving you a chance to get what you wanted out of our relationship?”

“No, I didn’t feel that way Sikelela. You put me first, my needs before yours and supported my dreams, all of them.”

He wanted her to at least blame something on him, to say he did something wrong and pushed her away.

“Then where did we go wrong?” he asked.

“I was happy with you, more than I was at home. And that’s

something I shouldn't have taken for granted," she said.

"You were not happy at home?"

She heaved a faint sigh, "I'm old, I shouldn't have allowed my parents' marital affairs to affect me. I just hated how unworthy and desperate my father made my mother look. Have you seen what she's become?"

He didn't answer. It didn't look like she wanted him to. She shook her head, deep in her thoughts. "Look at how her motherhood has been reduced to one mistake committed by her daughter. She's suddenly a bad mother, useless and incapable of raising children with morals. Now he doesn't remember how the same woman used to sell scones to clothe and feed his children while he gallivanted with women in Johannesburg and not coming home for two years. The same woman who kept the walls of his father's house standing and accepted him back with warm hands with his new wife. All that has been overwritten by my mistakes. Now I have to feel responsible for marriage I never broke. I have to go to bed everyday knowing that my mother is somewhere scrubbing dirty floors and treated like a dog because of me."

"It's not because of you," he said hoarsely.

"I know, but I have to take that responsibility now. Every good thing I've ever done and became don't count now, it's been overwritten by one mistake. Maybe it's better to grow up not knowing your father than to grow up witnessing your mother being ill-treated by someone who's supposed to protect her the most. I don't have fond memories of their marriage but I know

how much being a married woman meant to my mother. Just a ring on her finger and waking up at the Ntuli homestead; it gave her an identity.”

“But I wasn’t trying to define you by wanting to marry you. You visited me Vumo and not even once did I ever ask you to do something you were not comfortable with.”

“I’m not saying you were. But at times I wanted a relationship that wasn’t so uptight. A relationship I didn’t feel as if it was governed by my father and the rules of society.”

“How was the relationship uptight?” He frowned; confusion written all over his face.

“Okay maybe it was you who was uptight. You still are,” she said and gave him a side-eye.

“How so?”

“What do you do for fun Sikelela?”

He got even more confused. So she placed her elbow on the pillow and balanced her cheek on her hand.

“Beside us, what other good memories did you create out of your youth years?” she asked.

“Getting a permanent job, taking care of my mother, renovating the house and upgrading the furniture,” he said.

“And I’m so proud of you for that.”

He raised his eyebrow, “I sense a ‘but’ coming.”

“But I feel like you’ve never given yourself a chance to be you. To live in a moment and be loose. Just like my mother allowed marriage to define her, you have allowed your mother’s past and your father’s absence to define what you do and your future.”

“Aren’t you the fine one to point that out? At some point in your life, you lived and led other girls by the definitions of the society.”

“And it didn’t work out. I want the small things in life. Things that aren’t recognized by anyone but me.”

“Did Mthoko give you that?” he asked with a hint of jealousy.

“No. He gave me the blue-eye, broken jaws and swollen face.” She laughed and slightly shook her head.

“He doesn’t know who I am.”

Vumo’s forehead creased a few lines.

“Who are you?” she asked.

“A boring babydaddy,” he said.

“No Sikelela, I never said that. I said you’re uptight and you confirmed that by not knowing what you do to have fun.”

“Whatever! Are you going to breastfeed Langa or you’re going to give him shop milk?” His statement boldly stated where he stood.

“If I breastfeed I will have saggy boobs in two years,” she said.

“My mother’s boobs aren’t saggy and she breastfed me until I was five.”

“Yiks! No wonder you are like this.” They both laughed.

“But I will breastfeed, to cut down the expenses. Hopefully I won’t have men running away from me because of saggy boobs.”

He stood up and stepped closer to the bed.

“Thanks for having a conversation without biting my head off.”

She chuckled, “I guess the counseling I’m getting here works.”

“A hug?” He raised his eyebrow.

“You don’t have to ask.” She allowed him to wrap his arms around her for what felt like two minutes of safety and warmth. He didn’t squeeze too tight, she also became aware of his stitched side.

“My condolences,” her voice cracked into a low whisper against his ear.

“Thank you mamakhe. I’m going to see you soon.” He held her hand, looked at her in the eyes and exhaled heavily.

“When is ‘soon’?” she asked.

“When my boy is ready to come home. I will come and fetch you. Tomorrow I have to submit my medical report at work and see if they give me any sick leave.”

She dropped her eyes and nodded. Sikelela lifted her chin with his finger, forcing their gaze to meet.

“I’m leaving now,” he said.

Her lip trembled but she didn’t say anything nor move her eyes from him. His thumb swiped on her lip, he let out a sharp breath, turned away and left.

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HUBO

They came to the Dlamukas after Nkanyezi's burial. Hubo is the only one not too familiar with Cebile. He's a bit reserved. Sthembiso is behind her skirts chatting his heart away.

"Let's go to my bedroom," Sikelela says to Hubo. Sthembiso and his mother have disappeared to the kitchen. It was Cebile's first time meeting the Hlongwane wives at Nkanyezi's funeral. Nothing much was said, they just exchanged greetings and avoided each other's space.

"Your mother is young," Hubo says following Sikelela.

"She's not, she just have good genes. Hopefully she will find a man soon." Sikelela reaches to the wall and turns the light on.

"You want to have a stepfather?"

"That's another way of looking at it. I just want her to be happy. Mkhonto was her first and last boyfriend. It's been that long."

"You mean she hasn't been...." Sikelela turns to him with a reprimanding look before he says it.

"Let's not talk about elders." He sits on the bed, Hubo is standing in front of the table and looking at the pictures. "Do you think I'm boring?"

Hubo chuckles, "Is that even a question? I don't think you're boring, you are boring."

"Fine, can we talk about something?"

Hubo turns his head, "Yini, are you okay?"

"I'm okay. You need to sit so that we can talk."

Hubo approaches the bed with a frown. The burial took place at sunset with just the Ntulis and them. Sikelela seemed fine the whole time but now Hubo is panicking when he sees his long face.

"I'm worried about Vumo's mother. She has to stay there for seven days and that man hates the air that she breathes," Sikelela says.

"Don't tell me you're worried about that. They're adults, they'll figure it out," Hubo says dismissively.

"Well, she's Vumo's mother and she worries about her."

"So this is about Vumo?"

Sikelela exhales deeply, "Yeah, it's about her. I want to know a few things."

A moment of silence passes...

"How did you end up in bed with her? You were not dating, right?"

Hubo sighs. This is not something he likes discussing, especially now that he knows the truth and Vumo hates his guts.

"Come on bafo, I want to know," Sikelela pleads.

“We hooked up, casually. I met her and approached her then we agreed to meet later. She sneaked out, I picked her up and we went to the lodge.” He’s not proud, the pain he sees on Sikelela’s face furtherly breaks him. There was no need for details.

“Did she tell you she was a virgin?”

“No, she didn’t.”

“Did she try to stop you?”

“No, we were having fun, both of us.”

“Condom?”

“Sikelela!”

He sighs, “Sorry. How many times?”

Hubo stands and returns to the table and picks the photo album.

“I’m bringing her here after Langa has been discharged,” Sikelela says.

“What???” Hubo looks at him with displeasure.

“I don’t want her to be in the position she was at with Mthoko ever again. She’s not perfect but she’s the mother of my children.”

“I thought you had a new love interest,” Hubo says with his brows snapped.

“I was friendzoned. But there are people who have babymamas and still date other people,” he defends himself.

“Those people don’t have their babymamas staying at their

homes. You're complicating your life."

He takes out his cellphone and makes a phone call. It's ringing on loudspeaker, Hubo is looking confused.

"Hey," a girl answers.

"How are you?" Sikelela asks.

"I'm good. How was the funeral?"

"It went okay. I need your advice, are you not busy?"

"No, shoot."

"My son's mother needs a place to stay and I was thinking of my mother's house."

She laughs, "Why do you need my advice, you already thought about it."

"I still value your opinion," he says.

"Your mother can help her figure out motherhood. Maybe it's not a bad idea, especially if you guys plan to get back together in future."

"And if we don't?"

"Then good luck finding an understanding girlfriend who will stand for that setting."

"Thanks for your contribution."

"Was that all? You seriously called to ask me that?"

"Would you have preferred me to call to tell you what shirt Sguqa

is wearing today?”

“Bye Sikelela,” she drops the call.

Sikelela laughs.

“Who was that? She sounds beautiful and sexy,” – Hubo.

“Melamina Mshengu.”

“What? You’re friends with benefits now?”

“Without benefits.” He throws the phone away and sighs.

“And that thing of Sguqa and the shirt, is she dating him?” Hubo asks.

“Not in really. In real life she has another boyfriend,” he says.

“And Sguqa has another white girlfriend who’s a doctor. What kind of family was I born into?”

The door opens, Cebile peeks through and asks them come to the kitchen.

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CEBILE

Hubo and Sthembiso sits on the table. They were brought up well, they have manners. Sikelela is standing against the cupboards eating on his feet. How disappointing!

“Where is your girlfriend?” She’s looking at Hubo.

“My what?” He chokes on his saliva and coughs.

“He’s used to plurals. You should’ve asked where are his girlfriends,” Sthembiso says.

“Oh, he took after his father,” – Cebile.

Sikelela clears his throat. They all look at him but he doesn’t say anything.

“Wena Ma ask Sthembiso about a white doctor,” Hubo rats out.

“Oh, Giana?”

Hubo’s eyes widen. He thought he was the only one who knows.

“So it’s official?” He looks at Sthembiso.

“What’s official is Pastor Mdluli having a son who looks like you with your ex.”

The whole kitchen comes to a stand-still. Sikelela drops his spoon and looks at Hubo.

“He doesn’t look like me. Ayanda sent me the pictures,” Hubo says defensively, bringing an end to the awkward silence.

“When?” Sthembiso asks.

“A few months after Qobolwakhe was born.”

“And you’re supposed to be the clever one. Tell me, is there any chance you’re someone’s father and you don’t even know because you lose count of how many girls you sleep with?”

He puts down the spoon and pushes his plate. "Where did you see them?"

"At the supermarket when I went to get drinks for the guys who dug the grave."

"I don't understand, Ayanda must have an explanation. It's not like we don't talk, she should've said something or maybe ask for us to do a DNA test."

"Maybe she didn't want you to be the father," Sthembiso says.

"But she enjoyed my dick."

Cebile clears her throat, "Okay children, eat your food."

They all look at her. Did she say children? They're bloody adults.

Her phone rings, they stay quiet and eat their food as instructed.

"Hello...yes I'm home...no, now is not a good time...here, where? Tell me you're joking..." They lift their heads and look at her. She's sweating in a cold evening.

She drops the call, looks at Sikelela and back at the phone.

"Who was that?" Sikelela asks.

"No one important." She picks her spoon and eats.

They all continue eating. Hubo is just biting small pieces, he doesn't have appetite anymore. All he's thinking about is what Sthembiso just told him. It scares the shit out of him, the possibility of it all

There's a knock at the door. Cebile's eyes rise first, she looks frightened.

"I will get it," Sthembiso says.

"No Sthembiso, let's ignore it."

Confused faces!

"Don't worry Ma, I will tell whoever it is to come back in the morning," Sthembiso says going to the door despite Cebile's plea.

He opens the door, there's a man wearing a long coat and cowboy hat.

"Can I help you?" he asks with a frown.

"I'm here to see Macebi."

"Macebi? Come back in the morning."

"Mfana wami, it's too late for me to go back home now. I don't know anyone around here except Macebi."

"Sorry, I forgot to ask your name," Sthembiso says.

"Vusi Ntombela."

"Give me a moment." He turns to the kitchen and looks at Cebile.

"He's Vusi Ntombela and doesn't have anywhere to go now. Can I let him in?"

"Yes...I mean no...yes."

Sthembiso hesitates for a moment, but he's here, so is Hubo and Sikelela, there's nothing this man can do. "You can come in and

tell us what do you want from her.”

The man walks in, Sthembiso drags a chair and puts it next to the door for him to sit.

“Do you know him?” Sikelela asks his mother.

“Maybe, but I didn’t invite him here.” She’s not comfortable.

The man clears his throat, “I’m sorry to just come, I wanted to surprise you Macebi.”

“Where is the surprise?” Sikelela asks.

Hubo chuckles, leans to him and whispers; “He’s the surprise. You said you wanted a stepfather, ta-da!”

Sikelela looks at his mother with his eyes bulging out. He did say she must find a man but he didn’t mean this one. He hasn’t seen him well but definitely not him. He doesn’t like...how he breathes and blinks and arrives at night uninvited with cowboy hats. “Ma who is he?”

Sthembiso pulls a tray and puts their half-eaten plates on it.

“Children, it’s time to clear the kitchen,” he says.

“But I want to know who this man is,” – Sikelela.

Hubo adds, “And we demand his medical and criminal records, bank statements, affidavit and...”

“Mahubo, Sikelela, don’t be disrespectful!” Sthembiso says, his tone more firm.

Cebile looks grateful for that statement. They don't argue any further, at least they know when to listen to the big brother. Three of them leave the kitchen.

She almost had a heart attack. Almost!

She turns to him, "Vusi, I said we are taking things slowly."

"You lost a grandson Macebi, I had to come."

She melts; a smile curves from the corner of her lip.

SIKELELA

CHAPTER 46

LONDEKA HLONGWANE

He's driving with one hand, the other one is on my thigh. Now this is the relationship I signed up for. He finally gave up the D, now he's driving me home and listening to my music playlist.

MaNgcobo didn't come to say goodbye to us, I'm sure it bothers him but I've already accused him of having his umbilical cord attached to his mother, so he has to toughen up. I'm sure he's going to call her first thing after he's dropped me off.

"How often do you visit your sister?" I ask.

He has a sister, older than him and married.

"Mmm, maybe once a year. The husband doesn't like me very much," he says.

"And your mother? How often do you go home?"

"Every month," he says.

"And speak to her everyday?"

He chuckles, "She's my mother, obviously we talk everyday."

I'm worried. "She told me she doesn't like me. If she was a random woman I wouldn't have cared because I don't get money for being liked, or lose a tooth for being disliked. But she's your mother Sgcino, and I know myself, if she keeps poking at me I will

retaliate and your whole village will smell like fish curry.”

He’s quiet and driving like he didn’t hear a word. He’d rather not address it, cool by me. He’s seen how his mother treats me, he witnessed it the first day we met, but he wants me to deal with it my own way.

“My own mother could sell me if she had a choice. I don’t know what makes your mother think she can ruin my life.” This is the last thing I’ll ever say about that woman. I’m no longer talking about it.

“If she likes Vuyo that much then she must marry her herself. Same sex marriage. Homosexuality. It’s a democratic country.” I’m not wasting any more breath on this. It’s fine, he can drive and run us over the truck if he wants.

“And Vuyo’s availability has turned into desperation. She’s too beautiful for this. You were never hers in the first place, I don’t know why they make it look like you and her were a match-made in heaven.” Am I talking alone here?

“Do you want ice-cream?” he asks.

Wow, so he thinks everything I just addressed can be solved by ice-cream?

Silence is gold.

“Love,” his hand squeeze my thigh.

“Leave me alone Sgcinumyalo.”

He chuckles and ‘leaves me alone.’ Is this man crazy? Who leaves

a woman alone when she asks to be left alone?

“So you’re not going to say anything?” I ask.

“I will, not when you’re still angry though. She needs to be present when we talk and you need to be calm, she’s still my mother and your children’s grandmother.”

I understand what he’s saying but I also feel like he has a smart way of dismissing me. I’m well within my rights to express how I feel to him.

“Okay,” I say.

“So what are we going to do about the way you speak to me?”

What is he talking about?

“Which way is that?” My brows are furrowed.

“I don’t do ‘fucks’ and all those terms you use when you’re angry. You’ve never heard me talking to you any how. There has to be boundaries in tone and approach.”

I don’t say anything, I’m dumbstruck. I didn’t expect this. How did we switch from his mother’s unprovoked terrible attitude to my attitude when I’m angry?

Something pinches my thigh. I yelp and look at him, almost annoyed.

He smiles, “Did you hear me?”

“Jeez, yes!”

“So what do you say?”

“I will address it when you’re not angry. I’m still your girlfriend and the future mama of your children.” What better than plagiarizing from the best. I don’t know how to smartly dismiss people’s feelings but I can learn a lot from him. Can’t I?

He’s laughing. I don’t know what’s funny.

“At least you acknowledged one thing, that you and I have a soccer team to raise.”

When did I acknowledge that? I don’t know why I’m smiling. I have no reason, no ground, no excuse or whatsoever, to be thinking about bearing a brood of children for him.

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We made an ice-cream stop, had lunch at McDonald’s, fought and made up, all in a space of two hours. He’s two houses away from the Hlongwane homestead, I will be home for the next two days, I have to make time to see Sikelela.

This man wants to leave now, I don’t know when I will see him and that breaks my heart.

“Londeka,”

I take a deep breath and look at him. I don’t know why I’m suddenly so attached. I’m holding back tears because I don’t want a man whom I wasn’t born with to leave me. It makes no sense!

“I will see you in a few days,” he says.

I suppose that’s supposed to make me feel better. I don’t want

him to see me cry, that would be bad for my reputation and...divaness. I turn to the window and fight back tears away from his stare.

“Sthandwa sami buka la.” His tone is soft and begging.

I blink three times and look at him.

Okay, those papers in his hand are called money. He’s holding a lot of them.

“Thatha,” he says.

I’m not used to a lot of cash; I only withdraw for petrol and bread.

“What for?” Trust me when I say my voice has never been so clear in my life.

“Nails, hair and cosmetics.” It doesn’t sound like he’s sure of what he’s saying.

I take the money, I want to smell it but I don’t want to look poor. I’m no accountant but I’m going to count it and see if everything balances.

“It’s R3 060,” he says before I count beyond R400.

I look at him in amazement. That’s a lot of money if you didn’t work for it. But the R60 has to go!

“What?” he asks with a chuckle.

“I prefer R3 000,” I say.

He takes it back and gives me R100. I want to refuse because that’s not what I wanted. I just don’t like money that’s odd and not

balanced. I always chop extras in my bank account.

“No Sgcino, keep that for your petrol,” I say.

“You think like a wife.” He puts it back in his wallet.

What in the freakin’ South of Africa did I just do? Refusing money. Am I Oprah Winfrey’s daughter or something?

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His kiss is still lingering on my lips. Money worked like a charm, my mood improved in a snap. I must cry often, it will make me a billionaire soon.

I’m entering the yard with my overnight bag. I don’t know what my sin is; why the universe is against me? Everyone is sitting outside. My family is united, if there’s anyone fighting it’s always me against someone. My mothers are best friends, you’d swear they’re sisters. But in all that unity they never sit under the tree shade, all of them at once.

There’s jelly in my legs. I can’t walk straight, they’re all looking at me. It feels like they can see everything I got up to last night.

“Sanibona,” I greet. My legs cannot carry me past them fast enough.

The brothers return my greeting, very formal. I pray Hubo neutralizes this awkward situation with his silliness. I feel like there’s a sperm running down my legs; I’m that paranoid right now.

“How was your friend’s event?” MaXulu asks.

“It was great,” I say.

I’m almost at the door, glory to Jesus!

“Are you also an ambassador of Nivea-For-Men now?” Hubo asks before I disappear.

I almost freeze to death. He’s always throwing me under the bus. But I’m also an idiot, why did I use Sgcino’s lotion? It was going to sell me out anyway.

I don’t know who laughs first, Sthembiso joins in, before I know it Mkhonto’s whole family is being tickled by ghosts and laughing their lungs off.

I’m locking myself in my room the whole day!

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STHEMBISO

Londeka is shy today. This day is historical in this family. She can’t look at anyone in the eye. It’s strange that they’re laughing about her coming from a boy’s place. But it would be ignorant of them to expect her not to date at her age. They have no reason not to want her to live her life. She’s done what they always wanted; learned to be independent.

He knocks at her door and lets himself in before she can permit him to. He’s giving her a taste of her own medicine.

“Bhuti, you should’ve knocked.” Yep, she’s very humble today.

“Next time. Dress up, I’m taking you and Mela out for dinner. My schedule is tight this week and the following,” he says.

“Can’t we squeeze it somewhere in the week? I’m tired.”

“No, I’ve already told Mela that we will meet later today. You’re tired from what?”

She swallows. “From the event. It was quite busy.”

“You don’t say!”

She looks away. Sthembiso chuckles and continues staring at her until her legs fail to carry her. She sits on the bed and keeps her hands busy with nothing.

“You know your mothers were once your age, they know exactly what’s going, so do I.”

She clears her throat, “Ummm, okay.”

“Look, I understand that it’s not easy for you as it’s easy for Hubo and Thobani to talk about girls. But the world has changed, this is not 1976, girls go missing and die everyday. So don’t lie about your whereabouts ever again. Tell someone where you’re going, who you’re going with and for how long. Tell at least Hubo, you’re closer to him, so that when something happens we know where to look and who to deal with.”

She nods, “So nobody is angry that I went to visit Sgcino?”

“Not really, but you know what he has to do for us to like him. Indoda yindoda ngezinkomo zayo.”

“You’ve never said that to Hubo though.”

“Hubo finds different soulmates every week, imagine if we sent lobola to every girl he claimed to love.” They both laugh. How did they hate each other so much when it’s so easy to get along?

“Give me five minutes to dress up. What’s the theme?” Londeka asks dashing to her wardrobe.

“No theme. Just dress up and come out in five minutes, I’m counting.” He walks out.

She settled for jean and sneakers. To arm against the cold evening she put on a puffer jacket. This is what she always wanted, even though Mela is joining them, but she’s being taken out by her brother for the first time.

“So you missed the funeral,” Sthembiso says.

“You make me feel bad. I’m going to see Sikelela tomorrow, it’s not like the funeral was at the Hlongwanes,” she says.

“Don’t you think you’re developing a bad habit of missing funerals of your loved ones?” It wasn’t much of a big deal, none of the kids went except him, Hubo and Thobani. But it still needs to be addressed, she did it with Zime too.

“This is about Zime, right?” she asks.

“Not really, it’s about you and missing funerals,” he says.

“I’m sorry, it won’t happen again.”

He just nods.

“And I’m sorry about Zime’s funeral. I was very wrong, no matter what the situation between us is, when you’re in pain I should be there for you. Family is family, we are not always going to get along.”

“Don’t worry, it’s water under the bridge.” He’s quiet for a while, then he exhales heavily. “Do you know Zime’s last wish was for me and you to get along?”

Her eyes widen. “Really?”

“Yes, she asked me to mend our relationship,” he says.

“She must’ve felt death coming.”

“Or known,” he says.

“What do you mean?”

“Zime cheated on me, I found out about it the day I almost burned myself to death. I don’t know how long she did it or why she did it, the man who has my answers has left his brother in charge of his businesses and skipped the country.” He shouldn’t be disclosing such about his marriage but he needs to talk to someone about it and it feels right.

Londeka’s jaw has dropped to the seat. Her mouth is hanging open. Her brother had a perfect life, or so she thought.

“She cheated? Oh my goodness, are you okay?” She wants to hug him but he’s driving.

“I’m not okay, I loved my wife and I wanted her to be happy.”

“Do you think the boyfriend was involved in her death and not the Mshengus?”

“He was involved, if not why is he running? He could fuck my wife but he cannot meet up with me.”

“My God! What are you going to do? Deal with him the Hlongwane way?”

“I’m not a typical Hlongwane. I think before I act. If he killed Zime then I will make sure he goes behind bars. She deserves justice and he has to be punished for what he did.”

“You will still pay tax and indirectly fund his prison lifestyle,” Londeka says. She’s a Hlongwane, Mkhonto’s daughter, she wants to see blood.

“I didn’t send Zime to cheat, so I’m not getting armed and killing for izindaba zomphingo,” he says.

Fair enough, she thinks as she nods.

He wanted to take them to the movies after dinner but Londeka says it’s boring because they have TVs. So they’ll be heading to a casino afterwards.

Mela is here. They’ve been waiting for her for over ten minutes. Londeka was getting impatient and suggesting that they order without her. But he put his foot down.

Mela went all out. She’s dressed to kill; black bodycon dress, corset heels and straight blunt cut wig. Her make-up is on point,

sealed by nude pink lips. She looks like a doll.

“Woow! Nobody told me to look beautiful,” Londeka says.

Mela smiles, dropping her eyes as she walks around the table to take a seat.

She greets shyly, suddenly feeling overwhelmed and regretting putting this much effort on her looks.

“You’re beautiful,” Sthembiso says.

Now she needs water and air.

“Thanks,” she says.

Londeka is smiling knowingly.

“Have you ordered drinks?” She’s taking out her bank card for God knows what.

“Don’t worry Mela, everything is on me,” Sthembiso says and raises his hand for a waiter.

They place their orders. Londeka is not shy to order a glass of gimlet and drinks it before she eats.

“So how are you girls doing?” Sthembiso asks.

“Good from my side,” – Londeka.

“I bet you’re good,” he says giving her a side eye.

Mela clears her throat, “Well, I’m also good.”

“How is work?” he asks.

“It’s good,” she’s nodding.

“I haven’t seen you in a long time. My sister hides you from bad guys who hurt you.”

“That’s what good friends do,” Londeka chirps in and slurps her cocktail.

Mela laughs, this feels a bit awkward. Sthembiso can sense that, he expected it. If it wasn’t for Londeka, they would’ve eaten in silence.

He settles the bill and they head out, going to the casino. Londeka is tipsy and being forward about everything. There’s space between her and them, he holds Mela’s hand, which sends her to a wave of shock.

“Really Mela, how are you feeling?”

“Now?” she asks, almost too loud.

“A lot has been going on. Family feuds, deaths and personal challenges. So how are you feeling?”

The clarity almost make her feel like a fool.

“I guess I’ve learned how to cope,” she says.

“Isn’t it strange that we have to cope instead of living?” They’re taking slow steps, with no rush.

“It is, but what choice do we have?”

“Create our own happiness, I guess.”

“Only if it was easy.”

There’s a moment of silence...

“You’re young,” he says.

“For you?” she asks.

“No. Young to let anyone or anything stand in your way of happiness. Most of us wish we could go back to our twenties and re-live our best lives and enjoy every last bit of it. Life is hard after 30; parents and spouses die, siblings get out of control, new enemies arise, friends go through divorce and depression, fertility becomes a subject, wives cheat and leave a huge part of you dead.”

She stops and looks at him. “I hope you’re going through none of that.”

“I guess I don’t look like my problems,” he chuckles and pulls her forward. “So when you choose a man, choose someone with less burden than yours. You should benefit more from a relationship because you’re beautiful.”

“Is that how it works?”

“I don’t know, but that’s what I want for you and Londeka. And if any man breaks your heart come to me if you can’t go to your brothers, I have a special talent in breaking legs.”

She laughs, “That’s why you lift weights?”

“I lift weights to cope, breaking legs is a bonus.”

She’s looking at him. He attaches no emotion to the statement.

They enter the casino, with their hands still linked but she's not getting any tickles and butterflies now.

"Let's buy tokens," Londeka says on top of her voice.

He retrieves his wallet and they head to the counter. He can't be buying for more than R200, that's like throwing money away.

"We will need more," Londeka says.

"Hhayi bo, we are still going to do other fun things," he argues.

"R200 is enough," Mela chirps in.

Londeka rolls her eyes, "I will add, I'm not broke."

She rummages through her purse and counts her money. Then she looks up, "I don't have money yazi."

"What did you just count? Papers?" Sthembiso asks.

"I mean there's no money I can use. There's no extra, they're all siblings. Are you sure you don't have...?"

He sighs and takes out R100. This is it, he's not adding more.

"Thank you," she's now satisfied.

He stands back as they divide the tokens. He's here just to watch over them as they play. They start arguing about which games to play first. Mela can actually stand her grounds too. She's cute to watch.

But not cute when she's taking her shoes off and turning to him,

"Sthe would you be kind and hold these for me?"

"You can't play with no shoes on," he says.

"Don't worry," she opens her bag and takes out a pair of sleepers.
Girls and their magic!

"Please hold my bag too."

Even better, not just a shoe-nanny but bag-keeper as well.

"Enjoy," he says.

They've disappeared. He needs to walk around, lest he looks like a fool.

"They need to open the tennis court," that's Londeka's voice.

They appear behind him. Mela is busy counting her tokens, right now they mean the world to her.

"I want to play tennis but it's closed for some reasons," Londeka says throwing her hands up and rolling her eyes.

"It's closed, you say. Play another game then," he says.

"No, I want to play tennis balls." She means it. The arched eyebrow and folded arms. The monster Mkhonto created and died!

"They have their reasons, I can't come here and dictate what..."

"Ask for the manager or whoever is running this place and tell them I want to play tennis balls." Thank God Mela pulls her towards another machine slot. She's happy about that for now.

He cannot tell whether it's the gimlet or just her brat tantrums.

“Don’t you think a few slaps can fix her?” Someone asks behind him.

He’s startled; he turns his head with a frown plastered on his face.

Busizwe and his taxi rank dress code! What is he doing here?

“I can do it for free,” he says. His eyes are on Londeka. He must’ve witnessed the whole tennis tantrum.

“Busizwe if violence was a solution to anything your family would be at peace with everything and everyone,” Sthembiso says.

He chuckles, “Just my family? What about yours? We don’t fight by ourselves, the last time I checked your brother was the most violent person in Mashoba.”

“Well, you’re not slapping my sister. If there’s anything you’re going to do, since you’re here, it is buying tokens.”

“What tokens? The family I’m driving will be out any minute now. I’m on duty, not gallivanting around and buying things I don’t know,” Busizwe says.

Before he could step away Sthembiso yells; “Girls, more tokens!”

Their heads turn. Mela’s lips crack into a smile but Londeka quickly nudges her arm. Now they both look scared, worried and shocked. They’re thinking who’s going to pull out his gun first.

“He’s here to buy you more tokens,” Sthembiso says.

Busizwe shoots him a look. He’s not rich and girls coming here was not his idea. But he can’t disappoint Mela, not after that gorgeous smile she cracked when the idiot mentioned tokens,

whatever that is.

He takes out his wallet.

“R100? Thank you,” Mela squirms in joy. It looks like she’s happy and having fun here. He adds another R100, they start jumping and screaming.

For the first time in his life he’s happy to spend money on nonsense.

“Wow, she’s really happy,” he says as they both watch the girls run around the machine slots arguing.

“I’m just happy she made Londeka forget about the tennis balls,” Sthembiso says with a faint sigh.

Busizwe breaks into laughter. God must’ve known that they cannot always be able to deal with the Hlongwanes, so He created Londeka.

SIKELELA

CHAPTER 47

HUBO

His seat is reclined, he's lying back with his cap pulled below his forehead, chewing a gum and listening to Jazz that's hushing delicately through the speakers. A figure standing next to his window doesn't startle him, he waits until the person opens the door. The scent he's tried so hard to package and keep at the back of the drawers of his head fills up his car. He cannot discount how her presence always changes the pace of his heart to a complete mad race. Even now, that's a feeling he has to shake off.

"Hubo, I thought we talked about this," she complains, as she always does when he asks to spend some time with her.

He takes a breath to collect himself and then lifts his eyes to her. The girl who almost made him act like a man at 22. Only girl. After her he was back at being a playboy again. He had nothing to lose.

"How are you?" he asks.

Her nose furrows. "Good, and you?"

"Not good."

"What happened?" Of course she's concerned, this is her first boyfriend, a man who taught her how to love, to make love and how to sleep with a broken heart.

“I need you,” he says.

Before she can digest that his hands are clasped around her neck, he’s smashing his lips on hers and pushing her against the seats. Yes she lets him kiss her, touch her even, but it’s never this snappy and with so much command and aggression.

He lets go, breathing heavily and looking like a provoked horny wild beast. She’s turned on too, but not stupid to forget who she is and that they’re in public, at the side of the road by sunset.

“Hubo, I don’t think this is something you and I should be doing.” Her father is a reputable man in church, her husband a pastor, this may not be his neighborhood but people know exactly who she is.

His voice is raspy and breathy. He cups her face, looks deeply into her eyes and asks, “You want me to go?”

“Yes,” she nods against what her body sinfully desires.

His hand grabs her skirt up and brushes against her mound. He’s trying to be tender but today gentleness is nonexistent in his bones. With one hand he pulls her neck against his face. His silky breath brushes against her skin, summoning a trail of tickles throughout her body and between her legs.

His hand grabs aside her panty and sneaks inside her wet cookie. It’s a shame that she’s feeling this way for a man who’s not her husband and laid on the car seat with her legs spreading with each touch.

“When did you last open for the pastor?” Maybe this is the side of him she needed to remind herself who Hubo is and why they didn’t work out.

She closes her legs. “Open the door!”

“It’s just a harmless question.” Of course he doesn’t see how disgusting he is right now.

“Mahubo!” she’s firmer, holding his gaze fiercely.

He furrows his eyebrow arrogantly, before he opens his door and turns to her door and opens it.

“I’m fine,” she wriggles her hand off when he tries to help her out. But it doesn’t help because he stands in front of her, blocking the way. His demeanor still powerful and intense as it was four years ago.

He caresses her cheek, she holds his gaze trying to read behind his dark eyes. Hubo was, is, and will always be, a rebel in everything that this world lays out as blue prints of life.

“What are you now? An innocent prey caught in the claws of a hungry predator?” A ghost of a smile tugs at his lips before his hand cups her breast. He plays dirty and he knows very well that he’s not far from a hungry male predator, always using his swaggering masculinity and charm to prey on innocent females.

“Someone may walk on to us,” she’s breathing heavily, from high emotions and the lingering feeling of craving more of his touch.

“This is not a township, people are indoors,” he says nonchalantly

and pulls her to his chest and captures her lips in a sloppy kiss while his hands travel down to her skirt.

She's panting. "Okay baby, okay."

His finger slides into her opening, through the side of her panty, and rubs her soft inner walls. Her heavy breaths harden the beast behind his boxers.

"You didn't answer my question." His voice cracks against her ear, his fingers are tapping on her clit, splashing her warm juices all over his hand. She's that turned on, super wet.

"W-hat did you ask?" She's breathless.

"When did you last give it to the pastor?"

"I don't know...Monday maybe." Her hands are riding his back, threatening to tear his T-shirt apart. She wants a feel of his skin and this T-shirt is an obstacle.

He licks the side of her face. A feeling so intense and electrifying lodges between her legs.

"Was it good?" he asks, in a low whisper.

She opens her eyes and gazes wildly at him. He shows no sign of regret, like asking such questions when you're about to illegally enter another man's property is normal and he shouldn't at least respect the jubiliations of her marriage.

"I'm asking Ayanda, was the pastor's dick good on Monday?" He does a thing, pressing her pussy lips together and rubbing them against each other, there's a twitch on her clit and a spray of

warm juices.

“Hubo please make love to me,” she begs in a wobbly voice, her thighs slightly shaking.

“Answer me first.” He’s Hubo, he’s not going to abide to her unwillingness of revealing such about her private life.

“Yeah,” she says.

“It was good?”

She raises her eyes. He’s staring down at her, his eyes are moist and heavily-lidded.

He licks his lips. “Huh?”

“Yeah...”

He smashes his lips against her and smooches her like his life depends on it. She moans and pushes him back, inspecting her lip that feels swollen with her fingers.

“I’m going to fuck you.” At this moment fuck sounds better than ‘make love’.

He turns her around and pushes her chest down on the passenger seat. Her morals, what-people-will-say and the wedding vows she took, hatches at her head but she’s quickly shut out of reality by fingers sliding between her buttocks. Shock and lust twin through her veins, but the spank forces her to let loose and enjoy the moment.

He slowly inserts the head of his beast and pushes in slowly. His pubic hair caresses the bottom of her butt cheeks. A moan escapes her mouth, her walls stretch to accommodate his erect beast until he's fully buried inside her core.

He's not gentle, not counting his thrusts, he's fucking her as he declared beforehand. Hard, fast and mercilessly. It's a new experience for her; outdoor fast and furious. To him it's just another adventure; fucking someone's wife at the side of the road while the sun sets down and darkness peaks from the valleys. He's not scared of getting caught, in fact the idea of someone walking onto them is appealing, but he may be someone's father and these are the things he should give up.

She feels it nudging into her belly and lifts her chest up; big dick paranoia. He pushes her back on the seat; chest flat down and bottom out.

"Baby not that deep!" she cries out.

He swallows a deep groan and pulls out- unexpectedly so. Cold air fans her naked butt and exposed genitals.

"Hubo," she says in almost whisper. He needs to hurry and finish, before someone appears and catch them.

"Sukuma Ayanda," he says picking up his pants from his ankles.

"Huh?" She's confused, more than anything aroused to the nearest porn star.

“Stand up and look at me.”

This is embarrassing. Why can't he finish first? Or even better did not start doing anything at all.

Her eyes widen when she turns to a fully dressed man. Was she too wide open or cold? This is Hubo, a man who fucks anything called woman.

“Hubo...”

“Ayanda...”

He helps her pull down her skirt, leaving her panty hooked around one ankle and sticky liquid running between her thighs. He knows how she is, the last thing you'd do to Ayanda is embarrass her. She keeps blinking, her rosy cheeks have turned red, she can't even look at him.

He lifts her chin with his finger and looks at her deeply in the eyes. “Who is Qobo's father?”

What? Now? How?

She's confused, trying to wrap a thousand racing questions into one.

“I want to see him,” he says.

“Hubo you can't. What am I going to say to his father?” She's frightened, Hubo has never been like this with her. Right now she's looking at the scorned rebel of the Hlongwanes.

“I trusted your word because I thought you'd never lie to me. Because lying, cheating and breaking hearts is my department.

Yours is to be a God's servant, leader of the women in church, obedient wife and a good mother."

"I am a good mother," she argues faintly.

"But you don't get to choose who the father of your child is. I'm not perfect, I lied and cheated on you, I did this and that, but that doesn't mean I'm not capable of being a good dad." His finger traces down her jaw, his inner man is seething and trembling with anger, but looking at her face puts all that to temporary rest. He's not going to do anything stupid.

"What are you talking about?" For someone who claims to be confused and innocent, tears are quick to mess her perfect face.

"My brother saw Qobo and he will never mistaken any stranger for a Hlongwane. I want DNA test done Ayanda. You either tell your husband and explain yourself the best way you can, or I will tell him my way."

"Why can't you just believe me? I told you how my calendar was and that a ceremony was done for..."

"Damn it all to hell Ayanda! I don't care, I want to hear it from the DNA test results."

She's crying.

He drags in a few deep breaths and asks, "Do you want us to continue?"

"I'm not your bitch, Hubo."

He wants to curse but he did this to himself. But three long years! He had to address that first, before he even addressed his erection.

“If he’s my son Ayanda, I will never forgive you. Ungangihlulela, judge me all you want, but don’t decide what I can and cannot be.” He’s pissed but composed in a very unusual way.

“Hlongwane please don’t make me do this. Don’t put my son through this,” she begs.

He tears his eyes away from her, fighting the urge to give in to the flash of vulnerability that fascinated him the first day he held her close and confessed his love like a tormented korobela victim.

“Is this why I never see his pictures?” he asks, slightly shaking his head in disappointment. He’s trusted this girl, even from a distance. He never thought she could hide anything from him. They had a connection, even now they still do. Is he the only one who still cares? How is it possible that his feelings for her still tormented him and he’s been protective of her all these years?

“Hubo please,” she’s crying, worried for her own selfish reasons.

It’s really disturbing how much tears she’s let out just to stop him from finding out if he’s a father or not. How awful can one person be?

“What is so wrong about me?” he asks, hurt and self-doubt flickering in his eyes.

“He’s happy, safe and well-taken of. Even if he was yours, isn’t that something you’d want for him?”

The question confuses him. "Are you saying only your pastor husband is capable of providing such?"

"Can you provide safety?" She gazes wildly at him.

He's very protective of his family, his ability to protect his own child shouldn't even be questioned. Before he responds, she choruses another question, "Can you protect him now, in a decade to come, throughout his teenage and adulthood, with your name attached to him?" She poses this question with raging eyes. More than a question it's solid accusations and doubts casted at his ability of being a parent. She has the grounds to do so, but out of everyone in this world she's the one he had once hoped would believe in him. His character has always been talked about, out of all Hlongwane names his always outstands. His family's name always involved in every case of unrest within the village.

She knows one side of Hubo; the one that fucks around like a rabbit, cheats with no remorse and apologizes tirelessly, the side that never commits to anything but lies. But everyone else knows the side of him only Sthembiso knows how to tame, the one that breaks skulls instead of hearts, the one that dares the devil and walks in the shadows of death and arms with guns to solve every problem under the sun. She may have fallen in love with him and nurtured the side that served her and left the rest to God, but him being related to Qobo will mean all his sins will be inherited by Qobo in the near future. His own father, Mkhonto, carried grudges and enemies of his own father. Down to him and his siblings, they're who they are today, constantly living in fear, because of

Mkhonto's enemies. Sins of the father are visited upon his children.

"No child deserves not to know their true identity because of their father's short-comings and imperfections," he says.

"Is identity more important than life?"

"He's not going to die just because he's a Hlongwane," he pauses and looks at her with his eyes narrowed. "Is he my son?"

"He's a Mdluli," she says.

"I don't care what's written on his birth certificate. Is he mine?" He's closer to her face, there's a car approaching from a distance, she tries to close the door but he blocks her.

"I don't want to be seen here," her eyes beg for his mercy. She's always known the risks of meeting up with him but a part of her always agrees. Is it guilt or mutual desire of being close from time to time? She never gives it much of a thought.

"I don't give a fuck," he pulls down his pants, below his butt and faces her way.

All this to ruin her life! To make her look like a loose married woman.

"And you wonder why I had to do what I did. You're childish Mahubo, get inside the car!" She's never used this tone before. Something in his eyes shift, she holds his gaze until he gives in and lifts his pants and walks to his door.

She releases a sigh of relief. It's a local van, it drives past them

and blows a hoot.

Then his hands grab her wrist. "What did you have to do?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Cut the crap Ayanda!"

"Please take me home."

"Okay, let's go home."

She's going to sneak into the bathroom before her husband sees her and clean herself up. If Hubo lets the Qobo issue go, this will be the last time she entertains him. It's time to cut the ties, for good.

"Wait, you're driving to YOUR home?" Her heart beat picks a race. Why is he taking the road towards the Hlongwanes? Mdluli might be suspicious, Nana will drop Qobo off and questions her whereabouts.

Why is he not answering?

"Hubo!" she screams.

He drives, he doesn't budge, doesn't look at her. Her screams only make her look like a fool and they can potentially attract villagers' attention to herself.

The car arrives at the Hlongwanes, there's no one on the yard but it looks lively. He parks above the kraal, at the center of the yard where every house's door faces.

“Please take me home,” she’s on the verge of tears.

“Because this one is less of a home, right? It’s not so holy and anointed by the pastor’s dick. If he wants you, he will come here with Qobo and get you.” He opens the door, walks around to her side and opens her door. “Come out,” he instructs.

“Are you kidnapping me?”

“Oh come on Ayanda, you’re not an innocent prey here.”

“I’m here without my will,” she’s crying.

“It’s not like I’m going to chew you and swallow you.” He stretches out his arm to help her out of the car.

One door opens, a woman stands with a frown looking at them.

“Mahubo,” she calls.

He’s not even fazed. He turns to her,

“Ma?”

“Is that not a married girl from the hospital? Your father was against bride-kidnapping and that one is already someone’s wife,” she’s not even angry, she’s just a mother passing the advice in a very normal situation.

“I can explain Ma, give me a minute,” he says and signals for her to come out.

“I want no explanation Mahubo, that’s someone’s wife.”

She’s not sure what to do now. Sit in the car or obey the demand in his eyes?

He picks her up, his arms sneaked under her legs and beneath the arms. This is now turning into a circus, his mother is calling out other wives to come out and witness what's happening in their husband's house.

"Call Sthembiso," one says.

SIKELELA

CHAPTER 48

STHEMBISO

This one is his fault but he's not admitting to his mothers. If he didn't run his mouth and rather found another way of making Hubo aware of the pastor's 'son' none of this would've happened. Now not only did Hubo kidnap someone's wife, he's also exposing dirty secrets of himself and Ayanda to the world- the Hlongwane wives. Not that he promotes cheating, but he understands what comes with Ayanda's status. This could ruin her whole life.

MaXulu is coming to him as he offloads the shopping bags out of the car.

"Is Mahubo crazy? Out of all women in the world he wants someone's wife," she's talking and throwing her hands up and shaking her head.

"You need to speak sense into his head," she says.

Sthembiso chuckles, "You know your son has a loose head like a fly. I will go to him just now."

He takes everything to MaXulu's kitchen and passes by his bedroom to change.

He quickly changes and checks his texts. There's none from Paul. An update would've been nice, they've been doing this for so long

it's starting to feel like he's failing Zime. It's just a matter of time before he takes every piece of information he's got to the police and let them handle the case. It will take some weight off his shoulders.

He clicks on the next message from Giana. For some reasons he finds himself smiling as he reads through. It's still about the twins, he's never met anyone this persistent and crazy. Maybe they could do lunch and discuss possibilities of getting her into therapy so that she can let the whole thing go. As a Hlongwane he's used to such things; making life-changing decisions, some dangerous and cruel, and getting over them like nothing ever happened. He got Giana involved though, a stranger with a fragile heart. Practically she was on the front line in swapping lives of the twins and ensuring that his father's wishes were met.

He sends her a text; WE WILL TALK, I HAVE TO ATTEND TO SOMETHING, MY BROTHER JUST KIDNAPPED A WOMAN.

His phone vibrates before he can even put it down. She's inserted seven shocked emojis asking what in the world is going on. This is not a life she'd understand even if he explained. He leaves his phone in the charger and goes to Hubo's rondavel- the crime scene.

The pastor's wife is in bed, wrapped in a duvet with her head tucked under. She must be crying or hiding her face from shame.

Hubo is sitting below the bed, he probably doesn't even know what he's doing.

“Can we talk?” Sthembiso asks standing by the door.

Hubo knows that he has been sent by his father’s triple wives. He huffs, looks away and keeps quiet.

“Please,” Sthembiso begs.

“I don’t want to talk Sguqa. I’m waiting for her husband and my son.” How calm he is raises bells.

“This is not how things are done,” Sthembiso walks in, looks around for a chair to sit on. “Even if he’s your child, you can’t just kidnap his mother and order him to be brought over. It has to be done correctly and with respect, there’s an innocent child involved, his well-being has to come first.”

“I tried to do it with respect but Ayanda took me for a poes!” He’s on his feet with his brows furrowed and lips trembling with anger.

“I don’t think so. If you were did anything with respect you would’ve let your family know and asked for advice from your elders.”

“Yey Sguqa, I’m talking about the way she lied and pinned everything on me. Ask her, nangu mbuze!” He dares Sthembiso and forcefully peels the duvet off Ayanda. “Please tell him everything you said, I’m not crazy, I didn’t just bring you here for nothing.”

Sthembiso exhales heavily. “Allow me to take her home. Then we will arrange a meeting with her family. The boy is waiting for his mother to come home, please.”

That gets to him. He sinks back on the bed, buries his head in his hands and scratches it like a madman. Sthembiso knows he has to be careful and be the calmer one.

“If there’s a way we can fix this Mahubo it is by us acting like adults. Aspiring fathers.”

“Okay,” he nods, a tear runs half way down his cheek before he quickly wipes it.

“So you allow me to take her home?” – Sthembiso.

“Yeah,” he says and pulls Ayanda’s shoes from under the bed. It’s a permission for her climb down from bed and put her shoes on and leave.

Sthembiso grabs the car keys on the table and steps out to start the car; giving them some privacy.

Ayanda puts her shoes on and looks at him. He’s facing away, trying to deal with his emotions. She understands why he’s upset and thinks his best interests weren’t considered. They both knew how different their worlds were before they started, all she needed from him was an assurance that he was going to be a man her family could trust with their daughter. But Hubo had no sympathy, she was just a young innocent girl who chose to give love a chance in a very hopeless place. Having took that risk of going for a boy every parent didn’t want next to their daughters she’d hoped that Hubo would make it worthy. He loved her, yes, but what is love without respect? All those times he cheated on

her, sometimes with girls she knew and sometimes with strangers. Hating him would've made sense but how do you hate the only person who made you accept parts of yourself that you were never comfortable with? Someone who built your confidence and taught you to love every part of yourself.

Her mother knew about him and for some reasons she knew it wouldn't last. If she dares call home and tells her that Hubo has kidnapped her, she'd probably tell her these are the consequences of associating yourself with thugs. Hubo has never been apologetic about his rebellious ways. How he keeps her in his car now as a married woman is the same way she kept her from classes, took her from her way to church and returned her home after hours. He never once proved to be a decent man, to have desires of leading a family and being a father.

"I'm leaving," she tells him out of guilt. She's seen Hubo cry once in her life, it was when he realized he couldn't do anything to get her back, a day before her wedding.

"Okay hamba," his voice cracks in a broken whisper.

She places her hand on his shoulder but he shrugs her off.

Family meetings being involved will escalate things to unnecessary lengths. They can talk this with her husband exclusively.

"I will call you," she says and walks out.

Sthembiso leaves her settling in the car and returns to Hubo. He doesn't like taking decisions for people, that's what his role now in the family is all about and he hates it.

"Hey," he stands next to Hubo who's now lying on his stomach with his face buried on the pillow. "I'm sorry I didn't sit with you down and discussed this. That was a bad call from my side, I wish we can conduct ourselves with some decency and respect going forward, within this family and in the community."

He doesn't move but he's listening.

Sthembiso continues, "We are not a family of izixhwanguxhwangu, Ayanda has to see that as well and trust us with the boy, if he's really yours."

He turns, sleeps on his back and exhales. "He's mine, but I'm not good enough to be a thing called dad."

Sthembiso frowns, "Who said you're not good enough?"

Hubo gives him a look- who else?

"No, that's not true. I don't know the details of your relationship but I know the core of who you are. Why do you think everyone is comfortable talking to you in the family more than anyone? You care a lot and love your loved ones and protect them with everything you have. Hers is a flawed misjudgment."

"I just want my child, I will not read him a Bible every night but I will not teach him how to shoot guns and kill people. At least not until he's 21."

Sthembiso sighs, "I hope the mother never hears you say this. I have to go before she calls the police on us."

He walks out, goes to Hubo's car and drives out.

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LONDEKA

Listen, the drama this family has surpasses that of Love and Hip Hop. Last night a woman, someone's wife, was kidnapped, and I have a nephew that I know nothing about. I feel like there's so much weight on my shoulders, these boys don't think before making me an aunt. Sikelela and now Hubo. Who's next? Thobani or Sthembiso. It's not like they take us through the whole process of becoming aunts, no, you just sleep and wake up an aunt the next day.

I feel like I'm the only one whose life is in order here. Never mind that I don't have transport back to my place and have asked for a lift from Sthembiso who happens to be driving a lorry these days. His car and my father's are alright, I don't know why he's driving around in a lorry because it's supposed to be on duty at the hardware.

So yeah, the rich aunt is going to be dropped off by a lorry. I'm wearing huge sunglasses and a scarf around my neck, just in case I bump into old school mates.

“Yazi I’m meeting an old friend later in Durban central, I don’t know what gift to get her.” He’s indirectly asking for my advice.

“Is she a male or female? Age group? Race? Height? Weight?” I want to know exactly which gift would be suitable for her, even though I’ve never received any gift from him for ‘meeting up’.

“It’s a ‘she’, she’s white, in her late twenties or early thirties. I don’t know her exact weight, she’s not slim or fat, same as height.”

He said white? Gosh.

“Get her a dog chain,” I say. I don’t need to ask if she keeps dogs, I know she does or knows someone who has dogs. Black women you give data or airtime.

“You’re right,” he’s smiling. I guess I nailed it, he likes it but he just didn’t have the brains to think of it.

“I hope you’re not dating her,” I say.

He frowns, “Why?”

“Because she’s white and you’re still mourning,” I say raising my eyebrow.

He chuckles, “Luckily I’m not, let’s just say she did a huge favor for me and I’m trying to repay the kindness.”

Good for him! I don’t even want to imagine the trauma a white girlfriend could put MaXulu and Co through. They’re still recovering from the slayqueen wife, MHSRIP.

And then, why is he driving towards the mall?

“I’m going to look for the chain,” he answers my thoughts.

“But we are in a lorry, you can’t drive to the mall and expose me.” Which part of this doesn’t he get? I thought we were going straight to my flat, I don’t want to be seen.

“So what?” he asks.

“I’m a known brand ambassador, slash model, slash Princess of Mashoba,” I say.

He laughs, really loud. He’s driving to the mall anyway, he just crossed the robot and there’s no way out for the celebrity life of me. I don’t know if I should remain inside the truck or go with him inside the shops. Either way my reputation and divaness is at stake.

I curse that woman who made Hubo a ball of emotions, my brother would’ve driven me to my place in a nice car without embarrassing me. My relationship with this one has a downside because he always sees things his way and refuses to look from my perspective.

He doesn’t even check if I’m comfortable jumping down from the lorry’s door.

“Wow, so you don’t care if I break my leg or not?” I’m following inside the shops, obviously ranting and complaining about his lack of humanity.

“Your legs have climbed this lorry before, and you have long legs.”

I'm offended, who said long legs don't break?

"Don't buy the dog chain, it was my idea and now I'm taking it back," I say.

He doesn't respond. I swear I'm going to sue his ass if he steals my idea. He's entering the store, striding through the passages, intentionally making it hard for me to keep up with him.

I turn back to the entrance and wait for him there. I'm not going to chase him around the shop.

He's out within five minutes. I'm curiously waiting to see what he bought as the alternative.

"What did you buy?" I ask joining his strides.

"Two dog chains," he says.

"But I said you can't." He's unbelievable!

"In the store they said I can. Do you want anything before we leave?"

"No!" Why would I want to linger around any longer in a public space with a lorry-driving, idea-stealing brother?

I end up with KFC streetwise-two, which I'm grateful for because now I don't have to worry about cooking. He's a very thoughtful brother, I'm no longer mad about the idea of dog chains.

"Have you gotten any more leads?" I ask, regarding Zime's case.

“I’m going to hand everything I have over the police and get cleansed next month,” he says.

I’m sure it’s too soon for him to get cleansed, I mean he hasn’t mourned the six months. But on the other hand I think it’s good for his healing journey, it will free him from the misery of constantly remembering that he lost a wife. And Zime doesn’t deserve that much of his time after what she did behind his back. If it was me I would’ve stopped mourning the moment I found out.

“Do you trust the police?” I ask.

“I’m not letting it go, I’ll be checking the progress and helping them wherever I can,” he says.

I nod, it will take a lot off his shoulders. Anyway we are here, thank God no old school mate bumped into me.

“I will help you with the bags,” he says.

That’s thoughtful, and he needs to check if no snake or leopard is hiding in my bedroom before I walk in. That’s what men are for; to risk their lives and die first if there’s danger.

I jump off the lorry, honestly it’s not that hard, I grew up in a family of trucks and lorries.

“What was hard vele? Uyatefa wena,” he says as we approach the building.

“I was in public,” I say.

He laughs, “So you pretend to be something you’re not in public?”

“Pretty much,” I say.

We take the lift, people are at work, it’s peaceful and quiet.

My brows furrow when I see my door slightly open. I step back, allowing him to take the lead and check what the hell happened. I don’t think I’d be broken into and the security would just keep quiet and not alert me. Someone is in there, I just don’t know who. Nobody has the permission to come to my place if I’m not there.

“Did you host a friend?” Sthembiso asks, pausing at the door.

“No,” I’m nervous but trying not to show it. I’m sure with these biceps my brother would knock down the thief with just a twist of his knuckle.

He opens the door and walks in. I follow him, this is my mother’s precious son, if he dies I have to die with him.

My eyes land on a pile of dishes in the sink. Someone was busy here cooking a storm. People sneak into people’s houses to steal food and cook it...

“MaHlongwane is that you?”

Floor open up and swallow me, now!

Sthembiso turns to me with a frown. If it was Hubo I wouldn’t have cared but this is Sguqa.

Before I even start praying, he appears with his teeth bared out. His smile disappears as soon as he sees that I’m not alone. Now he doesn’t know what to do, he’s met Sthembiso before but it

wasn't about me and it wasn't a friendly visit.

And Sthembiso continues making things awkward by just standing and not saying anything.

"Ummm hey, you didn't tell me you'd be here." I'm pleased, this is a nice surprise, he came here and cooked for me. But I have to act shocked because I'm with The Rock.

"I wanted to surprise you, I'm sorry." He's so humble, it's cute to watch. He forces his eyes to look at Sthembiso. "Are you well Hlongwane?"

"Yes, I'm good. Nice to see you again," – Sthembiso. I'm not sure if he's being genuine or sarcastic.

I clear my throat and take the bag from him. "Thank you."

He raises his eyebrow, "Hhayi-bo, are you kicking me out after I drove you here for free and bought you lunch?"

Yes I'm kicking you out. "No, I thought you were hurrying to meet up with your white friend."

"No, she's at her surgery, I still have time." Fuck her surgery, fuck her degree, fuck the dogs and the DA!

"I'm sure you can stay as much as you want then." Actually I'm not sure, I'm looking at Sgcino.

"I cooked enough food," he confirms.

I'm blushing, my boyfriend is a chef.

"He he!" Sthembiso cracks a laugh and goes to the lounge.

What's funny about Sgcino cooking for me? Typical Hlongwane boy.

I'm sitting on the couch between them because I don't trust them sitting next to each other. Neither one of them is violent and crazy, but I need to remain guarded.

"I think I forgot my phone in the lorry," Sthembiso says and looks at me.

He mustn't dare ask me to...

"Please fetch it for me," he throws the keys to me.

"No," I say.

"Hhayi-bo!" He raises his eyebrow.

Before I get accused of being disrespectful for the umpteenth time I grab the keys and rush out. If I'm fast enough I will get to the parking within three minutes.

The lift! Why is it not leaving the 3rd floor? I cannot take the steps...

They're sitting quiet. Sgcino looks uncomfortable, unlike that morning when he was sent to him by his father.

"So you live around or you live here?" Sthembiso asks the accusing question.

“I don’t live here, I just came to surprise her and unfortunately...”

“Unfortunately I happened?” Sthembiso chuckles. “I hope you’re playing no games, she seems to be genuinely invested in this relationship.”

“I have pure intentions, it’s her who wants to take things slowly,” Sgcino says.

“If she wants to take things slowly then respect that,” Sthembiso says.

He nods, “Of course, I wouldn’t rush her into something she’s not comfortable with.”

Sthembiso looks around and then exhales heavily. “About the vision, I did it. I’m sure he’s happy wherever he is uMkhonto.”

“I’m sure he’s proud too,” Sgcino says.

“Proud of me? I doubt. He doesn’t care that much.”

He means not to be nosy but...

“What do you mean? Your father trusts you, at least from what I saw,” he asks.

“Yes he trusts me to do the dirty work. He doesn’t care how anything affects me, what I go through on daily basis and my overall happiness.”

Sgcino nods. A minute of silence passes, then he glances at him.

“Sometimes people give us what we need, just not how we want it. I don’t think he’d just ask something so big from you and not care

for you in any way. Maybe it's there, healing you but you don't see it."

"Healing me?" Sthembiso chuckles, "I'm fighting the case of my wife's death, trying to rewrite his wrong as a father to Sikelela, Hubo is having his own dilemmas. The list is endless but in all that nobody is there for me, not even him as my ancestor."

"In the middle of it all your needs are there, Sthembiso. You will find your healing and maybe find ways of forgiving the past. Someone is there for you, caring and waiting to listen, you just have to see her."

Sthembiso shifts, clearing more space between him and Sgcino. There's a frown on his face...

"Why are you talking like him?" He seems shocked and frightened.

Sgcino is confused...that was his voice, was it not?

"Is everyone still alive?"-Londeka.

They look at her, both looking freaked out like they've seen a ghost.

SIKELELA

CHAPTER 49

SIKELELA

The call he's been waiting has finally come. His son is out of the NICU and ready to recover in his mother's bed. Vumo says they might be discharged in a week. Everything feels okay, every pain he's gone through since the day he found out about the twins' condition subsides. He's the happiest he's ever been.

"Please send me the list of everything you're going to need," he says, beaming with joy.

"I already bought most..." He cuts her short, Vumo knows him better than that and she knows what Mthoko did to him.

"My son is not using anything associated with your boyfriend's money. Not as long as his father is alive," he says.

Vumo chuckles, "You're being unnecessary. Remember you still need to pay for the damages and arrange for Langa to be lawfully a Dlamuka. I don't want him to grow up at the Ntulis or have much attachment to my father."

"I didn't use all the savings." He inhales sharply, "I can still pay for the damages and do other things."

There's a moment of silence. "Why did you keep it?"

"What was there for me to use it?" Without Vumo he only had his mother as a responsibility. African mothers are naturally savers,

she only buys grocery once a month, she doesn't buy electricity. They last bought R50 two years ago and it's still the same units to date; part of bantu technology.

"You could've used it for yourself," she says with a chuckle.

"I did buy food and clothes, but that was on my salary." He pauses and laughs. Now he sees where this might go. "I also went out for drinks with Hubo."

"Drinks? You're lying Sikelela. You don't do anything for yourself. If you didn't have a mother you probably would wake up everyday and go to work without a goal."

"What do you want me to do? I used to go to the beach with you."

"You used to accompany me to the beach to watch me swim like I'm some 5 year old," she says.

He laughs, "But I was there, you made me eat ice-cream and watch some dumb movie in cinema."

"That's what you should do for yourself once in a while. Just have the 'you' time and enjoy yourself."

"But I didn't enjoy myself, I did all that for you because I love...because I loved you." That was awkward to say, the silence that follows is almost menacing.

She clears her throat, "Yazi Sikelela, being here and having gone through what I've gone through, I have come to realize that in life nobody can make me happy if you're empty."

"What do you mean?" he asks.

“You can travel around the world searching for happiness but if you don’t have it within yourself, you will never find it. This is to say I want my son to have a happy father, someone who’s content with himself and in charge of his own happiness. Langa can’t have two broken parents, at least you have direction Sikelela, my hope lies with you.”

“I don’t like you speaking like that. I want us to talk when you get here. We have a lot to talk about, right?”

“Yeah, I know.” She sighs.

“Please send me the pictures.”

“Langa’s?”

“Yours too.”

“No Sikelela, I’m ugly, my hair is a mess, I’m fat and...”

“Says the most beautiful girl in Hlabathini? Don’t play with me, or you want me to sweat before I can have them? Like that high school girl who made me run after her until I ran out of breath.” They’re laughing. She did give him a hard time, sometimes she wouldn’t speak to him at all, he’d talk alone until he turned back home. One day she threw water at him, but he still followed her with his shirt wet and begged for love. Every girl knew when Sikelela appeared between the trees it was time to walk fast and leave Vumo behind.

She loved it. He was never confused, even during ceremonies in the village with every maiden present his eyes would always be on her. He had put a mark on her because every boy in the village

knew she belonged to Sikelela. So did every girl, Sikelela was hers even when they weren't even dating yet.

"Fine, I will send them," she says in a softer tone.

He has to drop the call and call home to inform his mother about Langa's recovery. His thumb stops an inch away from the screen of his phone. She hasn't dropped on her side either.

"You're still there?" His voice is lowered, hesitant and full of fear.

"Yeah," her voice breaks, she's crying. This is not the Vumo he knows, she's always crying and he's so far away from her, he cannot do anything to help her.

"Everything is going to be alright Godide. You are going to be alright, I'm going to be alright, we have identified our sources of pain and weaknesses. That's a start, don't lose hope, you're not alone. I know it feels like that right now because you're alone there."

"Tha...thank you," she sobs painfully and drops the call.

Now he's hurting too. They're in a place he never thought they'd be at.

It feels like he's come far with her, yet there's so much distance between them on this one journey they've walked together.

"Sikelela what is it?" Cebile is panicking. This boy is calling him in the middle of the day, when she answers he just keeps quiet.

"Ma," he breathes his first word. Phewww, at least he's alive.

"I'm here, is everything alright?"

"No, everything is not alright. Why didn't forgive baba?"

Is this child testing him? She doesn't want to talk or hear anything about his father.

"Where is that coming from?" she asks.

"Because I want to know if forgiving someone who wronged you and turned your life upside down makes you weak?"

"The question is, did the person ask for forgiveness? The last time I checked your father didn't."

"If he did would you have forgiven him?"

"If he asked for forgiveness and worked to earn it and proved to be a changed man, maybe I would've forgiven him."

"And let him back in your life?"

"No, I don't let the same dog bite me twice, I change the route."
She's calling his father a dog but it doesn't matter because Mkhonto didn't care to prove otherwise while he was still alive.

"Ma what if...what if you couldn't imagine him ending up with someone else?"

She cracks a laugh, she can't help it. "Your father was a polygamist, that doesn't make any sense because he would have ended up with me and three other women anyway."

"I want to fix things with Vumo," he says.

"What?!" She's standing up, regretting every negative advice she

just gave him about forgiveness. "That's a good thing Sikelela."

"I feel like we can start over and build our relationship on a different foundation. I know her better, now she trusts me with her real emotions and fears. I can be more open too."

Cebile cannot hide her excitement. She was disappointed in Vumo but everyone deserves a second chance, except the dead babydaddy of course.

"That's your woman Sikelela. You and MaNtuli complement each other, you were meant to be. That girl taught you how to smile, before her you never did."

He chuckles, "You exaggerate Ma! Anyway I called to let you know that your grandson might come home in a week."

"And you're only telling me now, Sikelela! I have to clean that pigsty room of yours and go to Bab' Masinga for amakhathakhatha to block witches from hurting my grandson."

"A week is seven days Ma. You can still do all that, just relax."

"Seven days is like seven minutes, I have to go...."

"But Ma, you cannot drop the call, I'm the one who called and I haven't said everything I wanted to say. Where is my cowboy stepfather?"

Silence...

"Ma?"

Nothing.

He shakes his head and laughs. Langa is in for a ride with this grandmother.

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STHEMBISO

He's a few minutes late but that can be excused; bantu time things. He spots Giana already cozy at the corner table with a drink in front of her. Plans changed, they're now in Coastlands Musgrave Hotel. It's closer to her work and has seafood special that she's been craving.

"Am I late?" He's walking around to the other chair.

"No, you're early Mr Hlongwane." This is the attitude he needed, he smiles and sits.

"I apologize, I got held up in traffic." That's an excuse for every driver, everyone knows Durban traffic.

"I had already placed our orders and your drink," she says.

"I hope you didn't order the wine for me," he says.

"I thought you drink," her eyes widen.

"Not everyday. I'd like some water with ice today."

She's confused but maybe she doesn't know him the way she thought she did. The waiter comes over their table, she asks for his water and their food to be brought.

"I brought your babies a gift," he says passing the bag to her.

She's already smiling ear to ear. Women love gifts! Her eyes widen when she sees what it is.

He relaxes; nothing is scary as someone not liking your gift.

"This is my peace offering," he says.

She's admiring the chains. "Oh, this is beautiful. They're going to love them."

They're just dogs. Who likes being chained anyway?

"So how are you doing?" he asks.

"I'm good, just tired." She rubs her neck and yawns. His eyes are on her, he hasn't looked anywhere since he got here.

His water arrives, he takes one sip and looks at her again.

"I have decided that you're going to get counseling," he says.

Her eyebrows furrow, then she laughs. "Finally, I meet a Zulu man. So it's true that you guys are controlling?"

"How did I control you? You're not in a good space Giana, you need to talk to someone professional and move past the surgery thing."

"Then suggest counseling to me and hear what I have to say. Don't come here and tell me I'm going to counseling, I'm not your child."

Sigh!

Maybe he should've accepted the wine, sober is not a state to be at when addressing a dramatic woman.

"Fine, I'm suggesting. Giana would you be open to counseling?"

"I'm a doctor, I have a friend who's in the Psychology field, he'd tell me if I need help."

"I hope you are not a friend that can't keep secrets from her friends." He narrows his eye, like he will bite her if she says she slipped up and told someone.

"So you don't trust me?" She's offended, this is a man she went miles for and put her career on the line for.

"I do trust you, I just have...people betray people Giana. I don't have much but I want to live, I don't want to go to jail."

"I don't betray people, if I give you my word I mean it." She clears the table for their food. They're silent while the waiter arranges the cutlery.

She ordered steak strips, lamb ribs, chakalaka and potato wedges for him. For her it's sea food, basmati rice and veggies. He was scared he might be compelled to feast on sea cockroaches as well.

He's already dug in. She's watching him with fascination, she's never seen anyone eats such huge portions and so quick. But what if he chokes and die?

She grabs his glass of water and gives him.

He lifts his eyes, confused.

“Drink,” she says.

He takes the water and puts it aside and continues stuffing his face with food. A few minutes later the plate is cleaned, only then he picks his water and gulps it down at one go.

“Seriously!” she’s shaking her head, there’s a smile on her face. She didn’t cook it but watching him wipe everything she ordered for him gives her a warm feeling.

“Should I ask them to bring the dessert?” she asks.

“No, I’m limiting my sugar intake,” he says. “So you’re going to eat until Jesus comes back?”

“I don’t have your throat Mr Hlongwane, I can only eat small portions and chew properly.”

“It sounds so formal when you call me that, even my employees call me Sguqa.”

“Sgu...what is that? Your second name?” she asks.

“No, there’s a name that your parents give you, one that your friends call you and one you get from other men during stick fights. So mine is Sguqisamadoda, shortened as Sguqa.”

“What does it mean?” she asks.

“It means that I make other men kneel. I don’t stop beating a man until he falls on his knees.” He’s carelessly saying it like it’s the most normal thing in the world. Maybe in his world it is, but right now she’s just pale and frightened.

“So you beat people?” she asks.

He realizes how terrified she sounds and chuckles. “In a game of stick fighting, I don’t wake up and go around beating people.”

“But don’t people get hurt?” She’s gazing at him wildly.

“It’s real beating; some die, some get injured. But that doesn’t take away that it’s just a game to test each other’s strength as men and we enjoy it,” he says.

“You gamble with your lives Mr Hlongwane,” she’s in awe.

“At least with men we always know where they’re going to hit and how to shield ourselves. Unlike your gender that strikes unexpectedly and still smile on your face,” he says.

She’s gotten enough hints. He trusted someone, a woman, and that person betrayed him.

She stops eating and asks, “Who was it?”

“Ubani owenzi?” He frowns.

She frowns as well.

Oh, the English.

“I’m asking who did what,” he says.

“Who hurt you, I’m asking.”

“My dear wife,” he says and chuckles. When he raises his eyes again he realizes that she’s stopped eating and is staring at him.

“No, she’s late,” he says.

“That’s not what I’m worried about. What did she do to you?”

“She cheated, I found out after she was gone. Someone came to my house and shot her, I was not there.” That’s the most of it, he ends it with a shrug.

“And you can’t confront her about it because she’s no more. I understand your anger and pain.”

He exhales and puts his fisted hands on the table. “I don’t know where I’m at, emotionally. That’s why I’m asking you to be easy on me, I didn’t have a choice but to make the twin sacrifice. I’m one person who never gets a chance to go through his emotions before climbing the next mountain.”

He takes a brief pause, Giana is listening attentively and with no judgment. She’s not looking at him like he’s weak for complaining so much.

“When our father died we had to fight. There was no time to understand and adjust to the new world of being fatherless. Him too, my father, never gave me a chance to grieve to him about my needs when he was still alive. Everything had to get going, that’s how life has always been at the Hlongwanes. My wife died, my house burned down, I had to move back home with my mothers. Even they were not concerned about the series of events I had gone through in such a short space of time. Because the Hlongwanes always need to get going. I’m running family businesses, I have disowned they gym, one thing that was my baby and close to my heart, because there’s no time to dwell on emotions, you have to do what needs to be done and keep

moving.”

She’s blinking, her hand is etching to reach out and hold him but his hands are balled into fists.

“So Giana please don’t make me dwell on what I had to do, without much of a choice. Because as always, I want to keep it moving and forget that Nkanyezi is not alive because I faulted his life. Get counseling, charge me more if you feel like what you charged wasn’t enough and stop reminding me about it.”

She’s blinking rapidly, like a robot doll. Hurting him wasn’t her intention, she doesn’t want money or any other benefit for the job she’s already done.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to...” She doesn’t finish, Sthembiso stands up and storms off.

He’s upset and going to the bathrooms. The restaurant staff is watching through the corners of their eyes.

She has to go and check on him.

“Sthembiso are you there?” This is the first time she’s called him by his first name.

Only one male toilet door is closed, surely he’s inside here.

“Please open the door,” she begs.

“Giana go back to the table, I’m coming,” he says.

Why is his voice so low and wobbly? She knocks again.

“Open Sthembiso, fula!” she’s now pushing the door.

It opens, he’s standing with blood shot eyes, tears are still traced on his cheeks.

“I didn’t mean to upset you, I’m sorry,” she’s pulling his hand. She wants them to go and talk properly.

“Giana, I said I’m coming, go!” he pulls back his arm.

She stubbornly holds him again and tries to pull him out.

He grabs her by waist, pulls her closer and slams the door.

“Yini ndaba ungezwa wena?” He’s pissed but she hears none of what he’s saying.

“What did you say?” she asks, her eyes holding his piercing stare.

He turns her, presses her on her back against the door and holds her nape with one hand.

Their foreheads link, he hasn’t been in a confined space with a woman in months. He wants to be kissed, to be touched and...a moan escapes his mouth as his lips aggressively smash against hers. She has thin, soft lips. He wants more and more of her taste. His fingers dig onto her waist, his beast between the legs is awakened.

One hand unzips his pant, pushes it down and takes out the throbbing beast from his boxers.

She’s wearing a summer dress, his hand easily slides under and searches its way into the honeypot hidden beneath the G-string.

As soon as his fingers slides through, it goes for her tiny clit and rubs it.

“Oooh!” A sound of pleasure escapes her mouth.

Her hands wrap around his neck, she throws her head backwards and moans with pleasure.

He needs to do it before the staff get suspicious. He’s not the one to do things like this but this is not a temptation he can fight. Her honeypot is half the size of what he’s used to. He looks at her before placing the head of his dick at her opening.

“I’m not going to hurt you.” He inserts it slowly, he’s scared of mistakenly tearing the poor girl apart. Slowly he pushes in, constantly checking the expression on her face, until he fits half of himself into her. Then he starts moving slowly, with his gaze fixed on her.

She’s moaning with her eyes closed. She’s enjoying him, as big as he is compared to her size.

He lifts her to his waist, wraps her legs around him and inserts it all the way into the depths of her core.

She gasps, drops her head to him and bites his shoulder to prevent herself from making any noise.

He turns to be the one with his back against the door and starts bouncing her ass up and down.

The pleasure is unbearable, his jaws are tightened, veins around

his neck are pulsating visibly.

He wants to slow down, to change the position and be gentle, but this is not his bedroom, someone can knock at anytime. He's in too deep, soft walls of her swallow him and squeeze him in. She's tight, warm and juicy. He hasn't been inside a woman in a very long time, his legs are trembling.

He bounces her around a few more times, with his eyes shut and a deep groan vibrating in his throat.

Then he drops her on the floor, turns around with his hand wrapped around his coughing beast and releases a muffled groan. His cream shoots and runs down the door, he releases a deep exhalation collecting himself.

His knees are still trembling, Giana's hand comes from behind with the toilet roll.

He's back to his senses; embarrassed and disappointed in himself.

He wipes himself, picks his pants and boxers, and turns around to face her.

He can't maintain the eye contact.

"I'm going to make this right, I'm so sorry," he says.

"You're sorry this happened?" How is she so okay? He just fucked her in the restaurant bathroom for Christ' sake.

"Giana, I'm mourning, ngiwumfelwa. This was not me trying to transmit any bad lucks to you."

She's confused. "What bad luck? Losing a wife is unfortunate but it doesn't say anything about you having bad lucks or anything like that."

"You don't understand. You've helped me so much, I cannot risk anything bad happening to you."

She frowns. Why is he complicating things? They should be getting out of here and organizing a proper place to finish what they started. He owes her an orgasm, that's on record.

"I will call my mothers, they will arrange a chicken and cleanse you." He's serious; this is going to his elders and everyone will know they fucked.

"Surely I have a say in this and..."

"No, you don't Giana, it's very important." He pulls her into his arms and hugs her. It's a "thank you for a good fuck" gesture.

He pulls her out, there's an old man washing his hands in the sink, when they come out he raises his eyes and slightly shakes his head.

Is it obvious?

SIKELELA

CHAPTER 50

LONDEKA HLONGWANE

We are driving to his house, I don't know what it's about, I was told to dress up and pack my bag. He's a man of surprises these days.

"Baby," I break the silence, he lowers the radio volume. "What were you talking about with Sthembiso the other day?" I've been cracking my head trying to think why Sthembiso left so abruptly without eating. He was determined to be the extra wheel and join me in my romantic lunch with my boyfriend.

He's frowning like he has no idea what I'm talking about.

"Come on baby, yesterday you said you couldn't remember, surely now you remember something."

He chuckles, "But sthandwa sami, if I didn't remember yesterday what makes you think I remember today?"

Urgh! I hate that he's keeping secrets with my brother, they know each other because of me. I just hope Sthembiso is not angry with me, in any way. We haven't talked since he left without explaining anything.

Anyway we are here, I'm hearing voices as we approach the door of his house and I'm wondering who's here. Ntuthuko is out of

town, his friends barely come to his house, some I have not even met, even the so-called boyfriend of my friend.

He's not telling me anything about his guests, I guess it's not important. We walk in, me behind him admiring his legs. He was a bit shaken after that encounter with Sthembiso, we haven't shagged since we came back from his village. Today has to be the day, I'm going to make him beg for forgiveness, I'm done with WOT lessons and I passed with distinctions.

"Mfano is that you?"

Are my ears deceiving me? They have to be. Why would he bring his mother here? He knows MaNgcobo and I are water and paraffin.

I have stopped, I'm glaring at him. He turns and looks at me, showing no sign of regret.

"Woza sthandwa sami," he says.

There's something in the way he speaks, especially when he calls me like that. I'm behind him, we are heading to the bedroom.

He's not answering his mother's voice coming from the lounge.

I walk in, close the door behind us and look at him with my eyes widen. What the hell?!

"I called a meeting," he says.

Without my knowledge?

“Sgcino we talked about communication and I thought you understood me.” With this man I will talk until my mouth stretch to my ears, he’s not getting it.

“I just wanted you to be here while I address my mother and Vuyo.”

Sigh. “Next time ask me, but thank you for finally seeing the need.”

He throws my bag on the bed, pulls me between his legs and sits. He looks at me, with his heart in his eyes and admiration on the smile stretched on his lips.

“Today you’re sleeping here, right?”

Duh, I packed the bag.

I nod, my hands are on his shoulders, I’m gazing down at him and feeling a flight of butterflies in my tummy.

“You’re going to make your man happy, right?”

I nod, my face is blowing hot. Yes I’m going to give myself to you.

“Ngiyakukhumbula mina mungekho eduze kwami.” He is...I don’t know but I’ve never had anyone making me feel like this and looking at me so adoringly.

“I miss you too,” I say.

“How long are we going to take things slowly?” he asks.

“Sgcino!” I sigh and look at the ceiling, now I need rescue.

“Us taking the next step, introducing our families to one another,

will make a lot of things better.”

“Is that why you want to talk to your mother today?” I should’ve seen it coming.

“Please answer me, how long are we going to take things slowly? I’ve known you for almost a year now.”

“Okay, we will talk about it later.”

“Thank you.” He lifts my dress up, pulls down my underwear and plants a soft kiss on my wound. Tingles on my clit!

Then he stands up and gives me a kiss. Men must live!

His mother wasn’t pleased when she saw me. But I greeted with a smile and went to the kitchen and fixed them lunch on some “kukwami la” attitude. I don’t want that Vuyo woman anywhere in my kitchen. In fact I should swap containers; put salt in a sugar container and milk in the salt one. So that when she attempts to cook for Sgcino she’ll make a mess and embarrass herself.

“You’re generous with salt,” MaNgcobo says, halfway through her plate. She’s eating like a hunter, yet unhappy with the taste, I’m confused.

Vuyo is humble, she hardly says anything when I’m around. Maybe that’s why it’s hard for Sgcino to just ditch her. I don’t know why she’s allowing MaNgcobo to involve her in her schemes.

I don’t respond to the salt remark, I’m no chef but I’ve never had anyone complaining about my food.

“So Vuyo I asked you to come here with Ma because there’s something bothering me,” Sgcino says, breaking a brief moment of silence.

She looks at him, fear written all over her face. “Did I do something that offended you?”

“I thought you and I had an agreement. You know I like you and I will always have respect for you and your family. I want to see you flourish but you’re making it hard for me to be there for you.”

She’s looking at me. Yey, this is none of my business, I’m eating.

“I feel like you’re entertaining things that are set to stand on the way of my happiness. I thought you and I had a relationship better than that.” He shouldn’t have said she’s entertaining “things”, he should’ve said the culprit’s name.

“I love Londeka, I think you’ve seen that and how much she actually respects you. Don’t start trouble, please,” he says.

She nods, picks her glass and takes a sip. She’s close to tears but I think she doesn’t want to make the devil happy- me.

That was part one, I’m now waiting for part two and this man is now busy with nothing and stealing glances at his mother. He said he’s called a meeting to address every issue there is between me and his family. He was very brave when he said it.

I widen my eyes at him.

“MaFuze,” he clears his throat and glances back at me. He’s a

black child, respectful and frightened of confronting an adult, but adults can be disrespectful and it's within our rights to put them in their line.

"MaHlongwame has a few concerns," he says.

This is brand new to me. I have a few concerns? Few?

"Oh?" MaNgcobo raises her eyes to me, acting shocked like there's never been any issue between us.

"She's not happy with the way Ma treats her," he says.

I scraaaatch behind my ear. Say what?

"Are you serious?" I glare at him.

He's stuttering. "Baby I am...we are trying to.."

I look at him mother, "MaNgcobo, I don't have any concerns and I've never complained to Sgcino about anything. In fact him and I came here to announce that we are breaking up, he's going to marry a woman you approve of, which is not me."

"Whaaat? Why is he shocked?"

I'm done, I throw the napkin on the table and walk away.

I'm getting my bag, calling an Uber and leaving. I'm not sitting in that stupid meeting of his.

His footsteps are behind me...

"Londeka what are you doing?" He walks in and blocks me from

the door. "I'm trying to fix things and you're leaving. What is going on Londeka?"

"Really Sgcino? `MaHlongwame is not happy with the way Ma has been treating her'. Did I call this meeting? Are you happy with how she's been treating me?"

"Of course not sthandwa sami."

"Then own it Sgcinumyalo. Tell your mother, 'Ma, I'm not happy with the way you treat my girlfriend'. Don't hide behind my name."

"I wasn't hiding behind your..."

"Sgcino you're scared of your mother and it's not helping me. In fact you're making things worse between her and I. Why can't you stand up for us?"

"Londeka ngiyazama nje, I'm trying here and you're not giving me a chance."

"Move, I want to leave!"

He stands. I push my way out but he's stronger than I thought.

"Let's talk about this Londeka, ngiyakucela." He's holding my arm, my bag is on the floor and my phone scattered.

I guess we are now fighting. Not our first fight but this one is intense.

He's holding my waist, I don't know how his T-shirt got torn because we are not physical, I'm pushing him and he's pulling me.

"Hhayi, what's all this noise?" – MaNgcobo behind us.

He lets me go, for once I'm grateful for her presence. I pick my bag and scattered parts of my phone from the floor.

He's looking at his mother. He's not angry but just sad.

"Are you happy now Ma?" he asks.

"Your fight with your tikline has nothing to do with me. Come back to the table and finish your food."

I'm a tikline? It must be a new term for brand ambassador slash model.

"You out of everyone Ma, you keep blackmailing me for losing my wife. Yes it was my fault but I didn't want her to die. Allow me to be, let me be with the person my heart chooses and let her spirit rest. She's not Vuyo, I will never see Vuyo as her, or anybody for that matter. I don't want to replace her, I want Londeka Hlongwane."

Her eyes drop to the floor. I'm standing with my bag, not sure about my next step. I can't just switch off my anger, I already have plans, but I also want to listen to this fight.

"There's no child from your womb that loves and respects you the way I do. You are my queen, why would you want that to change? Why do you want me to be a child that calls meetings and embarrasses his mother? Why do you want me to choose between what you love and what I love?"

She lifts her eyes to me, "MaHlongwane give us some space."

He takes two strides and grabs my arm. "You're not going

anywhere. You and I made plans for tonight, remember?”

I nod. Sex plans, I feel so creepy.

He’s holding my arm, I give MaNgcobo a look- I tried. We are returning to the bedroom, she’s standing in the passage looking remorseful, probably for the first time in her life.

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MELAMINA MSHENGU

I’m squeezed between Hubo and Sikelela on the couch. Strange, right? Well, Londeka canceled on me last minute and Sikelela came through. He’s on some ‘let loose’ trial, I don’t know what that means. All I know is that I’m getting drunk because I have to break up with someone today.

I’ve never liked Hubo. I’m not sure I do even now, but I’ve befriended most of his siblings, we are likely to bump into each other some days.

“Must we call Sguqa?” Sikelela asks, looking at me with a cheesy smile. He’s still drinking the first beer, Hubo and I are going to our third bottles.

“Yes call him,” I roll my eyes. I regret telling him about my crush on Sthembiso. Funnily I don’t even think I’m still there. He’s a great guy, I adore him very much, but I don’t think I want to be in a relationship right now. Let alone with someone I’ve had so many

fantasies about and hold in such a high regard.

“Sguqa will break your bones with his muscles. Hubo and I are better options,” he says. I think he’s getting drunk.

Hubo chuckles, “She hates me, so count me out.”

“What?” I look at Sikelela, he’s the only one I told.

“I didn’t tell him anything,” he puts his hands up.

“Wow Sikelela, is there anything you keep to yourself?” I’m not offended, neither is Hubo, but he’s something else.

Hubo chimes in, “He only keeps to himself how you turned down his love proposal.”

“Fokof wena!” They’re laughing, I join in too even though I’m not sure what’s so funny.

I need to stop drinking. I can’t be too drunk, I have to tell my ‘boyfriend’ something that makes sense and profusely apologize for wasting his time.

“I want to go home now,” I announce.

Hubo looks at me like he regrets coming here with me.

“But we are still drinking,” he says.

“No bafo, let’s take her home and then we will come back,” Sikelela is always a gentleman.

“I’ve never met such boring people in my life. Why ningavele nibhebhone nibhorane embhedeni?” – Hubo. He’s annoyed.

I burst into laughter. What he said is funny, right? Why is Sikelela so uptight.

Hubo doesn't care, he said what he said. "Ngicela itakeaway kabhiya lapho," he whistles at the bartender for the beer takeaway.

Sikelela is driving, Hubo is too wasted, he's been crying about a girl called Ayanda since we left the bar. Nobody seems to have a good love story in their family. I won't even talk about Sikelela, I knew it was going to be hard for him to let go of his childhood sweetheart after she bore babies for him, but I didn't expect him to put his guard down so soon.

They're walking inside the building with me to ensure that I get in safe and there's no thug waiting for me inside.

Hubo throws himself on my couch, the beer is in his hand, I'm scared he's going to spill it.

"Yey ndoda, wake up, this is not home," Sikelela shakes him.

"Let him rest and come turn on the lights for me in the bedroom." I lead the way. My head feels so light and funny.

He turns on the lights, scans around with his eyes and then look at me.

"Are you okay now?" he asks.

"Yes, but about what Hubo said..."

"He's drunk, I will tell him to apologize when he's sober, I'm really sorry about that," he says, cutting me short.

What is he talking about?

“Sikelela, I know you love your childhood sweetheart. I have my own thing going on as well. But we can fuck once, come on.” I laugh at his bulging eyes. Why is he so shocked?

“I cannot do that to you,” he says.

“Think about it; siyabhebhana siyabhorana, because we are two boring people, and then tomorrow we act like nothing happened.” Saying this is so funny. I don’t understand why he went out to let loose and came out still uptight.

“People do these things Sikelela and nobody dies,” I say.

He clears his throat, darts his glances around shyly. “I’m not those people Melamina. I make love, I have so much respect for you, I wouldn’t sleep with you and act like nothing happened.”

“I respect you too and your childhood sweetheart. But for once in your life Sikelela, fuck the rules and everything that the world feels like make a good girl and a good boy!” He’s wearing grey joggers, I sneak my hands around the waist and feel his body tensing up.

I kiss him, deep on the lips, and he allows me to. His breath is shaky and uneven, this is his first time letting loose and so is mine initiating sex to a man and going down on my knees for him.

I take out the joystick. It’s still soft, the owner is intense and frightened. I massage the balls, looking at his face, his eyes unable to meet mine. Behind the dark face and scary eyes is just

an innocent boy who's obsessed with doing everything right.

His joystick is betraying him, as my hand wraps around it gains some strength and thickens. It dark, super dark, and surrounded by a bush of pubic hair. At least he's circumcised, I kneel down on the floor with it in my hands.

"Melamina wait, you can't do that. Let's arrange another day," he's picking up his pants.

I pull them down and push his hands away. I'm drunk but that's only giving me the courage, it hasn't clouded my senses.

"I want to do it," I say and bring his tip to my tongue and lick it.

He almost jump. "MaMshengu please, let's talk about this."

He's making it sound like we are fighting. I circle my tongue around a few times and then suck the head.

"Melamina please, don't do this to yourself," he says.

I keep my eyes on him, his are bulging out in fear. I lick him, sweep down to his balls with my tongue and try to fit them in my mouth. I'm scared his eyeballs might drop down- I've never seen his eyes so wide.

I'm loving it, that he's giving me this power to his body and allowing me to feel like a lead.

I suck the head again, there's a salty taste from his pre-cum. His joystick has grown three more inches, veins are popping around it, his breaths are now heavy.

Down my throat and back to my tongue. My tongue on the tip,

doing circles and licking.

He releases a sound and then a scream, "Hawwwwu!"

A smile of satisfaction spreads on my face. I suck him again and take him down my throat until I choke.

"Maye babooo!" He's holding my head, gritting his teeth with his eyes squinted. His reaction is everything to me.

I take a break and use my hand to do the job. He removes it, I guess I'm doing it slow, and does it himself. I'm kneeling in front of him, watching and licking my lips like a porn star.

"Ngisacela uyimunce okokugcina," he asks in a shattering voice. (please suck it one last time)

"Hold my head, put it in my mouth and do it like you're doing it in my pussy."

"What if I hurt your throat?" He worries too much.

"It's called deepthroat, if you hurt me I will ask you to stop." My mouth connects to his joystick again. He's hesitant, I lift my eyes to him and he gives in.

He's gentle, I'm not sure if he's scared of my teeth or that he might hurt my throat.

I swallow him in until his tip balances in my throat, then I shake my head until I choke.

"I'm cumming MaMshengu," he's pushing me off. A part of me

wanted to try swallowing but right now he's fighting like a beast.

I step back, he wraps his hand around his joystick and moves it up and down hastily.

"Cum on my boobs," I open my shirt, expose my boobs to him and wait.

He comes closer, his mouth loosely open and eyes still bulging out. He doesn't groan deeply like most men when they cum, there's a feminine little voice that he has for such times, like a woman who's having hiccups.

His cum sprays on my boobs. His knees tremble, he falls next to me and takes me with him to the floor.

I'm giggling, these are the things I should've tried out a long time ago, with boys my age.

"How was it?" I ask.

He opens his eyes and looks at me. They're so red and small.

"Good, so good!" he says.

"I have a spare bedroom, let's take your brother there and fuck all night."

His eyes tears away from me. He's still not comfortable with me, are you kidding!

"What is it? Your childhood sweetheart?"

"We are working things out," he says.

"I know that, you don't stop talking about her." I really have no

right to be pissed off but WTF.

“I’m sorry, it’s just that I haven’t stopped loving you, I just learnt to live with it because you have your people.”

I have my people? I feel like a whore. Sthembiso is not my person, he never will be, and I’m about to break up with my boyfriend too. So who are those people?

“No Sikelela, you love your childhood sweetheart. She’s the one you trust and comfortable with. You and I wouldn’t have worked out anyway because you’re scared of trying new things.”

“I’m not scared, it’s just that I can’t...” Mxm!

“Boy bye! Leave with your brother.”

“Melamina come on!”

I pick myself off the floor and go to the bathroom.

“Leave with your brother,” I say before shutting the door. When I come out of this bathroom I don’t want to see them.

And this guy is going to know that it’s over via the text. I know he doesn’t care anyway. He loved me because I was broken, I don’t ask where he goes when he disappears, I don’t ask about his background and why he never speak about his family. I never ask about his lack of social activity, why he’s so scared of people and doesn’t even have one social media account. Do I even know him? Yes I know that he stares at his laptop most of the time, he wears only expensive shirts and likes Mercedes cars and Scottish whisky by the balcony. He’s not crazy about sex, that’s why he

was my safer option when I was dealing with my traumas. But I don't know who he really is.

Hey Zibulo, you and I cannot continue with this. I need to work on myself and walk my journey alone. I know you will find somebody else, if you haven't already. Thanks for the expensive gifts and the few nights you spent with me. You are a good man, very handsome and sexy and rich. A lucky woman is going to find you and love you and cherish you and...all the best, goodnight, - message sent.

I'm officially single!

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Sikelela walks out of the bedroom adjusting his T-shirt. He knew it was a bad idea from the start but his body betrayed him, and now he's lost a good friend. His eyes land on Hubo, wasn't he asleep?

Hubo shifts his eyes from his phone, looks at him and starts laughing.

"Uhlekani? Let's go." He stands with a commanding look.

"You can't let muncas turn you into a tomfool. That 'maye babo' woke me up from a good sleep."

"Hubo shut up and get off that couch."

He's going to obey but he needs to finish his beer first.

"I thought you and Vumo were working things out."

“Mfethu please don’t tell anyone about this.”

“Fine, but tell me you laid her good and put her to sleep with the Hlongwane pipe.”

“She’s in the bathroom, if she comes out and sees us here she’s going to kill us.”

Hubo’s eyes widen, “Whaaat?”

“Let’s go, now!”

“Let me finish my...” There’s a door opening somewhere.

He leaves the bottle rolling on the floor, its contents flowing to the carpet.

They’re rushing to the door, him behind Sikelela staggering.

Sikelela stops and lets him out of the door first, after all this is his fault and he’s older, if there’s a flying pan after them it has to hit him.

“Fool, what did you do?” Hubo asks, they’re out of the door panting heavily.

“She’s drunk and not thinking straight, I couldn’t go all the way with her.”

“Are you trying to tell me that you turned her down? Sikelela are you stupid, all this for Vumo who’s been cohabiting with a man and getting fucked everyday?”

“Shut up Hubo!lethu!”

“Mxm! I have to go back and rewrite your wrongs.” He takes a few

steps back, Sikelela grabs him by his T-shirt and brings him back.

“You’re not touching that one mfan’wami!” He’s dragging Hubo down the passage, “You’re talking about people getting fucked, yet your babymama that you had before any other man is laying with a naked pastor wearing his ring as we speak.”

“Don’t talk about Ayanda wena nja!”

“Don’t talk about Vumo either mgodoyi.”

They stop and glare at one another.

Hubo throws the punch, he blocks it and sighs in exhaustion.

“Let’s go,” he says.

They leave.

SIKELELA

CHAPTER 51

STHEMBISO

His goal right now is to get Giana cleansed. She's not against it, she just doesn't believe in the whole process and the feisty side of her feels like he's undermining her own beliefs and imposing his on her. It does look like that, but he needs this done for his peace of mind. If he doesn't do this he will always wonder everytime something goes wrong in her life, he will never be at peace.

He's not thinking about what led to this problem- his uncontrollable dick. He hasn't confronted himself about the disgrace he subjected himself and Giana into. Not only is someone who lost a wife not so long ago, he's also a businessman and a big brother, he should be cautious of how he carries himself in public.

Thoughts lingering in his head about the climax of that toilet session and what he feels now are nothing but a simple biology. Giana is a gorgeous woman with a sexy body and he's a man. Any man would feel attracted to a woman like her. Surely he's not the only one who's had a quickie and kept thinking about it two days later. People think about people all the time. Every man wonders how it would feel like to have a beautiful woman- like Giana- in his bed butt-naked.

He craves for more. He wants to stroke her pale thighs until they lose color, to suck those thin lips until she runs out of breath, and pins her in bed with her legs in the air and bury his face on her egg-shaped honeypot.

He feels bubbles on his skin and a twitch in his vein as her soft moan replays in his head. But this, again, is just a normal fantasy of a man, it has to be. It doesn't mean anything more than him starving for sexual intercourse. After all, Giana is the first woman to shag with him after Zime.

He just need to get out of bed, pull his T-shirt over his poking front and go to MaXulu and break the news to her.

Just as he'd hoped, MaXulu is alone in the kitchen and weaving a mat on the floor- her new hobby.

"I've been wondering when you're coming to eat," she says and directs him to the plate in the microwave.

"I will eat, there's something I need to talk about with you first." He pulls the chair and sits. Yes he's going to be judged, but he can go through anything for this to be done and done right for Giana.

"How do I cleanse a woman if I happened to sleep with her while I'm in this dark phase?"

MaXulu looks up, a frown plastered on her forehead.

"What?"

He drags in a deep breath, "I slipped Ma."

“How did you slip? You fell on a naked woman and your penis happened to go straight to her sacred places?”

“Of course not, I mean I had a moment of weakness,” he says.

She’s disappointed in him. It’s been a year since Hlongwane died and none of her and her sisterwives have slipped. It’s easy, you just keep your body from people’s hands.

But on the other hand, this means her son has met another girl.

“Do I know her?” She’s resisting a smile.

“No,” Sthembiso says with a frown.

“Does she come from a good family? Do they know culture?”

“No Ma, I’m not in a relationship with her, we just had a moment of weakness.”

Ah, he’s just shy. That’s how he is. She’s gonna have to discuss this with MaDlamini and MaJiyane.

“You cannot cleanse her with muthi because not everyone believes in it. We have to slaughter the chicken and bath her with water and bile,” she says.

“Can’t I do it in her house or somewhere else?” he asks.

Actually... “No, she has to come here. Don’t worry, we are not going to judge her or spread the news.”

“Who is ‘we’?” Sthembiso frowns.

“Me, your mothers and siblings.” The whole family, just great!

“Please slaughter the chicken before we arrive because she’s not used to such things. I don’t want her to be uncomfortable.” He cares way too much about her.

He takes his food and returns to the rondavel to eat in his bed.

He has the plate on his lap, spoon in one hand and the phone in another. Giana’s phone is ringing unanswered. He tries two times, on the third try she picks up.

“Hey, I’m sorry to disturb you.”

“It’s okay. What’s going on?”

“It’s in regards of the cleansing. Are you comfortable coming over?”

“To your house?”

“My father’s, mine burnt down, there’s only rondavel standing.”

“I don’t have a problem,” it sounds like she’s moving around and busy.

“I had to tell my mother and get her advice as an elder, I don’t want anything to go wrong. I hope this doesn’t violate your privacy in anyway,” he says guiltily.

“So you told your mother that you fucked me in the restaurant bathroom, had your climax and left me wet, and now poor Giana who didn’t even get to cum has to be cleansed by a dead chicken?” Every word is coated with mock.

Embarrassment washes over him. He knows he's more than capable of bringing a woman to climax, even with just his finger. The time wasn't right that day, neither was the place.

"Why are you quiet Mr Hlongwane?" Giana asks with a chuckle.

He sighs faintly, "Is tomorrow afternoon okay, Dr Butler?"

"Yes, I will come."

"Thank you. Enjoy the rest of your day."

"Enjoy yours too."

Like hell he will! He drops the call and puts his quarterly eaten plate away, his appetite is gone.

His phone rings. What now Giana? Were his strokes weak? There must be more she'd like to embarrass him about.

No, it's not her but Paul.

He picks up, "Paul what's up?"

"I found something that I think will put you out of your old misery and put you in a new one."

Oh yeah, great Paul.

He drags in a deep breath, "What is it?"

"Your wife's medical file from a private doctor in Umhlanga."

He raises a brow, "Private doctor?"

“Yes, she was pregnant for three weeks and then she had an abortion six days before she returned home.”

His fingers tremble, he balances his elbow on the bed and allows his lungs to open.

“She aborted a baby?” He’s almost whispering.

“It wasn’t yours. The boyfriend went to the doctor’s office two days before your wife was shot and demanded to know if she went ahead with the abortion.”

He’s weak, something that has been thinly hooked in his heart breaks. He feels nothing but anger and hatred. Even the beautiful memories they had together can not overshadow this. This is the last straw!

“So Paul, my wife didn’t love me, she never did?”

Paul sighs, “She loved you, she just played a dangerous game, lost control and got burnt.”

“Paul, I’ve never cheated on her. I’d ask her to leave the village for her own safety. In all those weeks that she was away I slept alone in our bed. I never even hugged another woman, only she knew my body, more than I loved her I respected her so much.”

“I know, you’re a good man, that’s why you’re still fighting for her to get justice.”

“No Paul, I’m not fighting shit now. I’m calling her aunt and telling her everything. We will hand everything over the police, I’m done!”

“Wait, am I losing a job now?”

“You’re overcharging anyway, I’m sure you’re already rich and soon I will be hiring you for something else.” He drops the call and lies on his back with tears burning his eyes and heart racing.

Being married to him wasn’t easy, especially at the time when she came to the Hlongwanes. There was a lot of unrest, hence the constant running. He was busy too, if not fighting, working his ass off to prove himself to his father. His mothers were there too, making sure her stay at the Hlongwanes was nothing but hell.

But if it was too much for her she could’ve just asked for divorce. Not this!

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LONDEKA HLONGWANE

I’m still here, only leaving later after Vuyo and MaNgcobo have left. No, I’m not trying to play security guard on a man, I’m just keep an eye on my property. There hasn’t been any conflict since the last one. I think MaNgcobo finally gets it, she cannot unrelationship us.

I’ve dutied myself with his disorganized wardrobe. He’s taking a nap, I’m packing his clothes, MaNgcobo and Vuyo are watching TV. It’s awkward, Sgcino fought with his mother for the first time in his life I think. I don’t know how she feels about me now, I was the reason they fought, but she’s stopped calling me a tikline, she addresses me as MaHlongwane.

Hubo is calling me. I press the phone between my head and left shoulder.

“Where are you Londeka?” It was about time.

He’s probably in my flat looking for food or relationship advice.

“I’m being Mrs somewhere,” I say.

“Let me call home and...”

Idiot!

“I’m kidding, I’m in a friend’s place, what’s up?”

I hear him dragging a deep breath and I know he’s in trouble of some sort.

“Is it Ayanda?” She’s the only one who can stress my brother like this.

“No, it’s Saneli,” he says.

Okay, my eyebrows are raised. My little sisters are exactly that; little. They’re in high school, never bother anyone or bring any scandals.

“I know a guy who stays in the section they’re renting in and he’s telling me that Saneli walks with boys late in the evenings and stand in shady corners by dark,” he says.

I also moved out of home in high school, rented far away from home to do exactly that.

“That’s bad,” I say.

“Come on Londeka, you can’t just say that. You’re the oldest sister, you have to talk to her.”

“Hubo you know children of today. She will start bringing receipts of every bad thing I’m doing too. I’m not perfect,” I say.

“You don’t need to be perfect to advise your sisters. But if you don’t want to do it, I will and my belt will do all the talking.” Whoah, he needs to slow down!

“I will call her,” I say.

“Good. I have no patience these days.”

“How is it going with Ayanda? Have you guys set a meeting?”

“Her mother asked to see me before the meeting. I think she wants to silence me, she’s never liked me.”

They’re unbelievable! Do they even know us?

“You will get your son, don’t worry,” I say.

He chuckles, “With a sister like you, I’m sure I will.”

I throw the phone in bed after talking to Hubo and pack another pile of clothes. This man doesn’t leave any money in his pockets, or I have to wash clothes for that?

Strong hands grab my waist and pulls me to the bed. He’s awake, everything has to stop, the attention has to be on him. SMH!

"I'm hungry babe," he says, his arms wrapped around me.

"Let me go and dish for you."

He doesn't loosen his grip. I lift my eyes to him in confusion.

"I'm not going to eat now," he says.

"Then why did you tell me you're hungry?"

"I just needed your attention," he says.

His worn-out expression worries me. I don't know if it's the argument he had with his mother weighing down on him or something else.

"What's going on?" I ask.

"I feel bad." Oh buya, Jesu!

"You want to apologize to your mother now?"

"Not about that. I feel bad for putting you in this position, I know if they weren't here you wouldn't be packing clothes and cooking for me. I'm enjoying, I won't lie, but I also miss my Londeka."

I'm smiling, at least he notices the changes.

"Is it not what you want me to become by wanting to marry me? A wife who cooks, washes clothes and does everything while you take a nap?"

"Do you realize that I can hire someone to do all that?"

I roll my eyes, "Yeah, I know. But don't worry, I'm not pressured into doing anything. You earned it."

“What did I do?” he frowns.

“You used the mouth created to talk to the ghosts for something else.”

He laughs out loud. His eyes squint, in a very sexy way.

I love this man, even more for what he gave me last night. I didn't think he would, I mean with that mouth that talk to the dead.

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SIKELELA

He tucks a pillow under his chest and scrolls down his phone for Vumo's number. He loaded voice minutes, they're going to talk until they run out of words. He's got a lot to say and get off his chest.

“You just woke your son up,” she says.

“Aw really? I'm sorry.”

She chuckles, “He's not crying. Anyway how are you?”

“I'm good, I guess. You?”

“I'm hanging in there. I just wish they can discharge us now. I miss the world.”

“What do you miss here?” He sounds bored to even be alive.

“Hhayi bo Sikelela, I miss life. All I do here is sleep, talk to you

over the phone and sleep again.”

“Is talking to me lifeless?” he teases.

“You’re putting words in my mouth.”

“No, I’m asking a question,” he says.

“It’s actually the only thing that connects me to the outside world and reminds me that I’m alive and there’s someone out there who cares for me.”

He wasn’t looking for praises but this gives him bubbles on his skin.

“What have you been up to outside? Yesterday you said you will call and you never did.”

“I went to a bar, a fancy one with couches and a DJ,” he says.

Vumo laughs. If Sikelela wants her to believe this he’d have to bring hard evidence.

“I’m serious, I went with Hubo,” he says.

She stops laughing, “Oh my word, you’re serious. How was it?”

“Noisy,” he says.

“Is that all you can say?”

“I can also say that everyone looked happy, that’s what I loved. But the rest of the night was just not my cup of tea,” he says.

She sighs, “I understand, maybe you should try something else, without Hubo. Maybe go to a game reserve and...”

“I grew up in Hlabathini, I don’t need to travel to see animals.”

“There’s no big five in Hlabathini,” Vumo says.

“I don’t care for the big five,” he dismisses and takes in a deep, long breath. “Yesterday proved what I’ve always known about myself.”

“And what is that?” Vumo asks.

“I don’t have to do what everyone is doing. Everyone is formed by their personal experiences and the environment they grew up in. There’s nothing wrong with me, I’m just a bit different from other people. Going out at night can never make me happy. I drank a beer, the company was great, we left the bar and took Mela...” He clears his throat, FUCK. “That’s not my life Vumo, I don’t want to live like that. I don’t want to see the big five or anything. There are people for that life, the drinking and casual sex and big five, I’m definitely not one of them. I want to go to work in the morning, afternoon if I’m on night-shift, and then come back home to a woman who loves me.”

She only releases a deep breath on the other side and listens quietly.

“I want headache-free mornings, quiet evenings and warm nights in my bed with someone I share mutual feelings with. I want to be smiled at before I’m touched, to be kissed and held tightly, to be looked at like the world ends in my eyes. I want to make love Vumo, that’s why I waited for you, that’s why I’m sleeping alone in my bed today even though I have an option not to. I’m not chasing the fun, or the pleasure, or the ‘carefree’ tag. I’m chasing stability,

happiness and true love. And I can only achieve what I want by being me. Oh well, and getting someone who understand and love me for what I am.”

“I’m sorry if I put you under pressure, I just want you to be happy,” Vumo says, her tone laced with regret and sadness.

He chuckles, “You actually helped me understand myself better.”

“So what really happened there?”

“Where?”

“Come on Sikelela, I know something happened. Did you get wasted and woke up with a stranger in your bed?”

“What? No.”

There’s a moment of silence...

Then Vumo asks, “The girl you and Hubo took home, did you sleep with her?”

His chest turns dry. Maybe he should stop expressing himself to people. If he’s not saying too less, he’s saying too much.

“I didn’t sleep with her. It didn’t get there, she was drunk, I couldn’t...you know, I stopped before it went further.”

“Further than what Sikelela?”

“A blowjob,” he blurts out.

“I guess you are...you did what I wanted; you let loose.”

“Well, it was my last time,” he says.

She chuckles, regardless of everything she's feeling right now.

"I need to try and breastfeed your son, I'm sure you're tired and want to sleep last night's escapades off," she says.

"Yeah, I will call you tomorrow. Greet the little man for me."

"I will," she says and bids her goodbyes.

Something she's been rebuilding for weeks just shattered in one minute.

SIKELELA

CHAPTER 52

LONDEKA HLONGWANE

I called Saneli and asked her to be home today with Azile. I will talk to them both, I'm sure Azile is already giving boys attention too, at her age I was. I'm not a teacher or nurse or motivational speaker, I've been trying to put together a speech since last night. I even had Sgcino giving me a few advices about what to say and not say. I should not sound judgmental or better. At the back of my head I have to keep that I've been their age, I know the changes in their bodies and growing feelings. I shouldn't act like old women who acted holy and put pressure on young girls to be perfect.

Nobody has to be perfect, they just need to be safe from STIs and not fall pregnant. That's what I did, 10 years later I'm a brand ambassador and signed model.

I'm driving home and I'm told to carry poultry food. MaXulu's chickens are always eating. At least today I'm not taking taxis, I buy it from Spar and add snacks for the two little girls I'm about to preach to. I don't know why I'm feeling like it's not my place to do so, big sisters are like deputy mothers, this is my duty, I should've had the big talk with them when they're entered teenagehood. I hope it's not too late now.

Home is buzzing, it looks like everyone is home. Thobani comes out of his mother's kitchen when he hears the car driving in. He's grown too, I wonder if Hubo and Sthembiso ever sit down with him and advise him about life. I wish he could leave, relocate in a different province and live a life different from what Hubo and Sthembiso were subjected into. He can still be fixed; he's young and the violence hasn't injected into his veins yet.

"Sis'omdala," he says walking towards the plastic bags I just offloaded from the boot.

"Unjani?" I ask.

"Kuya le nale but we are trying."

I notice the change in his lips. It's easy to notice because his skin is light.

"Thobani are you smoking?" I ask.

"Just cigarette, nothing hectic," he says with a grin.

Does Sthembiso know this? I'm thrown back by the lack of concern in his voice.

"Smoking is hectic because you get addicted to it. Tell me, is there anything you shouldn't be doing that you do?"

He laughs, "No, I'm just searching for your sister-in-law."

My foot! I don't want any sister-in-law, Zime sailed that ship a long time ago.

“What do you know about girls?” I click my tongue and lock the car.

“I know everything about girls, Hubo taught me,” he says.

Hubo is the last person to talk to young boys about girls. The only thing he knows is that girls are fuck toys. Sthembiso needs to talk to this boy. Or even better Sikelela, there’s no way he’d disobey that one.

The sisterwives are gathered in one kitchen, no surprise there. I greet and leave everything on the table for others to pack.

“You have to take those shoes off, you and Saneli and Azile has to catch a chicken in the yard. Your brother is coming with makoti, there’s something we need to do for her,” MaXulu tells me.

Forget about chasing a chicken, I’m not doing that. Sthembiso has a makoti? Hubo would be first to know, and Hubo knowing means I’ll be the second to know too.

I didn’t even know Sthembiso was looking for a girl. The last time we spoke he was still depressed over Zime’s cheating and death. He was talking about healing, which I thought would take time, even years.

I look at Thobani behind me. He gives me a shrug; he doesn’t know too.

“What makoti?” I ask.

“We are yet to meet her too. Don’t just stand, go and call your

sisters, he wants the chicken to be slaughtered before they get here.”

“Why is the chicken being slaughtered? What are they cleansing?” I ask.

MaDlamini sighs, “You always have your fingers on the pulse of everything. Go and do what you’re told to do.”

Am I right about the cleansing being done? What could Sthembiso be getting cleansed with a new woman for? Unless if he’s personally being cleansed for losing a wife. But why would the new woman come along?

Oh shit, I hope he didn’t sleep with her while mourning.

“Londeka I need the chicken!” MaXulu says firmly.

“Come on Ma, I can’t be chasing chickens at this age,” I say.

MaJiyane cracks into laughter, “You’re a child here, not a model of skin products.”

“Or you want me to tell Sthembiso that you sabotaged things for him?”- MaXulu.

I know she’d do that, she doesn’t mind having children who hate one another.

“I need to change first, I’m wearing a designer dress,” I say getting off the chair and leaving them grunting their dissatisfaction.

I change into leggings, put socks over and wear my runners.

Saneli and Azile are already outside trying to lure the chickens into the coop with maize seeds. The rest are eating except the white one whose time on earth has come to an end. I think like people, this chicken can feel it in its blood; death is coming.

I'm standing with my arms folded, I don't specialize in running after chickens.

Hubo appears with those tiny hand-stereos blasting with loud music.

"Bruh, borrow me a gun," I say rolling my eyes.

He frowns, "What's happening?"

"We have to run after a chicken. That white one looking at us suspiciously," I say.

"If you shoot it's going to die though. Don't they need it alive?" And Mahubo is serious, like he was going to give me a gun to shoot a chicken if it wasn't needed alive.

"Don't worry Azile and Saneli will catch it," I say.

They look at me, eyes widen.

"Ma said you will help us," Azile says. Smart mouth!

"I will pay you," I say.

"R12 airtime?"

"Yes, R12 each," I'm the rich aunt.

Hubo huffs behind me. I give him a look, I know all he's thinking is them wanting airtime to call boys.

He walks away with his loud music.

The white chicken, most-wanted thug, has put its guards down, it's now eating with other chickens.

"Throw some inside the coop Azile," I'm the director of the chicken-search unit.

The chicken stupidly enters the coop, I can't help but scream a yes. It was a mission.

The search unit walk into the kitchen with the culprit. MaXulu takes the rope and takes it from Azile's hand.

"Nisebenzile yazi, take vetkoeks from the bucket on the counter."

Wow, after so much hard work the reward we get is vetkoeks!

"Cold-drink'nyana?" I ask.

She waves me off, "You should've brought it, the one I have is for your new sister-in-law."

This new girl is already replacing us. Now I can't wait to see her.

There's no time to rest, after the chicken race we have to start cooking for the coming queen.

I ask if she has any allergies and these women don't think anyone should choose food when they're visiting someone's house. Saneli is good with pap, I do the meat while Azile deals with dishes.

There's a car pulling up, I rush to the kitchen cloth and wipe my hands. Everyone is standing by the window, the curtain is slightly pulled to the side and we are peeking. We cannot scare her off and stare at her while she climbs out of the car. We will have an allocated time to go and greet her.

"Is he having a meeting with a client while we are here waiting for makoti?" MaDlamini asks in a low whisper.

I stretch my neck and look. Sthembiso is with a young white woman, she's the one MaDlamini thinks is a client here to discuss business with Sthembiso. But I once advised Sthembiso to buy a gift for his white friend who had done him a huge favor. Could this be what I'm thinking? If so, we might need to buy Oxford dictionaries.

They disappear in his rondavel. She looks plain; a dusty pink shift dress and gladiator sandals. Her hair is let loose and hugging her shoulders. I can tell from here, behind this window, that she's not wearing a matching lipstick.

The sisterwives turn to MaXulu, she owes them answers. This is where I remain a child and only lend an ear to what's being said.

"MaXulu did you know about this?" MaDlamini asks.

"No, I'm expecting him to come with a woman. He said he slipped and..." She turns to me and the girls with a look. "Go to the kitchen," she dismisses us.

"We are in the kitchen Ma," I say.

She clicks her tongue, "Let's go to the other room."

They're keeping this one to us. But I think I already know what's going on, I just don't understand how Sthembiso managed to convince a white girl that she needs to be cleansed for having sex with him?

I wonder if he's planning to marry her and if he thought about us before doing this. Multiracial relationships happen, but not here in Mashoba, this village is just too old-school and too traditional for the other race.

"Is bhuti dating a white girl now?" Azile asks.

"Yes," I say, very convincing.

She's smiling happily.

Saneli sighs, "I don't think he should be dating so soon."

"Umh, why?" I ask her.

"I just think he should move away and relocate somewhere before dating. Sis' Zime's life was hell here, that's why I only date orphans."

Hubo would have a fit, I'm laughing my lungs out.

Sthembiso walks in, right on time. I go to the room my mothers are gathered in and search for signal.

"Sthembiso we are waiting for the girl you said you'd bring," MaXulu says. I've never seen her so angry with her favourite child.

“She’s here,” he says with a slight frown, darting glances between the three of them.

“A white girl? What’s gotten into your head? What does she know about the Zulu culture and being a wife?”

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He rubs the bridge of his nose and releases a faint sigh. “Ma, I thought I explained. We are not dating or planning any marriage.”

“Still, you should’ve found a black girl like you. Do you know that some of your great-grandfathers were killed empini yaseSandlwana?”

“Impi yaseSandlwana ingenaphi manje Ma? Giana is Irish, she has nothing to do with the Battle of Sandlwana.”

“Oh, she has everything to do with bedroom battles?”

I stifle a laugh from escaping my lips, I’m just here for the signal.

“Are you going to tell me what to do?” Sthembiso is now irritated.

They look at one another. The excitement they had is all gone.

“MaJiyane will go,” MaDlamini says.

MaJiyane’s eyes widen, “Why me?”

“Because you have Standard 6.”

“Yes but I was failing English, that’s why I dropped out.”

Are the receipts coming out now? I didn’t know she’s the most-educated among them.

“Then MaDlamini has to go. Hlongwane found her working for Indians,” MaXulu says.

Sthembiso sighs, “Bab’ Ntuli was able to talk with Giana about the twin’s funeral. Surely it won’t be that hard to communicate with her.”

“The Ntuli who refused to let you bury the twin?” I ask.

“Yes, Giana is the one who got through him for us. Not only that, she saved one twin’s life, put her life on pause to make sure nothing went wrong,” he says.

I’m stunned. This girl has been coming through for this family. I get why he bought her dog chains.

“I will come, don’t worry. Just make her aware that she’ll have to take her clothes off and bath with cold water,” MaDlamini says.

“Thank you Ma,” he’s relieved.

“We cooked pap and meat. Does she eat that?” I ask before he leaves.

“She will eat,” he says and leaves.

Now I have the whole scoop for Mahubo.

I think they’re no longer angry at her for being white, maybe they’d even like her if she becomes a thing with Sthembiso. I mean, she’s already dealing with the Hlongwane problems and coming up with solutions. That’s what they needed from Zime, to prove her loyalty to the family and fit their description of a wife.

After dishing for the whole family, I take Saneli and Azile to the bedroom with snacks and our food. It's time for the big girls talk.

I have written questions in a box, I thought it'd be easy this way.

We sit on the bed, it clicks to me that I'm not that close with them. In fact I don't even know what's going on in their lives. The two of them are inseparable, more than anyone they love Sthembiso.

Then there's me and Hubo, Sthembiso and Thobani as well.

"So guys we are going to play a game, Q&A with Londeka. I'm the host and a participant," I say.

Azile giggles and throws crisps in her mouth. I shake the box and read out the first question;

"Who's had sex?"

This one opens...great.

I raise my hand. They're looking at me like I'm weird. I guess they haven't done the deeds, which is good.

Next question; "Who's ever been touched by a boy on her private part?"

Me and Azile?

I thought it would be Saneli because she's older. Now I have questions other than the ones I wrote.

Next question; "Who's ever touched a boy's penis?"

Azile and me are officially the family whores. I'm having heart palpitations.

Next question; “Who’s ever given a blowjob or handjob to a boy?”

Me and Azile again.

Is Saneli this innocent or she’s lying?

“You’ve never?” I ask.

She shakes her head, laughing.

“Like never?” I refuse to believe her.

“Try not to be gender-specific,” she says.

I’m lost. I don’t understand why I should be...wait.

“Saneli are you a lesbian?” I ask.

“I love girls, yeah,” she says.

But...oh my goodness!

“Are your friends mostly boys?” I ask.

She nods, “Yes.”

It explains why she’s always walking with them.

I turn my eyes to Azile, “So you’re dating and sexually active?”

“Yes,” she nods.

God forbid!

“Are you educated about sex?” I ask.

“I know some things but I still have some questions,” she says.

“Okay, ask me.”

“How do I know where my G-spot is?” Nice question!

“You touch yourself, learn your body and where your soft spots are,” I say.

She’s laughing. “Does it hurt when you do the actual thing for the first time?”

“Yes, it does but not so much.” Hubo’s footsteps are coming, don’t ask me how I know them, I just do.

I wink at them and change my tone, “So as I said guys, you have to go to varsity, graduate and get decent jobs first. After that you build your houses and buy your first cars...”

He’s standing at the door, looking at me with gratitude. I should be here exaggerating sex and scaring them, but I’m doing the opposite.

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STHEMBISO

It’s done. He feels like weight has been taken off his shoulders. Now he can move on with his life knowing he didn’t destroy anyone’s life or hindered their luck and progress in life. Giana did this for him, she doesn’t care at all.

They’re now in his burnt house across the road. She wants to see for herself and get a mini tour around the village.

There's nothing much left except burnt furniture and walls. Sthembiso leads her to the rondavel, the only house that survived. It doesn't have much inside, just a desk, one chair and a cabinet. He had initially built it for the ancestors but a sangoma advised him otherwise.

"I didn't see your mom," she says, walking around inside the rondavel.

"They're all my moms."

She smiles, "I like that. You make polygamy sound so interesting."

"Is it not?" He raises an eyebrow.

"I'm jealous, so no for me."

"Why would you be jealous? It's not like you wouldn't know where your man is sleeping."

She rolls her eyes and bents over the desk to pick up a piece of paper.

He smiles, "So you want your man all to yourself?"

"Yes, I believe I'm enough to satisfy a man, in every way possible. Why would he need another woman?"

He breathes sharply, "You're right. You're enough to satisfy a man."

She turns, their eyes lock. He swallows and licks his lips.

"You satisfy a man," he says, stepping closer to her. Again, it's just the two of them inside this small rondavel.

“I wish I was satisfied by a man too,” she says, keeping her gaze on him and watching the embarrassment flicker in his eyes.

“We were in public, Giana,” he says.

“So what? In public only men deserve an orgasm?”

“Women take longer and I...”

She interjects, “I don’t take long when I’m fucked right.”

He curses under his breath, at his dick that’s growing with erection. Why are they having this talk? This person just got cleansed.

“Giana stop testing me,” he says and chuckles.

She licks her bottom lip, turns and walks towards the empty cabinet swaying her hips.

He takes only two strides and grabs her waist. He turns her head towards him and smashes his lips against hers.

In a blink of an eye her G-string slides down her legs, she’s lying on top of the desk with her legs pulled apart.

Sthembiso’s tongue presses on her exposed core and lick from her clit, between her folds and down to her opening, sticking his tongue inside.

A few finger strokes and his lips sucking her clit, she falls apart and explodes in his mouth.

“Oh my God!” she’s exclaiming at the speed everything is going.

He's not patient like the day in the restaurant bathroom. One long thrust, he's entered her.

So deep and fast she feels her core heating up. In that heat is pain and unimaginable pleasure.

A few thrusts in, her body is ready to give up on her again. She's crying and begging for him to be faster.

Another wave takes her off, to a different zone. She hears him groan and pull her legs up to his shoulders. He's close too, he's faster and hitting repeatedly in one spot that soothes him the most.

"Oh fuck!" He pulls out and buries his head on her stomach, his semen leaking to the floor.

"Fuck!" he says again and lets her go.

He sits flat on the floor, covered in sweat and looking powerless.

"Another chicken?" Giana asks, lifting herself off the desk with dust all over her back.

"My mother is going to kill me Giana."

SIKELELA

CHAPTER 53

MELAMINA MSHENGU

I've been thinking about moving to a different city after umemulo. But the problem would be work, they wouldn't give me a transfer just because I ask, and without a job I'd be broke within a few months. I cannot count on my brothers to take care of me, they're barely making ends-meet in the taxis. What I'm craving for is a fresh start, I'm claiming back my life, I want to relive all those years depression took away from me.

Zibulo didn't even respond when I broke up with him. I know he's emotionally unavailable, he probably doesn't care. That's one burden off my shoulders, my present concern now is Sikelela.

We haven't talked since he ran out of my apartment with his brother leaving me drunk and horny in the bathroom.

I'm sure he's not comfortable seeing my face again. I'd like to blame alcohol, simply because it cannot defend itself. Deep down I wanted to do that, to be in control of a man and take something from sex willingly. But it shouldn't have been at the expense of his morals, I know he's a grounded man who wants to do things right. I trust he knows what he wants better than I do, so I owe him an apology.

I take a brief pause and breathe before calling his number. I pray he answers, I do appreciate his friendship, he's a genuine guy.

He answers on a forth ring,

"Hey Melamina."

"Sikelela, how are you?"

"I'm good, wena?"

"Not good. I thought I have made myself an enemy in you."

He chuckles, "Why?"

"Because of what I did the other day. I'm sorry I made you uncomfortable, I know you're trying to work things out with your childhood sweetheart."

I hear him taking a sigh, then he asks, "Did you break up with your boyfriend?"

"Yes I did, he moved on within a minute upon receiving my text."

"He's fast, I'd be crying the whole week if a girl like you broke up with me." Sikelela is confused at times.

"That's flirtatious, your babymama would bury you alive if she heard you say that," I say.

"I'm not sure she will."

"What's going on?" A few days ago he was excited about her moving in with his mother.

"I don't know, I think the more we get to know ourselves better is

the more our destinies clash.”

“You want different things in life as adults?” I ask.

“Yeah, I think that’s where we are going,” he takes a brief pause and sighs audibly. “I had a hard time growing up, my mother and my father were not together. I know from experience how difficult that is, to not have a certain parent in your life. So I want something different for my kids and the old me. It’s one promise I made to a young Sikelela. But Vumo grew up with both parents around and she witnessed the misery marriage can bring. While I’m searching for someone like her mother, a grounded woman to build a home with me, she doesn’t want to be like her mother, to be a married woman who sacrifices her life for her children and husband.”

I understand where both of them are coming from, after all we are all shaped by our personal experiences in life. Your childhood is likely to influence who you become as an adult, in a positive or negative way.

“But Sikelela why you never communicated these things before you started dating?” I ask.

“We thought love would be enough,” he says with a chuckle hiding his pain. “Now I’m just scared that if we don’t sort things out, settle our differences aside and make sacrifices, Langa won’t have the life I imagined for him.”

“You can co-parent, at least you have a caring mom. If she can volunteer to look after the baby while the mother continues with her studies you’d be sorted. At the end of the day there’s nothing

sweet about growing up with two parents who are unhappy with themselves.”

“If Langa stays with my mother that means neither Vumo and I would be in his life?”

“You’re always going home Sikelela, he will grow up and understand why you had to work and his mother had to return back to college.”

“I hear you, I just hope it doesn’t get to that,” he says.

“You really love her, don’t you?”

“I know how to love her,” he says.

Oh gosh! I’ve never met anyone like this. His head is more stubborn than his heart. Those thoughts need to be let go.

“Well, I just called to apologize about that night. I shouldn’t have put you in that position,” I say.

He chuckles, “It was good, kwakumnandi. But I wish we were in a different space, sober-minded and in contact with our emotions. I don’t want you like that.”

“But you want me?” I have no business being flattered by this but I am.

“Badly,” he says, his tone dropping.

I don’t know if this feeling is part of me wanting to explore more in life or I simply want a piece of him.

“When you really want me Sikelela, you will get me. So until then,

you and I shall be friends.” I drop the call before he makes another fruitless advance.

Now where was I?

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HUBO

Ayanda called and asked that they meet up. He wanted to go with his family because this is now a family matter, but she convinced him it's just them who need to talk.

Surprisingly he's walking into an empty restaurant with her, her mother and husband and another woman who almost looks like her mother. He's been tricked, they're up to something.

It takes everything in him to sit and not just walk out and leave right away.

He doesn't greet, he just looks at Ayanda who's snuggled in her husband's arm. Such a cold couple, he thinks to himself. They don't even complement each other, only he knows how to take care of Ayanda.

“I texted you but you never replied,” Ayanda's mother says.

“I'm here now, you can say whatever you wanted to say,” he says, giving her a cold look. They've never liked each other.

There's a brief moment of silence. The pastor's calmness is strange, is he not the man who's raised a child who's not his for three years?

"We understand that the child is yours, Ayanda confessed and told us her reasons. The good thing is that Mdluli is still willing to raise him with good principles and offer you visitations," – Ayanda's mother.

They got to be kidding! He looks at Ayanda, "Uthini umawakho? Visitations for who?"

"He knows him as his father, would you really want to turn his life upside down like that?" Ayanda asks, begging him with her eyes.

Her mother chimes in, "And he's been raised in a good family. Not that yours is not good, but you differ in terms of beliefs and religion. If we allow you to take him that means he'll be subjected into animal slaughtering, impepho and all those things."

"That's part of who he is and I want him to know that," Hubo insists, glowering at Ayanda.

"Hubo that's not going to benefit him. I'm begging you, don't ruin his life, he's going to be okay and you're going to be proud of him one day."

"I want my child Ayanda," he says.

Her husband clears his throat and breathes his first words, "Even if this goes to court Hlongwane, it can be proven that you won't be able to provide a safe environment for the child."

“Amen mfundisi-lawyer, ngebhadi I don’t care what you think the court would say. Qobo is the first grandchild but he definitely won’t be the only child to grow at the Hlongwanes.”

“But maybe he’d be the first to die,” – the aunt says.

Hubo pushes back his chair and stands. He’s not sitting here and being treated like a thug from a dangerous cave.

“I want my son,” he tells Ayanda, narrowing his eye to emphasize. “But if you want me to fight for my rights, then that’s what I’m going to do. I will fight Ayanda.”

He leaves, his heart is aching, the last few days have been nothing short of misery. Losing Ayanda to the pastor was unbearable, he refuses to lose a son to him too.

One doesn’t need to be a church-goer to be a father, just like everyone, he’s got a bad and good side.

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He parks in the yard, the sun is setting down, there’s a soft wind fanning from the trees. MaDlamini and MaXulu are sitting on the veranda. The yard is quiet, it must be just the two of them home.

“Mahubo come and put this thread in the needle for me,” MaXulu yells. She’s been waiting for a child, any of them, to arrive.

Hubo closes the doors of his car and walks to them in the veranda and picks the thread and puts it in the needle in one try.

“Your eyes are very sharp,” MaXulu praises.

He doesn't say anything, he turns to leave. MaDlamini notices the drop in his energy.

"What's going on with you these days?" she asks.

Hubo shrugs and keeps walking.

MaXulu raises her eyes, "Mahubo come back here."

He sighs and swallows a grunt of displeasure before walking back to them.

"Are you drunk?" MaDlamini asks.

"No Ma, I'm not drunk, I'm tired."

"Tired of what? All you do is drive around the village all day."

"Maybe I'm tired of being put down and undermined and judged. Maybe I'm tired of not being heard."

They look at one another, frowns plastered on their faces.

"What happened mfana wami?" MaXulu asks.

He exhales and shrugs. "They don't want to give me my child. The pastor wants to give me visitations, limited I guess."

"Some screws in his head are loose, someone must recommend a mechanic for him to tighten them. Where did you see him?" – MaDlamini.

"They called me to a meeting, I didn't know anything about it. They were all there; the whole family. They even threatened about taking me court and proving that I will not be able to provide a safe environment for the boy," he says.

“Their child should’ve thought about that before opening her legs for a boy from the unsafe environment. Tomorrow morning you’re taking us there!”

“I thought they were civilized people yazi sisi!” MaDlamini shakes her head, disappointed.

Hubo nods and leaves them plotting against the Mdlulis. At this point he doesn’t care how they approach them, he’s tried being civil with Ayanda and it didn’t work. Unfortunately a child’s life is about to be turned upside down; a good introduction at being a Hlongwane.

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CEBILE

She returns the tray with dishes to the kitchen. Vusi is here visiting, he will be sleeping over with her in one bed for the first time. At her age she shouldn’t be stressed by sharing a bed with a man. But she is, the last man she shared a bed with was Mkhonto, it’s been over decades. Nobody would believe this but she’s been alone all these years because she was afraid of meeting another Mkhonto.

All she wanted was to raise her son the best way possible, and she did, now he’s grown and he wants her to live a little.

She’s wearing a short tight under her midi-dress, she’s wondering

if Vusi would want them to do the deeds or he will be kind and wait until...God knows when.

Her phone rings, disturbing the train of her thoughts. It's Sikelela, she glances at the corner of the screen for time and it's really late- 9:35pm.

"Sikelela is everything alright?" she asks with worry.

"Yes Ma. I just want to let you know that Sthembiso asked for the families to meet this coming Saturday," Sikelela says.

This meeting has been postponed since the beginning of times.

"I will believe it when they're here," she says.

Sikelela chuckles, "Hawu Ma, they've been dealing with other family matters."

"Ngiyezwa. How is my grandson and his mother?"

"They're both good," Sikelela says flatly.

"Where's the enthusiasm? Why are you so cold?" she asks.

"We will talk when I get there. Please go to sleep, it's late now."

She rolls her eyes. This child thinks he's her father.

She gulps down a glass of water before leaving the kitchen and locking the door.

Her heart palpitates as her eyes land on Vusi already half-naked in

her bed.

“I thought you’ve ran away,” he says, stretching a smile.

She forces one too. “I was talking to my son over the phone.”

“Oh, mommy duties!” he chuckles.

Deep breath! She closes the door and takes her shoes off before climbing on the other side of bed.

“Must I switch the light off?” she asks.

Vusi grabs her hand and asks her to come closer. “If you turn the light off how am I supposed to see this beautiful face?”

She blushes and looks away. He turns her face towards his and plants a soft kiss on her lips.

“Has anyone told you how beautiful you are today?”

“You did when you walked in,” she says.

He smiles, “Really? But maybe I didn’t do this.” He wraps his hands around her neck and kisses her again, licking her lips and sweeping his tongue inside her mouth.

His hand runs on her back, untying old knots and sending her blood on a high notch. Her hands search for his upper arms, she digs her hands on her muscles while opening her mouth for him to feast more on her lips.

He stops but keeps her neck in his hand and stares at her. Finding love at 53 was something he never thought would happen to him,

after losing the mother of his two daughters his hope was dead. And out of all women, he got the most beautiful one. He can't stop smiling and stroking her dimpled cheek.

Cebile's eyes drop when he doesn't stop staring. She's Langa's grandmother, she shouldn't be blushing like a high school girl. But damn, nobody looks at her the way Vusi does.

"Ngicela ukufudumeza uMpangazitha phela," he says, lowering his face down on her neck. His beard caresses her skin, giving her a thousand tingles.

His hand is under her dress, he's brushing her and it feels good.

"We have to get rid of the trouser Macebi," he says kissing her neck.

It's not a trouser but yes, the tight has to go. He takes it out, together with her panty, and then keeps his hand there between her thighs.

"Aren't you so warm?!" His hand slides between her wet folds and rubs her.

It feels good, she's arching her back and resisting a moan threatening to escape her mouth.

Vusi pulls down his boxers, kicks off his ankles and climbs on top of her. He's not fully balanced on her but their bodies are touching.

Their mouths connect again. His tongue slides past her teeth and sticks down her throat. He's losing control, the kiss is not gripping, his tongue is loose in her mouth and moping her with saliva. His

hands are separating her legs, pulling them on either side of his waist.

She manages to break from the kiss and cocks her head to the side. He can kiss and drop his saliva on her neck instead.

“Wear a condom Vusi,” she says when he attempts to put his raw member inside her. Sikelela can’t have a sibling, he’s having his own babies now.

He swallows hard and slides off bed to pick his jacket from the chair. His nimble hands quickly find the one he got from one of his nephews school bag and tears it open.

“Isivunule-ke into yakho,” he smiles and plants a kiss on her lips. She prays for it to be just a light peck, and thank God it is.

He lifts her dress above her breasts and strokes her nipples with his fingers. He slides between her legs, his erection rests on her mound. She wants him, bad kisses can be excused.

His mouth latches on her nipple, the whole of it, he sucks her like an grown baby.

“Ah Vusi!” she groans when he mistakenly chews her nipple, sinking his teeth on her sensitive skin.

“Sorry sponono,” he apologizes with a kiss on the cheek.

She feels his member slowly separating her folds and sliding through her opening with the head. His thumb presses on her clit like it’s a stubborn Nokia button.

It's not painful as she thought it would be, as soon he fits wholly inside she breathes and shuts her eyes to let pleasure spread all over her.

Vusi's chest rests on top of her. So does his whole body, the only thing he's moving is his butt in a tsibha-tsipha dance. The pleasure is there but there's no pressure.

"Aren't you...so...warm Macebi?!" he cries out, his voice voice shattering as he speaks.

She moans in response. It feels so good, being filled so perfectly and rubbed tenderly.

Vusi's body convulses on top of her. She didn't feel this moment building up, one moment he was squeezing his butt and poking her soft spots and next his whole body falls down to her.

He's breathing with his mouth open, like a frail man who just climbed stairs or chased a wild animal.

If she doesn't move this man is going to break her rib-cage.

She pushes him off, Vusi rolls to the side and lies on his stomach.

"I'm going to marry you, Macebi," he whispers.

A minute later there's a loud snore...

Is this how men are? Mkhonto was probably the abnormal one. He took hours, sometimes she'd even fake sleep just to escape his never-satisfied beast.

SIKELELA

CHAPTER 54

SIKELELA

He's home for the family meeting. It's the night before Sartuday, the Hlongwanes would be arriving in the morning. He's sitting in the kitchen with Cebile and for some weird reason she's not talkative today. She hasn't even asked about Vumo and Langa.

He decides to break the ice by asking about Vusi. "Where's my cowboy stepfather?"

With her back turned Cebile rolls her eyes. "He's in his house. He doesn't live on my head, you know that don't you?"

Sikelela chuckles, "I thought you and him were tight? Am I going to be that child who's exposed to different partners every week?"

"Child? Oh please." She puts the lid on her pot and leaves it on the stove.

"Are you going to help me set the table?" she asks getting plates from the cupboard.

"Only if you tell me what's going on. One day I had a stepfather and now, out of the blue, I don't have one."

A sigh! She thought he'd let it go.

"We are still good, I'm just not sure if he's what I need," she says.

Sikelela frowns, "He's your age and he looks like a good man."

“I’m not his age, he’s 53,” she whines, Sikelela laughs. “And sometimes being a good man is not enough. Right now he’s talking about marriage and all that, I’m not even sure I want to be married.”

“Why? You’re not going to lose anything by marrying a man you love,” – Sikelela.

“What if he doesn’t make me happy?” she asks.

“Maybe you have to give him a chance,” Sikelela says. He’s too optimistic for her liking.

“I already did and he didn’t make me happy. I know it doesn’t make sense to dump a good man over bad se...” she stops, looks at him with her eyes widen and gasps.

“Okay I get it, please don’t explain any further. Yoh hhayi-bo, let’s talk about something else.” He looks really traumatized.

She can’t help but laugh at him. Isn’t he so innocent?

“But he can learn, right?” She raises her eyebrow, looking at him shutting his eyes and groaning. He kept digging, she wasn’t going to say anything.

“Ma there’s nothing wrong even if he performs badly. I mean, you don’t need a beast in bed, you’re old, sometimes your joints ache.”

“Hhah! Don’t test me wena, some women my size are dating young boys like you.”

Sikelela’s eyes drop. Can’t a man move on in peace here? He knows where she’s going with that.

“Vumo and I have been talking a lot,” he changes the subject.

Her favourite daughter-in-law; Cebile’s face lightens up.

“How is she doing?” she asks.

“She’s getting there, one step at a time. I’m actually proud of her.”

Her smile stretches, “You should be, you have come too far with that girl.”

He exhales and joins her in setting the table.

“I don’t think she still wants what I want and I don’t think I want to change what I want to fit into another world,” he says.

Cebile’s brows furrow.

“What is it that she no longer wants to do?”

“I think the whole setting of being a wife, staying at home and looking after our children. I believe she wants to live a different life from what I envisioned.”

“No Sikelela, please sort this out. Vumo wants to be married, maybe she just needs assurance that you won’t turn out like her father once she marries you.”

“But I’ve never been like him,” he says.

“Men are not to be trusted, especially if they have a Hlongwane blood in them. Look at what your father did to me?”

Oh boy! He sighs.

“I’m not my father,” he says through his teeth, holding in a sharp

breath.

“I know you’re not, but what if you get greedy and marry multiple women like your father? She comes from a polygamous, dysfunctional family.”

He doesn’t respond, he’s digesting the question. He’s rejected everything his father was, he promised himself to be a better man than he was and to become everything he was not, but he never saw his polygamy as a bad thing. Not that he’s ever thought of becoming a polygamist too.

Cebile glances at him, “Please don’t tell me there’s already another girl you love other than MaNtuli.”

“Hawu Ma,” he chuckles.

Cebile stops, throws a sharp look at him. “No Sikelela, this is not the time for you to be distracted. The mother of your children just lost a baby, after suffering physical and sexual abuse for months. Now more than ever, MaNtuli needs you.”

He nods, swallowing hard.

Cebile moves to the stove and picks the pot of rice and puts it on the table.

“I’m sure she’s scared of men now. I’ve been in that position too, I know what she’s going through. From a shitty father to an abusive boyfriend, I can only imagine what comes to her mind everytime she thinks of a man,” CeBILE says and slightly shakes her head.

The mood changes in the kitchen, the happy Sikelela is gone. Just

when he thought he was figuring out, now he feels like he's not really supportive of Vumo but focused on building his dream life.

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CEBILE

Those wives will probably judge her for everything, even if she breaks her hands trying to prepare for them. Sikelela woke up and went to God knows where, she's all alone here running like a headless chicken.

Her phone is ringing, she mentally curses at whoever is disturbing her.

Oh, it's Vusi.

She answers, "Ntombela."

"Sthandwa senhliziyo yami, unjani sshalaphala?" You can tell he's still in cloud nine.

"I'm good, just busy preparing for the guests," Cebile says.

"Only if I was there to help you. I don't want you to work too hard. See, when you become Mrs Ntombela you will never lift your hand again. I will hire a domestic helper so that you can relax and do only what you desire during the day, then at night you'd be giving me the warm thofonoza."

She doesn't say anything, she's not elated as Vusi had hoped she

would be. He's ready on his side, now it's just the matter of her giving him her word and he will contact his bank and withdraw the lobola money.

"Why are you quiet? Do you miss Ntombela too much?" He's cracking a chuckle.

Cebile sighs, "No, Vusi I don't miss your Ntombela."

"Aw, what happened sponono sami?" he asks with worry.

"You could've done better if you wanted me to miss you after you left. But you just teased me for two minutes and then dozed off. You didn't care if I was enjoying or not. You didn't ask if I was satisfied, you just did what you had to do for yourself and forgot about my needs." She wasn't planning on saying anything and ruining his ego, but he keeps pushing and she can only keep so much in her chest.

"MaDlamuka please forgive me. My body failed to handle you. It had been so long since I got between a woman's legs. But we can fix this...I can fix it," he says, frightened at the possibility of losing her.

"How Vusi? You didn't even move," she asks.

"Just give me another chance, I will make you happy," he says.

"What if you can't Vusi? I've waited for too long to have a man, I need to be touched and held right. I don't deny that I love you, but without a spark to enhance that love we have nothing."

His voice trembles, he's scared more than he's embarrassed.

“Every relationship has its secrets MaDlamuka,” he says.

Cebile frowns, “What do you mean?”

“Like secret affairs. I’m old now Macebi, I’d do anything for your happiness, even if it means you must have a ben-10 who will touch you in places that I can’t reach. I won’t have a problem, as long as it stays between us and you become Mrs Ntombela.”

What did she just hear? He’d allow her to sleep with a younger man.

“Vusi are you crazy?” she’s shocked

“Macebi, I need you in my life. I only have one daughter left, whom I can’t even say is alive because she’s addicted into these street drugs and staying God knows where. I’m all alone, I need someone I can spend my last days with. I need a wife, someone who will look after my property after I’ve died,” he says.

She takes a deep breath, feeling a bit remorseful, maybe she’s being too hard on him.

“I’m sure we can fix this,” she says.

“We can, themba lami. Can I come and visit you later?” He’s pushing it. But she’s smiling because for once she’s getting undivided attention.

“My son is home, you can’t,” she says.

“He will sleep, won’t he?”

She rolls her eyes, still smiling.

“I don’t want to traumatize my child.”

“We are not children Macebi, we can keep our joy to ourselves. I will come with his sweets, he will sleep early.”

Cebile laughs, “He’s a grown man, you can’t bribe him with sweets.”

“You will see!”

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A phone call from Vusi brightened her mood. Nothing can ruin her day now, not even MaXulu’s cold looks. She doesn’t get how she’s so cold towards her, only her, because there are two other women who came after her.

It’s Sthembiso, a man she’s never seen and the three wives. She’s with Sikelela and her sister-in-law since her brother couldn’t make it.

Greetings have been exchanged, if it wasn’t for Sikelela and Sthembiso’s hushed conversation this would be way too awkward.

MaXulu clears her throat, they cut the conversation and bring their attention back to the room.

“Thank you for agreeing to see us and for the juice.” CeBILE can’t help but feel mocked. Her son is only a security guard and he worked too hard to get a good company that pays him well. They’re not rich, they will never be, MaXulu should’ve brought her own drinks if she has a problem with Oros.

“Times like this remind me of everything I’ve gone through as the senior wife. I wasn’t there when you and Hlongwane met but I have to clean his mess now because he’s gone.” Her cold gaze meets Cebile’s.

“You never followed a single rule. I don’t remember you coming to report the pregnancy. Even after the baby was born you never came to his family,” she says.

“Mkhonto didn’t have a mother when I met him. He told me he had a wife back home, I couldn’t come to you and report the pregnancy. It would’ve been disrespectful, I expected him to take accountability,” – Cebile.

“But it wasn’t disrespectful to sleep with my husband and keep him for days in your bedroom?”

“Ma!” Sthembiso exclaims. This meeting is about Sikelela, not their grievances.

“We are not here to fight about a man. What do you think Sikelela is feeling witnessing this?” He’s disappointed in his mother, he’s never seen this side of her, she’s always civil with MaJiyane and MaDlamini.

MaDlamini nods in agreement. They can’t fight because Hlongwane belonged to all of them. MaXulu has always known that.

“We want Sikelela to be a Hlongwane. It’s what his father would’ve wanted,” – MaDlamini.

“Didn’t he have the means to do it while he was still alive?”

Sikelela asks, glaring at her.

“It’s complicated, my boy,” MaDlamini says, taking a deep breath.

“How was it complicated to love me like his other children. Am I the ugliest? The last time I remember he looked exactly like me, so why was he embarrassed of me?”

MaDlamini looks at MaXulu. She needs to represent her husband as the first wife and fix this.

MaXulu looks at Sikelela, “What happens when you see blood?”

How is that relevant? Sikelela frowns, “Nothing.”

“When you’re angry and then you see blood, what happens?”

He doesn’t answer.

“He calms down,” Cebile says. She never understood it, from a very young age Sikelela’s heart had another side. She stopped being proud of his ability to fight for himself when he almost killed a boy in his class, Grade 2. Then the scratching of ears began, it became his coping mechanism, he’d scratch them until they bleed and then he’d calm down.

“Your father had the same problem. So did your grandfather and his father and his father’s father. Each generation of the Hlongwanes has that one boy, if you look closer at your eyes you’ll notice that your pupils aren’t normally shaped. If you squint them they’ll almost resemble those of a snake, the viper. It’s a mark of a curse that was imprecated upon the family by a witchdoctor whose son was mistakenly killed by one of your great-

grandfathers over 200 years ago, before your father was even born.”

There’s thick silence in the room...

“He was that boy child who carried the curse for his generation. He always knew he’d pass the curse to one of his children and he knew it wasn’t something he could live with. Months before you were born his skin shed like that of a snake. From there he knew that he’d passed it down but for some reason he believed that if he kept you far from the Hlongwane name you’d be protected you. If he didn’t claim you, if he kept his distance and let your uncle raise you as a Dlamuka, he thought maybe it wouldn’t find you.”

Cebile is crying. He could’ve just told her. They shared everything, she thought she knew him. But this is a big secret to keep from someone you once claimed to love.

“And we believed it didn’t. Your father loved you Sikelela. There wasn’t a time when he wasn’t thinking about you or when he hated you. Something was always missing in his life, there was a gap in his heart that only Londeka managed to temporarily fill.” She looks at Cebile and takes a deep breath. There’s something she’s taking from her bag...a photo.

“He only had this, I believe you were pregnant here. He loved you too, he never stopped,” she says.

Cebile’s face is flooded with more tears. Sikelela’s face hasn’t changed; his expression is implacable. Sthembiso’s hand is on his shoulder, comforting him.

MaJiyane exhales heavily and says, "Hlongwane was a family man. He loved his family more than anything, especially his children."

Cebile nods with tears and looks at Sthembiso, "I know, I saw it with his prince. He didn't even let him walk when they visited me. A thousand kisses in an hour he'd give him, even on his lips."

Sthembiso's lip curves up in disgust. He can't imagine being kissed by another man.

MaXulu sighs, "Unfortunately Sikelela's absence in his life damaged their relationship. He gave Londeka more attention, it ended up looking bad because Sthembiso was also just a child who knew nothing about curses and needed equal love from his father."

Cebile's eyes drop. She understands that but she doesn't want Sthembiso not to know how much his father loved him. He's a good boy, she loved him back then and she still loves him now. He'll always be like a son to her.

"So MaDlamuka we are here to ask for your permission to acknowledge our child," the uncle who's been quiet says.

Cebile looks at Sikelela but she cannot read his face. She wants to know if it's okay, if he wants to be a Hlongwane, she understands now.

"What do you say?" she asks.

Sikelela only nods. It doesn't sit well with her, she wants to know how he feels after discovering about this curse thing.

But he stands, without saying a word, and walks out.

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SIKELELA

He thinks he's in the right location. He only needs the house number from Hubo.

His phone rings unattended a couple of minutes. He's so irritated by the time Hubo picks.

"Yey wena sfebe, where are you?"

"I will drop," Hubo says.

He takes a deep breath, "Look, I need to know where this Mthoko person lives."

"Aren't you in the meeting?" Hubo asks, confused.

"I heard what I've always wanted to hear. Now I know why he abandoned me, I didn't need to sit in that meeting and listen to how he fathered his other children."

"I'm sorry bafo," Hubo sympathizes.

"It's good. Please send me the house number."

"Okay..." he pauses. "Wait Sikelela, don't kill him."

"So that you can kill him better than me, right?"

“No, he could be Thobani’s half-brother. I’m still investigating.”

Oh bloody Detective!

“Are you serious?”

“Yes, it’s bad because Thobani is looking for his biological family now. You can rough him up and then wait until he takes Thobani to his father’s house, then we can kill him.”

Sikelela sighs. So he came all the way here just to beat the boy up.

Hubo sends the house number, it’s not far from where he is. It’s a five minutes walk or less, he sees the house and takes his jacket off and ties it around his waist.

It’s a big family house, occupied by the landlord and her family, and then about six rental rooms connected to it. There’s a dog barking at him as he enters the yard.

He’s not carrying any stick, it’s coming straight for his leg with its sharp teeth. He wasn’t prepared for a fight with a dog. Well, not this dog.

It jumps onto his right leg and bites him below the knee. He feels a sting where its teeth sank. New rage crashes through his veins. Only now someone is coming out to call off the dog. A lazy woman with unkempt hair and a white-brownish towel wrapped over her breast.

They’re fucking with him, her and her dog!

He walks back towards the barking dog. It’s also charging

towards him, craving more of his blood. It jumps onto his leg again, before it can sink its teeth into his flesh he grabs its neck and pulls it up in the air.

“Hhayi-bo nangu ebulalainja!” the woman screams.

The dog is trying to bite his hands and he’s strangling its neck. It cannot dislodge his arm, he’s putting more pressure with each second.

“Are you crazy? Lets go of the dog!” the woman is still screaming at him.

He puts it on the ground, now the dog looks lifeless with its tongue sticking out and drooling excessively. He kicks it twice and drags it on the ground and leaves it on the stoop of the main house.

The woman has ran inside the house and locked the doors behind.

Mthoko hears the commotion from other tenants and steps out of his door to see what it’s all about. The man he never thought he’d see breathing again is coming towards his room with his jacket tied around his waist and a dead dog lying on the stoop behind him. He has no where to run and all he’s thinking about right now is his sisters. Who’s going to take care of them if he dies?

SIKELELA

CHAPTER 55

CEBILE

Vusi has been asking her to come to bed but she just can't. She doesn't know where her son is, whether he's alive or not. If it means staying up all night and wait, she will.

"Did you hear that?" Vusi asks, he's in bed half-naked. This is also an excuse not to join him, it can't be that he's improved his bedroom skills so fast. She's not looking forward to the teasing and dozing off.

"What?" she asks with her eyes on the door and her back turned to him.

"I heard the door, maybe it's him uboy," Vusi says.

She rushes to the door and opens it, indeed Sikelela's bedroom lights are on.

"Let me go and check on him," she tells Vusi as she makes her way out. She's happy that her son is back, but she's also scared of what the outcome of the truth may be.

She finds Sikelela undressing with his back turned. Hearing footsteps coming in startle him.

"Ma, why don't you knock?"

Cebile folds her arms, looks at him menacingly. "Maybe if you

didn't disappear and scared me to death I would've knocked.
What time is this Sikelela?"

"Ma, I'm 28, I don't report, I can take care of myself," he says.

"Well, this is my house. You can't come at 10pm and expect me not to ask where were you. Did you fight where you were?" She just knows it. He was obviously angry when he left and he must've taken it out on someone else.

"I went out to stretch my legs," he says pulling up his shorts.

"Your legs need to be stretched for eight hours?"

Sikelela sighs and climbs on the bed.

She calms herself down in a silent count to three, then she asks how he's feeling.

Sikelela shrugs and says he's fine. But she knows this boy better than anyone.

"I'm sorry I made you believe he hated you. I shouldn't have done that, regardless of what happened between us. No child should grow up being told his parent hated him."

"But that's what you thought was the truth," he says.

"Still Sikelela, my job is to protect your heart. I projected my hate towards your father on you. I made us a team that was abandoned by your father and that wasn't fair on you."

He turns and sleeps on his stomach, burying his face on the pillow. She knows it hurt him back then and it still hurts him now.

“You’re not a cursed child Sikelela.”

There’s a sob...

She plants a mama’s soft kiss on his shoulder and rubs his back. “He loved you. So much that he walked away for you to have what he thought would be a normal life. He didn’t want you to be like him. I know it didn’t help but sometimes as parents we fuck up thinking what we are doing is good for our children. But Mkhonto loved us, Sikelela. He told MaMkhulu about you, he cried everytime when it was your birthday and he couldn’t reach out. And they killed him on your birthday, he couldn’t fight them because he was fighting bigger emotional battles that day.”

Sikelela sniffs and lifts his head and looks at his mother. “So I’m going to have a cursed child too?”

Cebile takes a deep breath, “Apparently Nkanyezi was. He was born looking exactly like you and his death means the curse ended with him.”

“Why did it have to be Nkanyezi? Why must I carry the curse, being left by my father and the death of my child? Do I owe the Hlongwanes that much?”

“No baby, you don’t. I’m sorry you were born with so much burden, only if I knew the truth, maybe I would’ve chosen a different babydaddy.” A tear escapes her eye, she quickly wipes it and cracks a sad smile. “Vusi is here, maybe you’ll bump into him in the morning, I don’t want you to be surprised.”

“I thought you dumped him because he’s weak.”

Her eyes widen. This child!

“I didn’t discuss that with you child, shut the hell up.”

Sikelela cracks up. It’s so good to see him laugh after such a heavy day.

“I’m going to bring your food, please make sure you return my plate to the kitchen Sikelela and put it in the big basin.” She walks to the door and stops, “If you don’t, you will eat your breakfast on the floor.” Then she threatens and leaves.

Sikelela shakes his head, lies on his back and calls Vumo. He hasn’t checked on them the whole day.

“Hey are you sleeping?” he asks when Vumo picks up.

“I was about to. How are you? How did the meeting go?”

He exhales heavily, there’s a lot to unpack...

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He wakes up late, the sun is already up, luckily his mother hasn’t barged in and woken him up. Vusi must come around more often.

He washes his face and brushes his teeth before putting his clothes on. Fuck, he forgot to return the plate to the kitchen and by this time his mother has already washed the dishes. Here is to an explosive morning!

Cebile and Vusi are in the kitchen. By the look of things breakfast

is about to be served. Sikelela walks in holding a dirty plate behind him.

“Please don’t start me so early in the morning Sikelela, I beg.” She’s seen the plate and she’s annoyed, both by Vusi’s unimproved bedroom skills and this child that never listens.

“I’m sorry MaDlamuka,” Sikelela says, sliding the plate in an empty basin. He picks a clean one from the cupboard and joins them on the table.

“How did you sleep boy?” Vusi asks.

Boy? Nobody calls him that, he’s not a boy.

“I slept good, I just have an ache in my finger joints,” he says.

Cebile gives him a look, “When did it start? You will wash that plate Sikelela.”

He looks at Vusi. Is he not supposed to calm down his girlfriend?

“Kahle sthandwa, there are kids who are worse, they wouldn’t even care to return the plate to the basin.”

“And they break plates,” Sikelela adds.

“You’re not them, you’re going to wash that plate. In fact you’re going to wash all the dishes after we are done with breakfast.”

Sikelela picks the loaf of bread with low mumbles. He’s obviously not the one who pissed her off, it’s just convenient to shout at him and take out all the anger.

“How is work?” Vusi asks.

“It’s good...umh, what do I call you?” He looks at him and his mother.

“Uncle, I know you won’t be comfortable with baba,” Vusi says.

He’s right, it’s better they keep it at uncle.

“Why are you single, uncle?” he asks.

Vusi chuckles and wraps his arm around Cebile, who shoots him a cold look in return. Trouble in paradise!

“I’m not single now, I have your mother whom I love with every bone in me,” he says.

Cebile’s face melts. She gives him a soft gaze and they both smile. Awkward!

“What happened to your wife? I’m sure you must’ve had someone before my mother.”

“She left me and then passed on a few years ago,” Vusi says.

“I’m sorry to hear that. Do you have kids?” Sikelela again.

“One passed away, I only have one daughter now,” he says.

“A stepsister, okay. So are you a pensioner? How do you plan to take care of your girlfriend?”

Cebile gives him a look, “Stop interrogating him and eat.”

Vusi chuckles, “It’s okay, sponono.” He looks at Sikelela, “Let me just say I worked hard in my days so that I wouldn’t worry about money when I’m old and retired. Mama is going to be fine, money is not a problem.”

“Oh well then, welcome to the family,” Sikelela says folding his fist to him.

They bump fists.

“Before I forget, I brought something for you on my way here, unfortunately you were not here when I arrived.” He asks Cebile to get the stuff.

Sikelela’s eyes are squinted curiously. He buys things for people, not the other way around.

Cebile takes a plastic bag filled with all sort of things Langa would eat in two or three years to come.

A packet of sticksweets, really?

He’s laughing as he unpacks everything from the bag. He will keep most of these things for Vumo. A grown man like him can’t be eating chocolate cookies, yoghurts and chips.

But he’s weirdly happy by all this. Maybe because it has never happened to him; being a child whose father visits and brings goodies.

“Thank you uncle,” he says.

Cebile is smiling, he’s never seen Sikelela this happy for something so little.

After breakfast Sikelela leaves to wash his sneakers, not dishes. Cebile lets the dishes issue slide, for today only. She’s tired of repeating herself about simply things like eating and returning

your plate to the basin before the dishes are washed.

“Thank you for making him smile,” she says to Vusi.

Vusi nods.

It’s awkwardly silent for the next two minutes or so.

Then Vusi asks, “Are you still angry at me?”

“Vusi please!”

“But I tried Macebi, you even called my name and held me tightly.”

“And it was over within a minute,” Cebile says.

“Did you think about what I suggested? I do want you to be happy.”

“I’ve never been a whore Vusi and I’m not going to start now. I’m not going to sleep with two people.”

“What else can I do? I’m diabetic Macebi.”

“I’m not trying to belittle you, I’m just stating my concerns. Maybe we can try other alternatives, other than the Ben-10 thing.”

“What could other alternatives be?” Vusi asks.

“Well, I read something in the newspaper yesterday.” Cebile rushes to the cupboard and takes a torn piece of newspaper from the drawer.

“There are toys that partners can use for intimacy. The author here also suggests oral sex, like using your mouth.”

Vusi is reading, she’s looking at him wondering what his reaction

will be.

He wraps his arm around her hips and asks, "Why don't we try this now before I leave and see if it works?"

"You're going to lick me down here?" Cebile asks in disbelief.

"Why wouldn't I? You have a very beautiful thofonoza, I'm sure it tastes great too."

Cebile pulls him off the table to the door. She checks the coast and it's clear, they can't raise any suspicions.

They get inside her bedroom, lock the door behind and turn on the radio; the first radio station they find.

Vusi unties her apron and pulls down her short tight. She's even more sexy during the day. He grabs her hips, dry humps against her mound until his front pokes out.

"You're going to kill me one day Macebi. I will enter here and never make it out alive." He's sticking his two fingers into her wet core and stirring them inside her.

"This is about me Vusi, remember," Cebile says laughing.

He throws her in the bed and strips his clothes off too. He lies beside her, his lips connected to hers with her controlling the intensity and direction of the kiss. His finger is back inside her, he's rubbing her clit with the thumb and stimulating her.

He breaks the kiss and moans, lust is threatening to tear him apart.

“Ngizothi nje thasi kancane bese siyaqhubeka,” he begs. (Let me in first, I’ll be brief)

“Ay Vusi, don’t you get enough?” Cebile asks, opening her legs wider in approval.

He wastes no time, he grabs a condom and gets on top.

“How do you expect me to get enough when you have such long ears down here?” He’s inserting himself inside. “They brush me so nicely, I just can’t handle you.”

Cebile blushes. He’s slowly learning to kiss her lips without involving the tongue. They’re kissing again, he’s now fully buried inside her and moving the only way he knows how.

Within three minutes he’s done, breathing heavily and sweating a storm.

He lies on his back and asks Cebile to come to the top. His member is lying on his thigh, soft as a butter.

“Don’t use your teeth Vusi,” Cebile says before she sits on his face.

He opens his mouth and welcomes the wet coochie on him. He’s careful with his teeth, he’s sucking the clit and the soft ears he loves so much and sticking his tongue in her opening. She’s enjoying, he’s never heard that trembling moan coming out of her.

He pushes her down on her back, his face still between her thighs. He flips over her and sticks his fingers inside her while lapping on her clit. She’s whispering his name, confessing her love for him

and asking him to suck more.

“Oh Macebi, you’re so beautiful,” he cries out. His member just got hard again. He wants to use it but there’s that obstacle of having to climb off bed and taking a condom. It will waste too much time.

“We can both do this,” he’s figured it out. He lies on his back, Cebile faces the south and sucks his manhood while he’s licking the coochie. They’re hitting two birds with one stone.

Their collaborated moans fill the bedroom.

Vusi cums quicker than her. She felt it coming and disconnected her lips from his manhood.

He’s now out of breath, trembling as his cream shoots up. Cebile is still heated, she needs more and it’s time she takes over again. She turns and sits on his face, as motionless as he is. She pumps herself on his face, pressing her clit against his pursed lips and riding down to his chin.

She feels it building from her toes in a curl of tingles and travelling up to her trembling legs and spreading all over her body. She explodes right on his face and cries like a dying sheep.

“Vusi I love you,” she whispers, rolling down to the side and letting tingles roll out of her skin.

Vusi turns to her, he plants a soft kiss on her forehead and smiles. He didn’t realize his happiness relies so much on hers. Yes he’s been happy with their sex life but now he realizes something was missing in that happiness.

“I’m going to marry you, sponono. I want to share everything I have with you,” he says.

She opens her eyes and looks at him with a lazy smile.

“When the time has come Vusi, maybe we can just go sign in court without having to pull any attention. We are grandparents now, remember.”

He chuckles, “Yes, we are.”

They kiss.

He strokes her cheek, “Oh yaze yamnandi into! It was so good.”

Cebile smiles, she’s happy. From here they’re exploring more alternatives. This is better than having a Ben-10.

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Sikelela walks in the kitchen and goes to his goodies bag to take pictures for Vumo. She wants to see what he got, she finds this funny as well.

He snaps a few pictures, sends them and then calls her again.

“Are those Spheres Sikelela?”

He chuckles, “I don’t know.”

“Please don’t touch them, keep them in a cupboard unopen,” Vumo says, she sounds excited.

“I don’t eat inyongo anyway. There’s a tub of ice-cream in the

fridge and a birthday cake, I guess that's for Langa's grandmother."

"It's only a birthday cake if it was baked for a birthday, baba kaLanga," she says.

"It has the birthday icing nje," he insists.

Vumo sighs, "There's no such thing. What else is there?"

Sikelela snoops around with his phone pressed between his shoulder and ear. There's a container with pieces of fried chicken.

"This looks like KFC chicken. I think they kept this from me and ate alone." Yes he's not into goodies but meat is meat and hiding it from a black man is a sin.

Vumo is laughing. "Check if there's no box of pizza in the dustbin. I'm sure they were having a feast without you."

"I think they ate their KFC with pap. I saw chickens eating pap outside earlier. And Ma gave me ordinary chicken curry and rice last night."

"Ah, shame! Do you think you're going to get the cake?"

"I don't care about the cake," he says.

"Okay, then take the KFC they left, eat it and leaves bones inside the container."

"They'll know it's me," he says.

"But they can't confront you about it, right? Do it Sikelela, it's going to be fun watching your mom looking for something she can't ask

you about.”

Maybe he can be that mischievous boy once in his life. He’s going to eat this KFC and sits here in the kitchen waiting for his mother to come and look for it.

He sits comfortably on the table and starts with a thigh. There’s a torn piece of paper in front of him. He runs his eyes on it while Vumo attends to Langa on the other side.

Why is he reading about dick toys and blowjob tips? His mother and Vusi were here not so long ago and now they’re locked in the bedroom listening to an Afrikaans radio station.

“Whaaat?!” he’s losing his appetite right away.

“What is it?” Vumo asks, she’s still on the line, just changing Langa’s diaper and coming back to the conversation.

“Fuck, I’m now a son of a bad girl.” He still can’t believe this. How is he going to look at them when they finally come out?

SIKELELA

CHAPTER 56

STHEMBISO

He joins his mother on the table for breakfast, it's just the two of them. It's one of those lazy mornings, he didn't even work out, he's taking a bath after this and going to work.

"I need to go and see your sister's workplace," MaXulu says.

"Londeka's?" Sthembiso raises an eyebrow. The Londeka he knows won't appreciate MaXulu and Co popping in the middle of her photoshoot or while she's on stage modeling.

"Yes, I know where everybody works except her," she says.

He chuckles, "I hope she's going to be happy about that."

MaXulu passes a bowl of maize porridge and peanut butter to him.

"So I've been thinking, I don't know how Sikelela will take it, he hasn't been returning my calls. I want him to take Hlongwanes Rav4 before Hubo takes it and crashes it, and then take his portion of the inheritance. I know he wouldn't be comfortable leaving his job to work with us."

"Don't worry he will come around, he just needs time to take in everything he heard yesterday," MaXulu says.

"I hope there's no other child out there who had to live without a father," he's eyeing MaXulu, you can never be sure with this

woman's late husband.

"Sikelela is the only one I knew of," MaXulu says. "I wish he can move in with us, there's a lot he can learn from you."

Sthembiso swallows two spoons of porridge and asks, "Like what? I'm in no position to be anyone's role model."

"Don't be so modest, you don't know how proud I am for having a responsible son like you. If there's one thing I always thank your father for, it's teaching you about taking responsibility for your own actions," MaXulu says.

The door opens, MaJiyane walks in with an empty bowl. She doesn't feel like eating bread this morning. She opens the pot and dishes the porridge.

"I'm telling this boy how proud I am of him for being so responsible and always ready to take accountability of his actions," MaXulu updates her as she joins them on the table.

"Aren't we all proud of him sisi? Uyabona nje I clapped when he brought that white doctor for cleansing. If it was these young boys of today they wouldn't have bothered. And a mother out there would be wondering why her daughter is getting turned away from every interview and unlucky in everything she does."

"That's the biggest problem in this country sisi. You see, these kids don't seek advices from their elders, they do as they please and don't even know what hits them in the future," MaXulu says, pouring tea in three cups.

"Sthembiso has never disappointed us. Yazi I don't know how

someone can be so perfect!" MaJiyane says boastfully.

Sthembiso brushes his face, exhales softly and continues eating, without acknowledging the shower of compliments.

"That's because I raised an honest child, sisi. My son rarely breaks the rules," MaXulu boasts, adding more milk in his tea and passing the cup to him.

"I was thinking you'd take a Zulu wife this time. Someone who knows and respects our culture. But it's fine if she's white because you know English and it wouldn't hurt to be the first family to have a white makoti in the village, she will learn."

Sthembiso rubs the bridge of his nose and heaves another sigh. Had he known it would turn out like this he would've eaten breakfast at MaDlaminis.

"Have you talked after the cleansing?" MaJiyane asks.

This breakfast is all about making Sthembiso uncomfortable.

"Yes we did," he says.

"What did you talk about? What did she think about the village?"- MaJiyane.

"We didn't talk about the village," he says.

MaXulu frowns; is he stupid?

"What did you talk about then?" she asks.

"That we need to get fixed," he says.

They look at each other, confused.

“Fixed, how?” MaXulu asks.

“Like I need to get cleansed and move on from being a widower,” he says.

“How so? You haven’t completed even six months mourning your wife,” – MaJiyane asks.

They’ve stopped sipping their tea, they’re interrogating him with wide gazes.

“I have mourned enough.” He won’t tell them anything about Zime, he never will. As much as he’s disappointed in what his wife did, he cannot allow her memory to be spat at because that’s exactly what his mothers are going to do.

“Maybe you’re right, you have to be free with your doctor,” MaXulu says. They seem to like Giana for some weird reasons.

Maybe this is the right time to just ask what’s been burning him.

“So Ma, what happens in the situation where a widower mistakenly sleeps with a woman he just cleansed?”

“What???” Both women ask, their brows furrowed.

“Mistakes happen, angithi?”

“First time is a mistake Sthembiso, but the second time is pure disrespect and lack of shame,” MaXulu says, already worked up.

MaJiyane clears her throat and asks in a lowered voice, “You didn’t do that Sthembiso, did you? Your mother and I just complimented you a minute ago.”

“But I never said I was perfect, you assumed I was,” he says with a shrug. He can’t be held accountable for them putting him on a high pedestal without him even doing anything.

“The only child who listens to me and helps me around here is Londeka. I’ve never seen you buy even a bag of maize seeds to feed the chickens you’re now so hell-bent in wiping out,” MaXulu says, clearly she was wrong about him, all these children are the same.

Sthembiso doesn’t mind that because today Londeka is the only listening and helpful child in the house, tomorrow it will be someone else and the day after.

“I will pay for the chicken,” he says.

“I don’t have more chickens who are going to die because of your zip that can’t stay closed.”

He looks at MaJiyane, “You too Ma?”

MaJiyane sighs, “I think it’s better if we just release you and ask mkhulu to come and perform the cleansing ceremony for you ngoba sizomgeza uMaBhathila uphinde umqhoqhobale futhi, you will have sex with her before the chicken is even cooked.”

It’s embarrassing to know that they think him and Giana have no control, because they really don’t. Only if Giana didn’t challenge him so much!

He leaves the kitchen after they promise to talk to the Hlongwane mkhulu about the cleansing ceremony.

Giana needs to know what just went down. They like her though, that somehow gives him a warm feeling. He's never had a woman that his mothers love and approve of before she even proves herself.

He's getting ready for work. His clothes are laid on bed waiting to be ironed. Life of a widower!

Giana's phone rings a number of times before she picks up.

"Dr Butler," he says.

"Yes Mr Hlongwane, how can I help you this morning?"

"Well, I asked my mothers for another cleansing and they nearly bite my head off. I think this coming weekend I will be a free man."

There's a faint sigh. "Free Sthembiso? You're always dealing with something. How is the other brother doing?"

She's right, maybe being a free man is a bit stretched.

"Which one? The one fighting for his child or the one who just found out about the curse?" he asks.

"Well, both of them."

"Hubo is Hubo, he's handling it the best way he knows how. Sikelela has been unavailable since yesterday, so I don't know."

"But babe you all really need a break," Giana says.

There's a brief moment of silence, Sthembiso caught it but she

hasn't realized anything strange she said.

"I'm going to arrange something for you since Zulu men don't care to spoil women they casually sleep with in the restaurant bathrooms." It sounds like she's now on a computer.

"Uyaphapha yazi Giana, you're so forward. Who said I was not going to take you out as soon as I was free?" She always tries to embarrass him. He's not a stingy man, he just didn't know how to start with it.

"Whatever! You said you have how many brothers?"

"Three now," he says.

"Okay...four people booked in for two hours...done!"

"Giana what are you doing?" he asks.

"I just booked you and your brothers for a spa day later. Be there at 5pm, I will send the address," she says.

"Spa day? For what?" This has to be a joke. He used to take Zime there, he never entered and he thought he'd ever because a man can't be touched anyhow by strangers.

"That's where people go to distress, and nobody needs that more than you and your brothers right now," Giana says.

"We can distress by going to town, having inhloko and drinks with other men. Spa...? I'm not one of your girlfriends Giana. I have izinhlanga on my body, ngiyindoda yomZulu ngeke ngihambe ngibhucungwa nje." (I have muthi incisions on my body, I can't be touched anyhow)

"I'm glad I don't understand what you just said. You really don't want to know how much I just paid. Be there Sthembiso, don't waste my money, 5pm!"

He sighs, "Yoh, hhayi ukhona bo! So what do we bring? Vaseline and towels?"

"You bring your bodies Sthembiso, that's all."

"What did I do to deserve this torture?!"

"You looked my way, Mr Hlongwane," she says.

He smiles, this woman is a different sport altogether.

"Well, I wouldn't have it any other way. I'm glad I met you at the time I did," he says.

"Really?" she asks, her tone softened.

"Yes Giana, you heal something in me without even trying, you don't annoy me as much as I make it look like."

"That's all there's to this- I heal you?" She sounds a bit offended.

"And you make me smile and do crazy things. You invade my thoughts and make me stay awake at night thinking about what my future could look like if you're in it. You make me question my sanity when I wake up feeling strange, like you had your hands on me the whole night." By the time he finishes his hand is already pressed against his heart that's beating irregularly like it's going to leap out of his chest.

"Now I wish I booked me and you in a hotel, instead of sending you to be massaged by strangers," she says.

He laughs. "It's too late to change your mind now. But maybe after the spa thing we can go to the hotel. What do you think?"

"I'm thinking tomorrow I have to see a patient who's in a critical condition and I'm wondering if my legs would be working," she says.

"I thought Dr Butler can handle anything," he says with mock severity.

"I never said I want a wild bull in bed...or rather against the abandoned house tables," she says.

"Okay Giana, I'm going to drop before I mess my boxers." His member is already getting excited by this talk and she's not even close by to assist him.

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IN THE AFTERNOON

Thobani said no, he didn't even care to listen what was at stake if they didn't pitch up for their booked spa treatment. He's young, he probably had other plans with his friends and the idea of going out with his old brothers didn't seem appealing.

Luckily Hubo came through without a hustle, praise the lord for that! Now they're going to Hlabathini to convince Sikelela to join.

"So vele you and the doc are official now?" Hubo asks.

“I think we will be, time will tell,” Sthembiso says.

“You see a future between you? For real, you see her becoming your wife and mothering your children?”

“I said time will tell Hubo. I don’t want to repeat the same mistakes,” he says.

“What mistakes?” Hubo questions.

“Like rushing into marrying someone without a proper foundation for her at home. There are things I need to do, in my personal life, before I let someone be a permanent part of it,” he says.

“You like complicating things,” – Hubo turns up the music. If he had a doctor who’s head-over-heels with him and booking him for spa treatments his life would be hundred times better. While Thobani turned down the offer and Sthembiso just doing this to avoid unnecessary fights with Giana, Hubo is all about getting his body massaged. He deserves this after everything his body has been through this year.

The Dlamuka premises are quiet. Nobody comes out even when the car pulls up in the yard. But the kitchen’s door is open, there's music playing softly.

Hubo yells for Sikelela to come out.

He appears at the door wearing only his shorts and nothing on top.

“Why are we counting your ribs? Get dressed, we are going to chow imali yomlungu,” Hubo says.

“Ungazodakwa wena!” Sthembiso scolds him.

Sikelela is now confused. Are they going to chow a white person’s money or what?

“Kuyiwaphi madoda?” (Where are we going)

“It’s a surprise, we have a new sister-in-law who’s taking us to places,” – Hubo.

“Hey bafo get cleaned up, I need to talk to you about something and there’s somewhere we are being taken out to,” Sthembiso says.

“Taken out by who?” Sikelela frowns. They’ve never taken him out, they don’t even take themselves out for crying out loud.

“By my friend, Giana,” Sthembiso says.

“Friend with benefits,” Hubo adds.

He can’t imagine a better way to end his day-off other than being taken to a surprise adventure with his brothers.

“Where’s Ma?” Sthembiso asks as he steps out of the kitchen to go and get ready.

“She’s sleeping,” Sikelela says.

Sthembiso frowns, “Why? Is she sick?”

“No, she’s tired, my stepfather was here,” Sikelela says with a faint sigh.

Hubo’s eyes widen. “The cowboy one?”

“Have respect, he’s old enough to be your uncle,” Sikelela says.

Hubo raises his eyebrow, “And then wena? Did he buy you sweets?”

“He did, they’re in the cupboard, I’m keeping them for Langa’s mother,” Sikelela says.

“Mmm...which side of the cupboard?”

“How is that any of your business? I need to splash quickly, you guys can wait for me here and get yourselves something to drink,” he hurries off, leaving Sthembiso and Hubo heading inside the kitchen.

Sthembiso sits, Hubo goes to the cupboards and looks for the goodies.

“Didn’t Sikelela say he’s keeping those for his son’s mother?” Sthembiso asks when he takes out a packet of biscuits.

“Vumo? That one hates me, I don’t have to spare anything for her,” Hubo says.

“You don’t respect people Mahubo and then you act confused when they hate you.”

Hubo shrugs and sits opposite him, opening the box of biscuits with a packet of chips next to him.

When Sikelela walks in Hubo has almost finished everything

Vumo begged him to keep.

“You’re so childish,” he says buttoning up his shirt.

Hubo sips water, “You will replace them, Mr Husband-Material.”

“I hope you get diarrhea,” Sikelela says looking at the empty box of Vumo’s favourite biscuits. He knows chances of her and Hubo ever making peace are slim, which is weird because as the main person who was wronged he’s forgiven both of them.

“Let’s go,” he says.

Hubo stretches his arms, burps loudly and gets off the chair.

Sthembiso looks hesitant, “Are you sure that Ma is alright?”

“She’s alright bafo, trust me you don’t want to hear the details,” Sikelela says.

Well, this means they can leave, he’s not coming back with them though; greater things will be waiting for him at the hotel.

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They’re filling medical questionnaires, something they didn’t anticipate. Sthembiso and Sikelela have already lost the least excitement they had. Hubo has talked almost to everyone who happens to pass by.

They’re given gowns and slippers to wear and taken on a quick tour by one of the staff members.

“Your sessions begin in 30 minutes, we have extras you can enjoy

in the moment. We have a sauna, a steam room and swimming pool. Bathroom amenities will be provided.

“Can I have a full body massage?” Hubo asks.

The lady smiles, “Yes, you’re going to have a full body massage.”

“Is the person who will massage me going to wear a gown too?” he asks.

“No, she will wear the uniform,” the lady says, still smiling.

Hubo frowns, “Why? I thought she wasn’t going to wear anything.”

Before the lady can explain, Sthembiso tells her not to bother.

“Don’t mind him.”

“I’m going to take a shower. I’m not sure about you two,” he turns to look at Sikelela and Hubo.

“I’m going wherever you are going,” Sikelela says. This doesn’t look exciting, to say the least. He applauds Thobani for turning down the offer.

Giana booked a hot stone massage for them. It’s something Sthembiso would like, she thought. It will help him ease his muscles and just relax for 60 minutes.

He’s lying in bed, face-down, enjoying every bit of it. Hubo too, he’s releasing uncomfortable moans as the masseur’s stones roll on his back.

Sikelela on the other hand...

He sits up again and shakes his head. The masseur looks defeated now.

“Isn’t there anything one can do in this place other than this?” he asks.

“If you’re not comfortable with this you can try foot scrub massage,” the masseur says with a kind smile.

That sounds better, he will take the foot massage instead of having black stones rolling on his back and soft hands touching him.

The girl scrubs, soaks and massages his feet. At first he was uncomfortable but now he’s collected his nerves and he’s enjoying every moment.

“Are you okay with pedicure?” the girl asks.

“It will be on my feet?” he asks.

She chuckles, “Yes, it’s just a mini cuticle care.”

“Okay,” he shuts his eyes again and relaxes. She’s clipping his nails, in his life he never thought there are people who work to clean other people’s feet.

“I’m going to add base coat on your nails. It contains Vitamin E, proteins and calcium that’s going to enhance your nails.”

Sounds good! This is the life one can get used to.

Hubo walks in to check on him. They still have an hour here and

he plans to make the most out of it.

He stops and frowns.

“So you left real massage to get cutex here? Are you gay Sikelela?”

Sikelela sits up and looks at the girl. She’s holding what really looks like a cutex. Wtf! Didn’t she say it's something with vitamins for his nails.

He frowns, “Did you put cutex on my nails?”

Hubo cracks up. “Yes, you just got ‘your nails done’ boy.”

“Please remove this thing,” Sikelela is not smiling, he’d rather have them amputate his feet than to paint them.

NB: Please forward proof of payment for the Whatsapp story to 0784004908, NOT my personal number because I don't have Whatsapp. Zibulo's chapter is coming a bit too late today, I'm still on the road...apologies.

SIKELELA

CHAPTER 56

Sthembiso calls Giana to confirm their check-in time. Hubo is still having the best time of his life, he's trying to get the female staff contact details in hopes that he'll lay down with a woman today. For someone who just got a rude awakening about women he surely doesn't learn, or he's just a sucker for women trouble. Sikelela on the other hand is done with all this, he wants to be out of here as soon as possible. He's never coming to a place like this ever again, not even in the name of letting loose and trying new things.

"Okay boys, drop me off at the Blue Waters Hotel," Sthembiso says as he climbs at the back.

"We are going to the hotel now? This day can't get any better," Hubo belts with joy. Giana is his new favorite sister, he wouldn't mind exchanging Londeka for her.

"No, I'm going to the hotel, you two are going home," Sthembiso tells him.

His face falls in disappointment. He didn't expect to be excluded at last minute.

"We can sleep on the floor and cover our ears," he says and looks at Sikelela for some team work.

"I'm not sleeping on the hotel floor," Sikelela says.

He yawns, how boring!

“Fine, let’s go to Mela’s place, maybe she will give you another blowjob.”

Sthembiso looks at Sikelela and frowns. He’s not pleased by this one bit.

“Aren’t you trying to work things out with Langa’s mother?” he asks.

“I am,” Sikelela says with no enthusiasm. He’s not in the mood to explain his love life that he doesn’t even understand himself.

“Then why are you letting an innocent, vulnerable girl suck your black dick?” – Sthembiso.

Hubo chuckles, “Let? He ran for the hills with his black dick when the vulnerable girl wanted some vitamins inside her.”

Sthembiso rubs his face and sighs. He understands Mela wants to experience men in her own accord and he trusts Sikelela to be gentle with her and have some good intentions, but there’s a babymama he hasn’t let go of.

“Sikelela who has your heart between Langa’s mother and Mela?” he asks.

“My heart is with me,” Sikelela says.

“I know, but who do you love?” he asks.

“I love both of them, differently,” – Sikelela.

Hubo laughs, he’s entertained, he’s finally not the only bitch at the

Hlongwanes.

“Don’t tell me you’re going to follow your father’s footsteps,” Sthembiso looks at him inquisitively. He knows how far his father came with his own polygamy, it wasn’t easy, his mothers didn’t just get along, peace wasn’t stored overnight.

And really, between Langa’s mother and Mela who needs the stress of fighting for a man?

“Are we going to leave this place?” Sikelela asks, dismissing the questions he’s being drilled with.

They drop Sthembiso at the hotel and leave Durban. The aim was to drive to Mela’s place afterwards but as fate would have it, Vumo calls and Sikelela’s request before even answering the call is that they go straight home.

“Hey I have good news,” Vumo beams, the call is connected to Bluetooth granting Hubo every detail of the conversation.

“What is it?” Sikelela asks.

“Tomorrow we are coming home,” she says with so much ecstasy.

Sikelela has been waiting for this day, so has his mother. He’s going to finally spend time with his own little family and begin on his father duties.

“Do I need to come and fetch you?” he asks.

“No, your brother arranged everything before he left.”

As uncomfortable as Sthembiso may be as a big brother, he's still the best in the world.

"Okay, then I will ask a few days off at work so that I can spend time with my son," Sikelela says.

"Hhayi bo, didn't you take days off not so long ago? What if they fire you?" Vumo asks worriedly.

"Don't worry about that, I'm going to spend time with my son...and you," he says.

There's a brief silence from Vumo's side, then a faint exhalation. "I can't wait. Where are you going? It sounds like you're on the road."

"I'm coming from a massage store," he says.

Hubo laughs, "Fuck you idiot, it's a spa."

"Who's with you there?" – Vumo.

"Hubo, do you want to say hello?" Sikelela asks.

Hubo coughs dramatically.

"No, thank you," Vumo says.

Sikelela chuckles, at least he knows one person who makes Hubo uncomfortable, however he wishes that they can be civil one day.

"He's my family, which makes him your family now. You know that, right?" he asks Vumo.

"Call me when you are alone," Vumo says and drops the call.

Hubo clicks his tongue and fixes his eyes on the road.

Sikela sighs! It's going to be challenging to have these two in his life, unfortunately he cannot get rid of either.

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STHEMBISO

Giana stares at him as he walks back from the bathroom. He's half-naked with only a towel wrapped around his waist. Now she can't deny the feelings she has for him. They're more than her wanting to sit with him and have a silly chat. More than a physical attraction, she wants to explore him beyond sexual levels. His body may have been what struck her in interest at first, she likes them with six-pack and big muscles, and he came with an eight-pack, trimmed sideburns and a deep-toned voice that's always kept at a moderate level.

"You're staring MaBhathila," he says.

She snaps out and gives him the stink eye. "What is that? An ugly nickname you gave me?"

She always masks her weakness, which is him, with sauciness.

"It's how my mothers will call you if you ever decide to become their daughter-in-law," he says.

He's never clear, that's her biggest problem. She does feel that he wants her too, but it doesn't look like it's love from his side,

maybe just a physical attraction.

He kisses her cheek and lowers himself on the bed next to her. He can see that she doesn't look okay but he brushes it away, it could be that she's just tired from work.

"Do you want me to teach you some Zulu words?" he asks.

She lies back and holds a pillow on her chest, "Yes, please. Just the basic though, how you call each other and all that."

He sheds the towel and sits butt-naked with his one leg thrown over her. He knows exactly how to distract her!

She bites her lip and looks at him like she doesn't want to eat him up.

"Okay, I will start with umama, it means a mother," he says.

She interjects, "I know that, baba means a father and gogo means grandmother and khulu means grandfather."

Sthembiso chuckles, "Khulu is a grandmother from your father's side, gogo is the one from your mother's side and well, mkhulu means grandfather."

"Wow, okay," she flutters her eyelashes, trying to keep her hands to herself and her eyes on his face, even though the temptation to grab his dick is overwhelming.

"Malume means uncle, his wife is referred to as malumekazi. The eldest daughter in the family is umafungwase, the eldest son inkosana, and then the last born is uthunjana or umagcino. Umamkhulu or mamdala is the sister of your mother and the

sister of your father is ubabekazi. Umzala is a child of your mother's brother or your father's sister. Then ukanina is a child of your mother's sister and ukayise is a child of your father's brother. Umfowenu is your brother and udadewenu is your sister. Then you separate your brothers as umnewethu, meaning he's your eldest brother, and umnawethu meaning he is your youngest brother. Then umamezala is what my mother would be to you if you ever decide to be her daughter-in-law, a daughter-in-law is umalokazana but umakoti is widely used, I don't know what it means. But then again dialects depend on your location and sometimes the family you're born into." He brushes the side of her hip and lowers his lips to her tummy and plants a soft peck.

"And what will my mother call you?" Giana asks and adds with an eye roll, "If you ever decide to be her son-in-law."

"I will be umkhwenyana to her and umyeni to you. Then after I have counted, which is ukubala in Zulu, all the cows I owe your family and given them the date of lobola, your brothers can start calling me usbali. Before that they have every right to kick my ass and call me a dog everytime they bump into me," he says.

She laughs, "I really want to call Ronan but he's in the US. I would've loved to see your ass getting kicked."

He looks at her and feigns being hurt beyond imagination.

"I thought you cared. Don't you love me Giana?"

"I do care," she says.

"That's not what I asked though." His hand massages all around

her hip to her lean waist and travels up to her breasts.

She's breathing unsteadily. "What did you ask?"

"I asked if you don't love me," he says.

"It should be you who tells me if you love me or not first."

He chuckles, "Oh, that's what they taught you in the feminism chat-group?"

"What makes you think feminism groups discuss men?"

"Fine, I don't know. So you're not going to tell me you love me?" he asks.

"Do I?" She frowns and looks at the ceiling pretending to be thinking hard.

"Okay, let me not make you disappoint the women's league, lest they kick you out of the chairwoman position. After I get cleansed next week I'd like to take you out on a date and have your permission to call myself your boyfriend. I'm not going to buy you a plane or jump and kiss the sky to prove my feelings for you, but I can love you until you realize that Romeo and Juliet's story was that, just a story based in Italy, and yours is a reality you're going to live each and every day of your life."

She smiles, "Is it going to be that good?"

"You have to live it to know Giana. So uyangifaka noma uyangikhipha?"

"Huh?" She furrows her brows.

“Do you let me in your heart or take me out of this love misery? Choose one,” he says translating with a teasing smile.

“That’s one question asked differently. Badly structured multiple choice if you ask me,” she says.

He narrows his eyes, “It is two different questions, respect my language Dr Butler.”

“I’m not disrespecting your...wow Sthembiso!”

“Then answer me,” he says squeezing her hip.

She takes a deep breath, looks at him and smiles.

He’s such a bully!

“The second one,” she says.

“So you’re taking me out of the love misery?”

She nods, “Yeah.”

“Give me something I can use to prove that to those who don’t know that I’ve been taken out of the love misery.”

She’s confused. “Something like what?”

“Anything, even if your bracelet.”

“You’re going to keep it until when?”

“Until forever, it’s going home with me,” says.

Weird!

She takes off her slider bracelet and gives him. It’s her favourite

one unfortunately.

He gets off bed and puts it inside the pocket of his trouser and comes back to bed smiling.

“That’s it?” she frowns.

“Yes, that’s it. You’re mine now.”

Well, it sounds good when he puts it that way. She’s been his since the restaurant bathroom shenanigan.

She opens her legs to let him lie in between and lock his eyes into hers.

“Hey babe,” he says.

She smiles, feeling a flight of butterflies landing below her stomach, “Hey...my love.”

“Are we going to make love tonight sweetheart?” he asks.

Why else would they be here? She tucks her hands around his neck and pulls him down to kiss his lips. She’d love to be fucked rough against the wall, just like the other day in the village, but they just became boyfriend and girlfriend, it’s time to express love.

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SIKELELA

Well, he just got a warning. He couldn’t reach an agreement with

the management of his company, they wanted him at work today and he was adamant he wasn't going to show up because his son is coming home. They had their valid reasons too, but he couldn't imagine Vumo and Langa coming home and not finding him. He has to make sure they're comfortable and settled before going back to work. Unfortunately tomorrow he has to report to work for his night shift before he gets fired.

He's swept twice after his mother cleaned the house in the morning. He knows babies are super sensitive and they get sick easily. The furniture was arranged, some moved out to accommodate the baby. Yes he still can't move around but it's better the house is child-friendly at all times.

Cebile walks in and finds him wiping the windows. She's never seen Sikelela this active, maybe fatherhood will change him for the better, he will finally wash dishes too.

She notices the bed and asks, "Why there's only one pillow on the bed? Where are you going to sleep?"

"I will sleep in the kitchen," he says.

This child knows how to spoil her mood!

"And leave MaNtuli alone with the baby? I thought you're home to help her with Langa," she asks.

"I will help her but we can't share the bed yet. I mean, what if...?"
He stops, this is his mother, not Hubo.

“What if you do what? She’s not a stranger to you and I believe you can control yourself, just like you did before Langa and Nkanyezi,” Cebile says.

“What if we are no longer comfortable the way we were before?”

“How so? You two have babies together now.”

His mother can never understand, he sighs and continues wiping the windows.

Cebile leaves and fetches the second pillow, Vumo can’t sleep alone with the baby and take care of him alone all night. Isn’t that what she’s been doing at the hospital? Sikelela needs to step up, babies are more troublesome at night, she knows this from experience.

She comes back and places the pillow on bed.

“Ma please respect my decisions,” Sikelela says, he’s stopped wiping the windows. As much as he understands his mother’s perspective, he still doesn’t think he made a bad decision.

“Why is MaNtuli coming here if she’s still going to take care of Langa by herself throughout the night?” – Cebile.

“I will take Langa to sleep with me to the kitchen,” he says.

“A little baby has to sleep in the kitchen all because you can’t put your differences aside Sikelela?” Cebile shakes her head in disappointment.

He throws away the dirty cloth and sits on the bed.

“My case is different from yours Ma. There are feelings involved, a

history of infidelity and broken promises, ex-boyfriend and other sexual partners involved from both sides. We've come too far but that doesn't mean we are there yet, there's still a long road ahead of us. If it was possible I was going to ask you to sleep with Langa tonight so that his mother and I can talk. There's a lot for us to talk about, grudges to get rid of and a new journey to pave."

Cebile takes a deep breath and sits next to him. She didn't look at it that way. "I'm sorry I didn't mean to meddle in your business, I'm just a concerned grandmother. And yes, I will sleep with Langa if you want me to."

"I'd appreciate that. Please allow me to be, I'm scared because I don't know what my future looks like. I don't know if Vumo and I will end tonight, for good," he sighs heavily.

She tries not to let that statement hurt her as much as it possible can. "Is that possible?"

Sikelela nods, dragging in a deep breath.

"I don't want her to be unhappy. At first I wanted her and I to be together for Langa's sake at whatever cost. But then I thought of you, would I really want you to be with my father if he was still alive knowing very well how miserable you'd be with him? I don't think so, you're with Vusi and you're happy, so am I. I want the same for her, to be happy wherever she wants to be happy at, and I don't want to change who I am or how I am for anyone. Together is not always a happy place, if Vumo and I are both happy we will be able to raise a baby with love in peace."

"So you're going to break up tonight?" CeBILE asks.

“We are going to talk and see if we are really what we want. But one thing I’m sure of is that I can never hate her. Angry, disappointed and hurt by her, yes that I will be. But hate her, I don’t think that’s possible. She means a lot to me, more than words can describe.”

Cebile smiles, “That’s my boy! You have a big heart and I love you so much.”

“Urgh, come on Ma!”

“What? I do love you and now I’m not leaving this room until you tell me you love me too.”

Well, she needs to get out.

“I love you too,” he says, barely above whisper.

“Louder Sikelela, I’m sure you raised your voice with that agemate of mine you hooked up with in Durban.”

He will never hear the end of this, that’s for sure.

“I love you too Macebi,” he says, imitating Vusi.

SIKELELA

CHAPTER 58

It feels like he's been waiting for this moment forever. He stands in front of the car door, Cebile has taken Langa and wrapped him in a blanket, he's temporary her whole world right now. Vumo climbs out of the car, she can stand straight and walks properly now, she's completely healed and looks better than the last time he saw her.

He smiles, "Hi."

"Hey, you all came out?"

Sikelela glances at his mother who's having a long conversation with Langa.

"We've been waiting the whole day," he says and steps forward, holding out his arms and enveloping her in a warm hug.

"I'll get the bags," he picks her two heavy bags, asking what she brought from Cape Town that's so heavy.

They bid goodbye to the driver of the Toyota Condor that brought her and they walk inside the yard leaving Cebile and Langa behind.

"It feels like I haven't been in this place in years," she remarks, looking around and trying to breathe in as much air as she possibly can.

Sikelela walks silently next to her, he's happy that she's here but his unknown fate still nibbles at the back of his head.

“I don’t know where I would’ve gone if you didn’t take me and Langa in. Qambi has taken Ma to her shack and she can only take so much.”

“You can never be homeless while Ma and I are still alive,” he says.

“I appreciate that, especially for my son, every child needs a stable home,” she says.

Sikelela drops her bags on the bed and sighs, looking around to see if everything is still okay.

Vumo chuckles, “Who cleaned?”

“I did,” he says.

“I feel properly welcomed. Is Ma going to give me any attention today?”

He laughs, “Probably not, I haven’t held my son either, he’s suddenly her second born.”

“I love Langa but I think I’m going to enjoy this. Let me pack the bags.” She opens the bigger one and takes the clothes out to the bed.

Sikelela holds her arm, stopping her from unpacking more clothes.

“Relax, I will do this, you need to take a bath, eat, watch some TV and rest. It’s been a long journey, isn’t?”

She nods, smiling. “Yeah, let me greet Ma first, maybe she will notice me this time.”

“I doubt but try,” he chuckles and unpacks the bags.

Vumo walks out and heads to the kitchen where Cebile is loudly praising Langa's handsomeness.

He sinks on the bed as soon as she disappears and exhales heavily. He's holding her T-shirt in his hand, it's not washed, it still smells the way he remembers her. He's triggered by their good and bad times. He hasn't even appropriately gushed over his only surviving son because of this heaviness in his heart.

His phone rings...

It's Mela, his heart skips a few beats, maybe Sthembiso's concerns were valid. He's complicating his life, even though him and Vumo are still just Langa's parents it won't look good if he keeps answering another woman's calls.

"Hey Melamina," he answers, hoping their conversation will be brief as possible.

"Sikelela, are you good?"

"Yeah I'm good, just a bit occupied at the moment."

"I thought you are off today."

"Yes I am. I'm just taking care of a few things..."

"Wait Sikelela, is she home?" Mela asks remembering that his babymama was coming home this week.

"Yeah, she just arrived," he says softly, almost inaudible.

“I’m sorry, I will call you some other time, let me know when you’re free,” she says.

“It’s okay, we can talk about whatever you wanted us to...”

She cuts him short, “No, I really don’t want you to feel uncomfortable. I know how you are.”

“Thank you,” he says with relief.

After Mela’s call he continues packing Vumo’s clothes into the wardrobe and throwing some into the washing basket.

Vumo is sitting on the kitchen stool with a glass of water in front of her. Cebile laid a grass-mat on the floor with Langa on her lap. She wants to know how Vumo feels, trying not to impose her thoughts on her even though the urge to is burning.

“Do you think you cannot be happy with him?” she asks lifting her eyes from Langa to look at Vumo.

“I think I can be happy,” she says, popping her fingers nervously.

“But you still don’t think you two can be together. What is it? Is it because of the past or you’re just not ready for a long life commitment?”

She swallows, “I don’t know Ma.”

“Do you love him?” Cebile asks and releases a shallow sigh. It feels like she’s now interrogating her.

“I do, I love him. But I feel like there’s no need for me to be that

good girl who gets a good man, marry young and be a perfect example of a wife. I mean, who am I impressing because my dad no longer wants me? Who am I making proud when my own mother is now homeless?"

Cebile nods, she doesn't fully understand but she gets where she might be coming from.

"So what do you want to do now?" she asks.

"I want to heal emotionally and be a good person for my family. I want to find a job and restore my mother's decency. And mostly I want to be a good mother to my son and to show his father how sorry I am for the pain I've put him through."

"Do you think you two will ever get back together?" Cebile.

"There was never a point in my life when I didn't want to be with him," she says.

Cebile cracks a feebly smile, she loves Vumo for all the great things she did for Sikelela's emotional journey. It was harder before her, he was an empty soul but when Vumo came into his life Cebile saw a light in him. She saw another side of her son; it resembled that of Mkhonto except that he was way too loving, caring and honest. Vumo made him smile a lot, like other children. She gave warmth to the cold-heart and taught him patience. She fixed where Cebile had failed to fix.

"He's scared, he asked me to sleep with Langa today so that you two can talk. I wish you nothing but the best of luck. I will support you both no matter what happens. You're my grandson's mother,

whenever you need a home my doors will be open for you.”

A drop of tear runs down her cheeks. She inhales sharply and wipes it. She can't keep crying everyday.

“Thank you Ma,” she says.

Cebile looks at her with sympathy. “I hope your father will allow you home after we've paid for the damages, you deserve to see your son's grave.”

Another warm tear! “I hope so too, otherwise I'd have to sneak in to visit his grave. I don't want him to think I abandoned him. I'm still mourning at heart even though I'm not wearing black clothes.”

“I'm sorry MaNtuli, it will get better with time,” – Cebile.

She nods, wiping her tears with the back of her hand.

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Langa has been sent to grandma's bedroom, Vumo is waiting restlessly for Sikelela to come. It looks like he'll be sleeping in the same bed, there are two pillows, which scares her to death because the last time they shared a bed things went south. Now a lot has happened, she's been with Mthoko and Sikelela was with that old woman whose name she won't even bother remembering and she knows very well that they engaged in a lot of sexual activities. That's on her; the initial agreement was to abstain until she was released from her position as the ambassadress. So, when Sikelela found out she had broken the promise he chose to

give his body to someone else, she cannot be mad about that but it changes who they are now from what they were in the past.

She's wearing her cotton pyjamas and a scarf over her sleeping hair-knots.

There's a soft knock. Normally he wouldn't knock because, this is his bedroom, but things are different now.

She sits on the bed, fixes her pyjama top and tells him to come right in. He's fully dressed; a black jacket, jeans and sneakers. It feels like old days, when he'd come from Durban to see her at her home and leave by the break of dawn the next day.

"Why are you dressed like you're going somewhere?" she asks, shaking off the uneasiness she's been engulfed in.

"It's cold," he says with a chuckle.

"And the cap?" she asks.

"I don't have hair, my head is cold, I can't wrap a scarf like you," he says.

He stands next to the bed, scratching his forehead under the cap and looking just as uneasily.

"Did you eat?" he asks.

"Without a choice, I have to pump milk for your son," she says.

There's an appreciating smile teasing his lips. He asks if he can sit and Vumo agrees.

They sit in awkward silence for quite a while. Just stealing

glances at each other and keeping their breaths steady.

“It’s awkward that we planned, this is not happening naturally,” Vumo says, breaking the awkward silence.

He chuckles, “It is. It even feels like I’m sitting next to a stranger, yet there’s so much I feel inside, I just don’t know how to put it.”

Well, now they are here, he’s no longer angry or disgusted by her, maybe they can talk regardless of the awkwardness of it all.

“Maybe we can start on the day things ended,” she says and sums in a huge breath.

He’s not saying anything for the next two minutes, he knew this day was coming and he prepared for it but now words just keep jumbling up.

Then sighs faintly and looks at her. Their eyes lock, he doesn’t look away. “At times I feel like none of this would’ve happened if you just picked up your phone and called me. I would’ve been there, first taxi or last taxi home. But then again maybe that needed to happen for us to be able to have a conversation like this.”

He adjusts and sits directly facing her. “You hurt me more than anyone in this world. For weeks I laid awake in the deep hours of night asking myself how could you look at me in the eyes and lie for such a long time. Did you feel sorry for me or you just felt nothing?”

She exhales heavily, “I felt sorry for myself because I ruined one of the most beautiful things I had in my life. You. But I didn’t want to

lose you, I was scared all the times, and when I found out about you being a Hlongwane I knew it was almost over, you'd dump me and never look at my way. But I want to know Sikelela...."

He's looking at her attentively.

She asks, "Why you didn't tell me about your father? All along I thought you didn't know who your father was. You made it seem that way."

"I was still trying to deal with that part of my life," he says shifting his eyes away.

"We were together for years not months, and not even once you were comfortable sharing that with me?"

"That was...I'm sorry," he says.

"You don't have to be sorry. But don't you think it doesn't make sense for you to include me in your dreams of being a better man than your father but not tell me about him, at all?"

He frowns slightly, in objection. "I wasn't blindsiding you and there wasn't anything malicious about me wanting to be a better man than my father."

"So you wanted to marry me because you wanted to marry me or because your father didn't marry your mother?"

"I wanted to marry you because I loved you. If the goal was to get married come rain and sunshine I would've been married by now, don't you think?"

She drags in a deep breath and nods. "I hear you."

“Can I ask you a question?” he asks.

She gives him a go-ahead look and he asks,

“Do you still love me Vumokuhle?”

“I do,” she nods, keeping her eyes locked in his.

“Do you see any future between us?” he asks.

She doesn't answer, her eyes drop for a second before she inhales sharply and looks at him again. “If the future links me into something that has anything to do with proving parents wrong or right, making them proud or living to certain standards, then I'd rather love you from a distance and allow you to be with someone else.”

Tears prick his eyes. “Is letting go of me that easy?”

“No Sikelela, I'd rather be sad because I allowed you to be happy than to be happy that I held you back from achieving your dreams and living the life you envisioned,” she says.

He's staring at her, his eyes glistening with tears. “I didn't do anything for my father. Inspired some of my decisions, yes his actions did. But everything I did was for you Vumo. I put all my efforts into doing everything right for you, by you and your parents. You didn't tell me it was wrong of me to prove myself to your father when he wanted nothing to do with me. You watched me and helped me prove my intentions of you to him. But now you cannot be with me for the things that I did mostly for you, things that both of us felt were okay.”

She rubs her forehead, "Sikelela you're not getting my point!"

"Then tell me what I've done wrong? How is me wanting to marry you and have a family with you so bad?"

"Because I don't want to be married now. I don't care about marriage and bringing families into one and having my father accepting lobola and..."

"I do care. Does it not count that I do?" he asks.

She sighs and lies on her back, staring up with worry lines creased on her forehead.

"I'm sorry," he swallows hard and covers his face with his hands for a minute, controlling his breaths and fighting back tears. "It's fine, let's end it and focus on Langa."

"Okay," she nods and looks away.

Sikelela stands and puts his cap back on. Vumo's eyes turn, she looks at him with tears flowing down.

"You think I don't love you? Look into my eyes, you'll see how broken I am. I want to grow, I've learnt from my mistakes and part of learning is not repeating them again. I don't want to hurt you."

He crackles, shaking his head. "Yes you love me so much Vumo that you cheated on me and then walked away from me because my dreams no longer aligned with yours. And apparently when Vumo's heart changes everyone should just bow," he says heading towards the door.

"I want you to be happy Sikelela, why can't you understand that?"

She's crying.

He pauses and looks back, "Maybe because I wanted to be happy with you."

"Without making any compromises?" she asks.

"Oh, compromise by acting more like Hubo? I'm uptight and boring and not interested in the Big Five and any adventure that people like, that's how the fuck I am."

"Sikelela if you had anything you were interested in you wouldn't be so obsessed with a wedding band and being called a husband. After getting married at 28 what next? What's your next dream? Nothing, that's where your vision ends, from there you'll wait for death."

"Yes, I won't be a whore," he says.

"Oh really? Let's hope there won't be any old-age home around." She folds her arms and glares at him.

"What makes you think I'm not capable of getting a woman my age?" he asks with a conniving grin.

"Go and get her Sikelela. I don't care, I have a beautiful son to take care of," she says, pulling the duvet over her head and tucking her head under it.

He doesn't walk out, he returns to the bed and stands next to her with a heavy sigh. He peels the duvet off her and lifts her up regardless of her little protest.

She stands in front of him but looks away. She's hurt...and angry.

“I don’t want to be without you, ever again. But I can’t be the only one compromising, you have to meet me halfway. Uthando lusekhona,” he says.

She nods, tears make their way down again. He pulls her into his arms and embraces her tightly.

She releases a faint sigh and closes her eyes, resting her head on his chest. “I never stopped loving you. Let’s work on us with patience and combined efforts. If it hurts we will stop.”

His lips lower down, his finger finds her chin and lifts it up. He presses his lips on hers and slowly separates them and sucks her lower lip tenderly. It feels different and good, his hand wraps around her neck and brings her closer, deepening the kiss.

SIKELELA

CHAPTER 59

CEBILE

She walks into the kitchen and looks around. It doesn't look like anyone slept here, a smile creeps over her face as she slightly shakes her head in delight. Is this what it means to be a grandmother? She will be babysitting while the parents sleep till the sunrays enter their arses? She's not complaining though, she only needs milk from Vumo and then they can continue cuddling in peace.

She leaves Langa's milk bottles soaked in the basin of water and goes to Sikelela's rondavel that's still closed.

She knocks outside, "MaNtuli are you still alive?"

There's movement inside, she takes a step back and waits until the door opens. Vumo is still wearing her pyjamas, she looks happier than yesterday.

Cebile mouths quietly, "He slept here?"

Vumo smiles, "Yeah, he's still inside."

She wants to know more but Vumo looks a bit uncomfortable. Maybe they can go somewhere else and catch up.

"Langa needs milk, you need to come and eat something so that you can pump before the last bottle finishes."

Vumo nods, "Let me brush my teeth, I will come."

Cebile leaves with a smile on her face. It looks like her prayers were answered, nothing makes her happy than seeing them together.

Vumo pours water into the basin and washes her face and brushes her teeth before going outside to throw the water. When she comes back Sikelela has woken up, he's sitting against the bed's leg, still wrapped in the duvet he slept with on the floor.

"Please bring Langa if you go to Ma's room," he says.

She chuckles and looks at him hopelessly. "Good morning to you too Baba KaLanga."

"I'm sorry, I'm not used to waking up to a human being, I'm a bachelor. Good morning MaGodide."

That felt and sounded normal.

"So I'm MaGodide again?" She's smiling.

His gaze softens, the corner of his upper lip curves into a smile.

"You look beautiful, I have missed you."

"Really Sikelela? I thought you didn't think about me when we were apart."

"I thought about you everyday. I just learnt to live with it. But now I don't have to do it anymore, my love is back to me."

She smiles, "This time I won't disappoint you, as long as we are

honest with each other and not rushing into anything. We still need to heal. We have our whole lives together.”

“I love you,” he says, his heart wrapped in his words.

“I love you too. Thanks for everything and for kissing me last night. It was good, I felt loved after a very long time, it felt like home.”

“Because you’re home Vumo. Only we know how to love each other.” He stands to hug her, leaving the duvet bundled on the floor. He’s wearing only a trunk short and seemingly his member is awake too.

Vumo wants to kiss him but he turns his face away and chuckles. “Only you have brushed your teeth. You’re going to visit me in Durban, right?”

“Yes,” she nods.

“How long do I wait this time?” It doesn’t sound good when he puts it like that, but he didn’t mean any harm.

“Two months now,” she says with her eyes dropped.

“That’s a very long time. But I will wait because I love you, I just hope nothing comes between us this time.”

She exhales heavily, “Nothing is going to come between us now.”

He wraps his arms around her, his excited member throbbing up against his navel causing his breath to deepens.

Their eyes lock, there’s longing in his eyes, unfed hunger he’s endured for so long. He’s been deprived of her for years, it was special before and it’s still special now, because it’s her, the

woman he loves.

“I still want it to be special,” he tells her.

Vumo’s eyes prick with tears. If there was a reset button in life she would’ve started this afresh. “Why do you love me so much Sikelela? Not even my father loves me the way you do.”

“Because I see my world in your eyes,” he hugs her again.

Her heart is beating fast, she’s happy yet so scared of the unknown journey lying ahead of them.

“Let me get our son,” she says, almost whispering.

He plants a kiss on her cheek and slowly pushes her off, “Let me get dressed, before Langa sees his father with a baby arm poking from his trunk.”

She chuckles, “He’s just a month old, he doesn’t know anything.”

“Still, this is embarrassing.” He searches for his pants and puts them on. He doesn’t fit anyone’s standards of handsomeness, he’s an African man, dark to the bone with defined muscles and scars from his belligerence.

She’s caught staring and they both laugh before she changes and heads out.

Cebile sees Vumo walking in and laughs, slightly shaking her head. “I thought you said you were just brushing your teeth and coming.”

“I’m sorry Ma, is he troubling you?”

“No, not at all. My grandson is such an angel, you should let him visit grandmother’s bedroom more often.”

“What if his step-grandfather is here?” Vumo asks with a suppressed grin.

“Vusi knows I’m a grandmother. I’m going to buy him a sleeping cot and keep it in my bedroom,” she says and shrugs off the topic, starting a more interesting one.

“You look happy this morning,” she remarks.

Vumo smiles, “It went well, we are okay now.”

“You’re back together?” – Cebile.

“Yes, we are.”

Cebile’s smile spreads over her face. “I knew you two would find your way to one another. I hope there won’t be any demons standing in your way this time around.”

“This time it’s forever,” Vumo assures her and asks if she could take Langa to greet his father. Cebile is not happy with that, she tells Vumo to bring him back if he cries.

Her own mother is yet to meet Langa but she’s at ease now knowing that Langa has a family who’ll always be there for him.

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HUBO

He's driving the RAV4 one last time before it's passed to Sikelela. He's picking him up on his way to Durban since Sikelela is also going back to Effingham. Knowing that Vumo is at the Dlamukas he decides to wait for him in one of the local shops. Maybe one day he'd be able to see Langa, provided Vumo won't be around because the last thing Langa needs is their negative energy.

His phone rings...

If it's not his estranged babymama then who else?

"Yebo mthakathi," he answers. (Yes witch)

"Thanks for the name Mahubo, how are you?" Ayanda asks.

"How do you think I am?" Today is just not one of those days where he takes everyone's bullshit.

"I want us to meet," she says.

"Talk about what? Your husband hid my son from my mothers, they're still waiting for your mother's call to this day. Where are you going with this?"

"Qobo is fine. Can we meet and talk?" she asks.

He sighs and puffs his cigarette, "About what? There's nothing I'm going to talk to you about if you're not bringing my son."

"It's about him," she says.

His heart beats rapidly. "Is he okay?"

"Yeah, he's...he's fine." She doesn't sound very convincing.

“Ayanda is my son okay?” He raises his voice.

“He’s acting strange lately. I just want to know if it’s something connected to the surname before I involve professional help.”

“So you’re asking my advice. Am I now a good cut for a father?”

Ayanda exhales audibly, “Hubo please!”

“What is it?” This is not fair but at least he’s hearing about his son.

“He eats his own poop. I had to put him back to the diapers but he still takes it off and eats his dirt.”

Oh wow! He’s never heard anything like this.

“So you never call to tell me anything good about him, you only want to tell me about him eating shit? I’m a good adviser of shit?”

“Hubo come on, Ma asked me if it’s something maybe your mothers did. But I refuse to believe that anyone would stoop so low and mess with an innocent child’s mind just to prove a point.”

Just when he thought he’s heard every insult from her directed to his family!

“It must be nice to have a vagina between your legs Ayanda because I cannot kick your ass even when I see you.”

“I didn’t say they did it. I just wanted to know if there’s anything you know about this act,” she says.

“Bring my son home Ayanda. He needs his ancestors. Are you that cruel? You’re going to let him suffer because of your personal perspectives about me,” he asks.

“You know we don’t believe in such things at home,” Ayanda says.

“He can choose when he’s grown. People always say mothers would do anything to make sure their children are okay. Be that mother too, do what’s good for the boy.” He feels a lump rising in his throat and releases a deep sigh. “I will make compromises too. I will let you go, I will respect your marriage, your husband can be in his life too, I won’t be any trouble. Even in the village I’m not going to do anything crazy, I’m not going to create any more scandals. Please Ayanda, I’m begging you from the bottom of my heart.”

There’s a brief moment of silence. He’s anxiously waiting for her response, he knows he’s bad news but it doesn’t mean he can’t change and become a better person for his son.

“Where are the people you were fighting with?” Ayanda asks after a moment.

“They’re around but there hasn’t been any attack lately,” he says.

“But it doesn’t mean it’s over, does it?” she asks.

“It’s not over but I would never let anything bad happen to my son. I’d lose my life before anyone touches him.”

She sighs, “I will talk to my husband again.”

“When should I expect your call?” He’s feeling a bit hopeful. They haven’t talked in this civil manner in a long time.

“Tomorrow,” she says.

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Sikelela finally comes, he's not alone though, he's accompanied by Vumo who's carrying his bag. Hubo knew Sikelela wouldn't really let go of her. He didn't let go of Ayanda either but he's going to judge him.

He climbs out of the car, Vumo's eyes meet his and she immediately hands the bag to Sikelela. Hubo remains by the door of his car and doesn't inconvenience her by walking closer. They do their couple whispers and hug goodbye. Vumo turns back home while Sikelela walks towards Hubo with a grin on his face.

"Does Mela know?" Hubo asks.

"Yeah, she knows and she respects my decision. How are you Hubo lethu?"

Hubo clicks his tongue and gets back in the car. Sikelela loads his bag at the back and gets on the passenger seat, still grinning like a Cheshire cat.

"Did you get rid of the Mthoko guy or you're going to share with him?" – Hubo.

Sikelela unwraps his minty gum, not taking any offense. "Did you get rid of the pastor?"

"Oh, she's taught you to talk back to your adults? Tell me, how is this going to work?"

"What?" Sikelela looks at him.

"Do I become a part-time brother now because you have a woman

who doesn't like me?"

"No, I'm sure you are not that petty. If I can be okay with both you what can stop you two from making peace?"

"Peace for what? That I told you exactly what she was. I'm never going to apologize to her. She treated me like a whore anyway, she's one of those who never saw any good in me, people want you when they want you and when they're done they treat you like trash."

Sikelela blows a heavy sigh. "What did Ayanda do this time?"

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VUMO

She's a bit empty with Sikelela gone and Cebile totally focused on her grandson. Sikelela wants to pay for the damages in two weeks time and sort out the twins identity as soon as possible. With her mother restricted and denied access at the Ntuli homestead she's left with no choice but to call the man who hasn't talked to her in a very long time.

She does dishes and leaves Cebile putting Langa to sleep. She can still smell and feel Sikelela where he sat. His T-shirt is on the bed, he must've forgotten to put it in the washing basket. She takes it and puts it on over her shirt-dress and then sits.

She dials her father's number and recites a small prayer before

calling him.

“This is Ntuli, who’s there?” he asks, his impatient greeting furtherly scattering her nerves all over the place.

“Baba it’s me, Vumokuhle,” she says.

Silence...

She’s holding her breath.

“Vumokuhle what do you want?” he asks.

His voice is colder than it was when he picked up.

“Sikelela wants to come and pay for the damages,” she says.

“As he should. Who’s going to pay for inkomo kanyoko?”

They didn’t discuss that. It didn’t cross her mind but one thing she’s sure of is that she’s not going to ask Hubo to pay for that cow. Maybe if it was someone else, who’s not related to Hubo at all, and if they got along. But now it’s just impossible.

She clears her throat, “I’d like to come home before the day comes. I want to see where my son rests, I didn’t get a chance to say goodbye to him.”

“If your mother had told you to close your legs maybe you wouldn’t have angered the ancestors and had disabled babies.”

“The doctor said it had nothing to do with me. It’s not a curse or anything connected to the ancestors anger, I didn’t cause my son’s death.”

“And you listened to that doctor but when your elders told you to

take care of your body you didn't listen."

She keeps quiet, her heart is too heavy for her chest.

"Find that boy who invaded my kraal, he must bring your mother's cow otherwise I don't want you here."

"But baba my son is there. Can I come and see his grave only and then leave?"

"If you come by force carry a spade to dig him up and leave with him. I'm not going to be disrespected by you Vumokuhle, never!"

Her hand trembles, the phone slips to her shoulder and falls on the bed. How can he be so unforgiving? This is her father, a man who's supposed to embrace her with all the imperfections and guide her.

SIKELELA

CHAPTER 60

LONDEKA HLONGWANE

I'm shooting for an ad campaign this weekend, which means starving myself the whole week and drinking lot of water. I never had a food problem before I started dating Sgcino, I could eat anything I want and my body wouldn't gain a gram. But now I have to watch what I eat and work out for crazy hours because my body react to my eating patterns. I blame Sgcino for it, don't ask why. Being a model wasn't even my dream, it was all Ntuthuko's idea and now I'm the one eating veges instead of chicken wings and doughnuts.

I'm booked to a spray tan appointment and hair cut at the salon. I was trying to grow hair but Ntuthuko insists that chiskop is what defines my brand. He's right, people know me as the bald Skinture girl. I'm here to confirm the fine details and also to check up on him. He's a cousin-in-law, our relationship is deeper than just work.

As usual, I just let myself in without knocking. He's standing with his back turned and hands wrapped on somebody who's sitting on top of his desk. A male somebody, he's one of his signed models.

I gasp at the door and step backwards, slamming the door in front of me. I knew something was up but the way Sgcino brushed it off made me start believing that my feelings were wrong.

The door opens hurriedly, I'm still standing outside trying to pull myself together so that I don't raise eyebrows when I walk out of here.

"Oh my goodness, Londeka!" He looks embarrassed, so do I.

I don't even know how to look at him. He's a married man with a wife and kids back in the village.

"It's not what it looks like, I was taking measurements for next week's costumes."

Since when he's responsible for costumes? I'm tempted to roll my eyes but I was the one who intruded.

"Sorry, I should've knocked. How long until you're done taking his measurements?"

The corner of his lip curves up, "An hour will be enough. Can you do me a favor?"

I nod, as long as I'm not sent to buy condoms.

"Don't tell anyone," he says.

I guess he doesn't know me too well. Nothing ever stays in my chest, I'm asking his cousin about it as soon as I get out of here, I will tell him not to tell anyone too.

"My lips are zipped. But can I ask you a question?" He gives me a go-ahead nod. "Why did you marry a woman?"

"Because I love her," he says.

“And this guy?” I point my head at the door.

“It’s just a fling,” he shrugs.

I don’t believe him but it’s not my place, so I let it go.

I meet up with the girls at the studio, this is old-days modeling crew where everyone looks terrible skinny and tall. Ntuthuko is very strict when it comes to weight, you gain a kilo, he takes you off gigs until you’re back to what he approves of. So it’s a skeleton gathering.

There’s a girl called Ashley, she looks down today, I decide to sit next to her and find out what’s going on.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

She shakes her head.

Now I have to ask what’s wrong, I might as well just become the therapist of this agency.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

She heaves a sigh, “I’ve been replaced with Nonny, I’m no longer going to Durban Fashion Week.”

I’m surprised, I thought she was Ntuthuko’s favorite.

“What was his reason?” I ask.

“I need to see a dentist and that scheduled to be in two weeks,” she says.

“Why do you need to see a dentist?” I’m confused.

“For dental bleaching.”

I’ve never heard of that before, so everything in Africa gets bleached; skin, hair and now teeth.

“Why do you need to bleach your teeth?” I ask.

She pushes her hair back and releases a sigh. She’s not ready to give me the details, I’m probably frustrating her even more. I look at her teeth before I go, I think Colgate- Optic White can fix them, I don’t think they’ve gotten that brown.

Kelly calls my name, I turn my eyes to her at the studio entrance and notice a woman with a big bag standing next to her. She’s not one of us and she doesn’t look like an aspiring model either. She’s dressed in a long satin skirt and a white Fila crew-neck T-shirt that’s tucked in her skirt and layered with a blazer on the shoulders. She’s got a turban wrapped on her head and a pair of shoulder-duster earrings. I’m rural but I’m classy vibes!

“Is Ntuthuko in the office?” Kelly asks me.

“Yes, who’s asking?” I’m stealing glances at the woman.

“His wife,” Kelly says.

Oh shit! I should’ve put one and two together. These people have children together, I’m not sure she knows that her husband lives a double life.

“Ummm hi,” I’m stuttering. I’m so nervous, you’d swear I’m the one

cheating.

“Londeka, we finally meet.” She drops her bag on the floor and hugs me. Ok, I’m a celebrity, very well known.

“Sgcino cannot stop talking about you,” she says.

Oh, that’s what she knows me for. I smile with an eye roll. She’s actually the first family member of Sgcino to give me a warm hug, beside Ntuthuko.

“This is a surprise, nobody told me you’d be in Durban,” I say, I’m still trying to come up with a better way to deal with this. Do I let her go to Ntuthuko’s office and see her husband shagging his model or I save him this one time and let him handle this his way, at his time?

“Did they even want us to meet? I’m Sonto, MaZwide.” She’s hugging me again. What a sweet woman!

“Londeka, MaHlongwane; the daughter-in-law of MaNgcobo,” I say. She cracks up. I guess she knows the history.

“How is she? My best friend,” I ask.

“She’s well, I have a parcel for his son,” she says, still laughing.

“I hope it’s not a bomb to kill me in my sleep,” I say.

She laughs harder, “She’s just a dog with no teeth.”

“I don’t trust her eitherway. Let’s leave this bag here and go get something to drink.”

She chuckles awkwardly, “I need to see my husband first.”

“He’s busy with one of the top designers who’ll be participating in Durban Fashion Week.” I can’t believe I’m getting myself involved in Ntuthuko’s cheating scandals.

I look at Kelly, “Please tell him HIS WIFE is here, getting a drink with me.”

Kelly nods with a slight frown. I leave with MaZwide, deep down I know I’m letting her down, I’m betraying the women movement and siding with a cheating man.

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I don’t know what Sgcino did but I’m not talking to him. He’s here, cracking his head probably trying to figure out how he’s suddenly a bad person. But after his cousin walked to his sweet wife with an innocent face and kissed her lips like he wasn’t fucking another man in the office, he’s very much deserving of this anger.

“I’m coming to your photoshoot tomorrow, maybe we can pose for some couple pictures too.” He’s trying to break the ice.

I don’t respond, I’m staring at my reflection on the mirror. I look unfamiliar, I’ve been so used to my afro hair that now I just see a potato when looking at myself.

“Do you want us to go and eat out?” Honestly, his voice is adding to my ugliness.

“Keep quiet Sgcino,” I say.

“What did I do vele? I’m here visiting my girlfriend and I’m being

ignored without a reason.”

Without a reason? I’m not stupid, I wouldn’t be angry at someone for no reason.

“Your cousin sleeps with other men while he’s married,” I say.

“How is that my fault?” He frowns.

“You’re his cousin, you call him everyday, obviously you’ve known of his double life and you didn’t see anything wrong with it. You’re not even shocked, ay shame!” I clap my hands; I give up on men and this new look of mine.

“Londeka every family has secrets, why do you expect me to go around spreading mine?”

“So when you tell me something you’re spreading it?” Wow, can this day end already?

“So you’re trying to tell me we are going to fight over other people’s marriages?”

Well, it doesn’t make sense when he puts it that way. But for the sake of women solidarity I will continue being angry. I can’t just stop being angry abruptly, what about the emotions I’ve invested in this anger?

“Stull Sgcino, you’re just as bad as he is,” I say.

“Okay, so what are you going to do about it? Sit in front of the mirror and look at all angles of your face, ignoring me?”

“I’m trying to find out which angle I look beautiful from,” I say with a heavy sigh. Why did I let Ntuthuko the cheater convince me that

I need to remove my hair? Phewww.

“Let’s go out and have dinner, you look beautiful. If you can wear the same outfit you wore when we first met, I’d propose to you tonight.”

I smile feebly, hoping he won’t throw in the marriage subject again. That’s his only present goal, I’m not against it but I’m scared the next stage will be children and I just began my career.

“I’m still waiting for the date,” he says, like he was reading my thoughts.

“My family is still dealing with the chaos of my brothers,” I say.

“Then our relationship could be the joy they really need right now. Imagine how happy they’d be watching the Zulu cows crowding your father’s kraal.”

For some reasons I’m smiling. I’ve never had a day that’s all about me. Beside complaining about everything and slicing everybody with my sharp tongue, there’s nothing my mothers expect from me. I don’t think they even know there’s someone who loves me so much and sees me above all the imperfections.

“What do you want to eat?” I ask.

“Food,” he says.

“You have to specify. We are practicing being wife and husband, if I survive tonight then you can write a letter to my brother,” I say.

All his teeth are out. He’s coming to me, looking so happy, my ribs almost crush in his tight hug.

“You asked what I want to eat?” His hands grab my butt.

“Like a real husband who just got home from work,” I say.

“Well, this is the food I’d want as a husband coming from work. We can order pizza after you’ve taken care of this hunger.”

“So you’re not going to change even when we are married? You’ll still act like an obsessed boyfriend who just got into the relationship?” I ask.

“I don’t want to marry you because I want things to change between us, I simply want you and I to be legally together. I hate sneaking around, I’m 40 years old.”

I give him a look, now he wants my family to call him a grandfather. He’s close to 40 but not there yet, wtf!

“Ngishade ngingaze ngikhathale, ilanga seliyashona,” he says. (Marry me before I get too old, the sun is about to set down)

I hate that he’s not lying, our children will have a grey-haired father in school parents’ meeting.

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He kept his promise, today we are shooting for the ad campaign and he’s here to support me. A lot is happening today, I’m a body paint model for the day, I’m being turned into this West African goddess painted with African illustration elements all over my body. I’m wearing only a piece of cloth that’s covering my private part and butt, and nude nipple covers.

We are starting with an indoor photoshoot. Sgcino walks in as they set up the cameras.

He stands next to Ntuthuko, doesn't acknowledge him or say anything. I only realize now that he doesn't look happy.

"You want to join?" Ntuthuko asks him, he's busy with the wallpaper behind me.

"She's naked," he says.

Yawn! So this is what the long face is for? I thought he understood how this thing works, he got me into it.

"She's not, I've had nude models photoshoot, trust me it looks nothing like this."

"But would you do this to MaZwide?" Sgcino asks.

I hope he doesn't end up ruining things for me. This is one of my most paid projects.

"MaZwide is not a model," Ntuthuko says.

They hold a stare battle for a minute, then he turns to me and looks at me from head to toe.

"You didn't tell me this is how you'd look," he says.

"I didn't see the need to. It's not like I'm walking in public naked, we are shooting for an ad campaign and I'm covered in paint."

"Londeka this is not America, couldn't you wear a costume that covers your breasts?"

"Can we talk about this at home? You're making me look

unprofessional, I thought you were here to support me.”

He huffs, “We will definitely talk about it, that’s for sure.”

I need a drink but I know Ntuthuko would come for my soul if I dare request it and put the paints on my face at risk. He’s hard to work for, that’s why most of his models are depressed, but his is one of the best agencies in Durban and if you’re under him you’re guaranteed to have high rates and get the best gigs.

I’m only allowed a sip of water after we’ve completed the indoor photoshoot, now we are going outside for more. Ntuthuko is the one giving me water with a straw, there’s a girl with an Ogi fan next to me making sure I don’t drop a sweat. I’m feeling like Queen Elizabeth for a moment, until my stomach growls, reminding me that I only had a fruit salad in the morning.

“Ntuthuko, I’m hungry,” I know he’s going to lose his mind.

His eyes widen at me. “Come on, you know the rules, you can’t eat in the middle of the photoshoot.”

“How long until we are done?” I ask, now this is the real Londeka.

“Maybe 30 minutes,” he says.

I can wait for thirty minutes but I will be less patient with the crew.

Lusanda comes to us and asks that we wait a few minutes inside, they’re solving some commotion outside. I’ve already started counting the thirty minutes I was promised, I don’t care what

they're dealing with. Well, until I hear my name being called and Sgcino walking in with a fearful look on his face.

"She needs to cover up, now!" He's telling Ntuthuko.

"Bafo, you're not here to tell me how to do my job. This project involves the biggest brand in Africa," Ntuthuko snaps.

Before I can ask what's going on I see MaJiyane entering with a slight frown on her face. She's looking around, at the unfamiliar equipments and wallpapers on the wall.

There's no time to process how she got here and why exactly is she at my photoshoot, our eyes meet and I hear a scream.

"We Shwele Nkosi yami, what have they done to Londeka? MaXulu, MaDlamini!"

They're all here? Out of all days they had to be here when I'm a paint model and almost naked on the shoot.

MaXulu and MaDlamini enter. I don't know what's happening today, what are they celebrating, they only wear matching seshoeshoe dresses during special family functions. Their faces are white with Ponds, you can see they came here ready to slay, with matching black scarfs and imhezo across their chests.

MaXulu just freezes, today I don't think she's overreacting, she's really shocked.

MaDlamini is looking at the people I'm with in the room. Guess what, it's a male-dominated crew.

"Londeka this is what you left Mashoba for? To parade your body

for the cameras? And what kind of Satanism is this?”- MaDlamini.
Everyone has realized what’s going on. I don’t know who’s going to answer, me or Ntuthuko.

He answers, “Sanibona boMa, we are only doing a photoshoot for an ad campaign. This is the crew we work with, everything is professional.”

Maybe he shouldn’t have answered because now he’s being referred to as the boy with a burning head (ginger hair) and he’s being accused of working for Satan and recruiting young girls into it. I expected Sgcino to understand but I don’t expect my mothers to do so. This is not the kind of a career their generation could grasp easily, especially when one has to get almost naked to promote a brand.

“Can I talk to them?” I ask Ntuthuko, Sgcino is standing behind a poster hiding.

I walk towards them, forgetting the black paint on my face and that I’m suddenly bald and they last saw me with a growing afro. They’re scared of me, I think they really believe this Satan thing, they’re stepping back as I approach.

“Londeka don’t you dare come to me looking like that!”- MaXulu.

I stop and sigh. I don’t need all this drama, not until I’m done with all the shoots for the day.

“Ma, please, I’m working here,” I beg.

“You can work with your brothers at the hardware or even better

just stay at home, Sthembiso can provide for you until you get married. This is an embarrassment, your father must be turning in his grave.”

There’s a sudden smell of steamed bread, I know because I’m hungry and when I’m hungry I get a sharp sense of smell. Thobani enters with Tupperware containers. So he’s the one who brought them here? I’m going to kill this child.

Ntuthuko yells from the back, when it comes to eating patterns he never compromise. “What is that? Food is not allowed during the shoot Londeka, you know that.”

MaJiyane folds her arms, giving him a look of contempt. “What is this? Sodom or Gomora? Now she can’t even eat her lunch? Do you know how long we have traveled to come and support her?”

So they came to support me? Oh gosh, why didn’t Thobani inform me? I feel like a bad child now.

“And I took my time preparing this steam bread. Sisi took one of her chickens and roasted it because we know she doesn’t eat solid food when she’s not home,” MaDlamini says.

I know Ntuthuko would die before he allows me to eat ujeqe and roasted chicken before I’m done with the photoshoot.

“Look how skinny she is!”

“Hawu Ma!” I can’t believe this is happening. What if Skinture representatives were here?

“Kawu Ka ini? You want to continue with this nonsense,

embarrassing your father?" MaXulu asks.

I nod, there's noway I'm going to quit this ad campaign and lose the money.

"At least eat. What kind of work is this? There's no lunch break?" she shoots a look at Ntuthuko.

"Khipha ithawula esule ubuso edle," MaDlamini suggests. (Take out the towel, she must wipe her face and eat)

They took almost twenty minutes doing this face and MaDlamini just wants everything to be wiped with a towel. I'm getting a hearing meeting from this.

"I will eat when I'm done. Thanks for coming, I appreciate it." My eyes meet Ntuthuko's as I promise to eat steam bread and roasted chicken and I know he's about to sign me up for crazy work-outs the whole week.

But I'd take that over angering these women furthermore.

SeKELELA

CHAPTER 61

SIKELELA

He's coming from work tired, all he wants is a plate of food, cold bath and his bed. But it won't happen in that order, he has to cook first, that's the life of a bachelor. He soaks his work uniform and puts one cup of rice on the stove while peeling potatoes.

His phone rings, he reads the caller's name and smiles. Now he can forget about everything and talk to one person who matters the most.

"MaGodide," he answers.

Sobs...

His heart sinks to his feet. He's used to her crying most of the times, ever since Nkanyezi died she's been like this.

"Hey what's wrong?" he asks.

She's disturbed by hiccups as she starts narrating how Ntuli blamed her for Nkanyezi's death and denied her access to his grave.

It's very disappointed how Ntuli has chosen to fight his battles with his wife through his kids. Sikelela knows the kind of man he is, he had to do a lot to please him before he was accepted as Vumo's boyfriend.

“He’s not going to let me see him until inkomo kamama is paid,” she says between the sobs.

“He’s not your mother, how is it his right to demand such?” He cannot believe this. At first it seemed like Ntuli was on his side, sympathizing with a man who got cheated on and betrayed, but now he realizes that his situation was just a ladder for Ntuli to climb on and finally find an excuse to kick out Vumo’s mother and mistreat them until they disown themselves.

“I don’t know, I just want my son to see me, he must be thinking I abandoned him.”

“I wasn’t planning on excluding inkomo kamama, I’m the first man you bore a child for, I can thank your mother for that.”

“Thank you but that’s not what he wants. He knows you were not my first, he wants to embarrass me and prove to the community that my mother failed to raise decent children.”

Now he doesn’t know what to say to calm her down. “What do you prefer I do then?”

“You can’t do anything Sikelela. I cannot send you to request the cow from your brother and I cannot go to him either. It’s okay, maybe I will learn to live with it.”

“Come on, even if it’s not Hubo that I talk to, the Hlongwanes will come up with a solution. I will make sure nobody embarrasses you, you’re the mother of my children. What happened was between me and you and we’ve talked about it, I don’t see why there are people at the sides who feel like they were entitled to

what happen to your virginity.” She starts crying all over again when she hears him defending her like that. His heart breaks because he’s far from him and unable to comfort her.

“Where’s Langa?” he asks with concern. The baby could easily sense her emotions and get sick.

“Ma took him,” she says.

“Please MaGodide don’t sit alone, have some company with you. I don’t want to lose you, there’s so much we still need to share in this life. And I’m going to stand with you every step of the way, no matter how hard it gets. I just need you to trust.”

She sniffs back tears, “Okay, I trust you.”

“I will see if I can swap my shift with someone tomorrow and go to Mashoba during the day to discuss this. If I do come I will pass by and see you. What must I bring for you?” He’s trying his best to cheer her up.

“I don’t know, bring anything you like,” she says with no ecstasy.

“I’m cooking and washing the work uniform, can I call you a bit later?”

“Yeah,” she says with a heavy sigh.

After she’s ended the call he calls his mother begging her to comfort Vumo and assure her that everything is going to be fine.

Well, now he’s stressed and he’s not even sure he’ll be able to eat this food he’s cooking. Maybe it would be better if she just comes to Effingham and lives with him until she’s emotionally okay.

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STHEMBISO

Bumping into Busizwe is nothing out of ordinary now. He's at Spar with a woman who's pushing a trolley with baby necessities. It looks like they're expecting a new person, she looks pregnant.

Sthembiso greets as he walks across them. The woman greets back and keeps walking, Busizwe stops.

"New person?" Sthembiso asks.

He smiles, "Yeah, but we are just getting prepared, she's still two months away."

"Congratulations are in order then," Sthembiso says, genuinely happy for him. He's always wanted kids but the universe had other plans for him. It's still at the back of his head but he's not allowing it to bother him.

"It's good that I bumped into you. I don't know if MaMshengu has talked to the parrot yet but she's having umemulo and the parrot is one of the friends she'd like to stand with."

"My sister is not a parrot, you're too old to be calling people names and you're about to become a father. They say people give birth to what they criticize the most." He's not really offended, Londeka has had a lot to say about Busizwe as well, but he's just not going to let Busizwe do it in front of him.

Busizwe chuckles, "I know how to use a belt, no child of mine would be a parrot. Anyway, I want to extend our invitation for MaMshengu's memulo."

He's dropping a bomb, Sthembiso plainly looks at him for a minute trying to figure out what his intentions are. Meeting in town and exchanging greetings is different from attending each other's family ceremonies.

"MaMshengu would be happy to see you there, I'm sure the parrot would feel safer if her brothers are present too," Busizwe says, he doesn't want it to sound like he's begging even though he is.

"I don't know Busizwe, a lot happened, you and I may have come to certain grounds in terms of being civil to one another, but our families still hate each other. Your brothers, my brothers, people were hurt."

Busizwe exhales heavily, "I know, but if we can be in one place for once, keep your brothers on a tight leash and I'll do the same, maybe there will be some progress. Unless if you know you won't be able to guide and control your brothers as the eldest in the family."

"I can keep my brothers in check, musukudakwa. I just don't want any more blood to be spilled because of my family."

"Then it's your responsibility to ensure it doesn't. I will hold my end of the deal, and besides, I wouldn't ruin my sister's big day. I will see you on the 13th of December," Busizwe says, hurrying off to his fiancé.

It's easy to promise Busizwe that he can keep his brothers on a tight leash but the reality is, even his father couldn't control Hubo. If anyone, from either side, pops off, it will mean another round of a war.

Anyway, he needs to call Mela and congratulate her, having your family doing umemulo for you shows pride and appreciation. Nobody deserves that more than Melamina, it's traditionally done for virgins but affording parents do it without any set of conditions.

Her phone is ringing, he rests back on the car seat and opens the can of Redbull.

She answers, "What did I do to deserve a call from His Highness?"

He chuckles, they haven't been talking, he's been busy with his things and so has she.

"Hi Melamina, how are you?" he asks.

"I can say I'm good," she says with a sigh.

"That's not the spirit of a girl who's about to have umemulo done for her. What's up?"

"No, never mind, I'm just being petty," she says.

"Come on, you can talk to me about anything, your secrets are safe with me." Well, her last secret ended with him teaming up with Busizwe against the uncle who raped her, but she knows it

came from a good place.

“It’s actually none of my business. But it’s Sikelela, I know him and I are just friends but he was ready to move on and let go of his high school sweetheart, I mean babymama.”

Sthembiso sighs, he knew it wouldn’t end well. This is what he didn’t want but Sikelela stubbornly said he loves both of them, now one is hurt.

“He said he was going to let her go and not compromise any of his dreams to fit in her world. But now all of a sudden he’s okay with it, his goal is no longer getting married and having a family, all he wants is keeping his high school sweetheart happy.”

“They were together for a very long time and now they have children together. I’m sure it’s not easy to just let go.”

“Come on Sthembiso, him and I had a deep talk and he was emotionally prepared to let go and then the sudden change of heart? I don’t understand.”

“Have you talked to him about it?” he asks.

“Obviously I’m a supportive friend, I don’t want him to feel like I’m standing on his way whereas I didn’t even accept his love proposal when he pursued me.”

“But if you don’t want him why are you so worried? Do you want to be in a relationship with him and do your goals align with his?”

“No,” she says.

“Then I suggest you let him be. I know how hard it is to live with

the 'maybes' and 'ifs'. God has given him a chance to give their love another shot. No matter what happens next his heart will be at ease because he'll know he gave it his best shot and tried his best to make her happy. Maybe that's what he needs, ukudelisa inhliziyo."

She heaves a loud sigh, "Do I sound selfish?"

Well...

"You don't really want a relationship with him but you don't want him to be in a relationship with someone else. Ummm, it sounds a bit invidious, but it doesn't mean you're a bad person."

"It means I'm a good person?" She's clearly getting offended, not by him, but by the truth in his words.

"You're a good person Mela, you just need to be honest with yourself. Clearly you want something he's not willing to offer, just as he wants something you're not willing to offer; commitment. This makes his situation with you similar to that of him and Langa's mother. And you know what they say; the devil you know is better than the devil you don't know. He's sticking to the person he knows the best."

"I'm not a devil!" Londeka has rubbed it off to her, the drama

"I didn't mean it literally. Anyway I'd advise you to talk to him, he's your friend, isn't? Sort it out because we just got an invitation to attend your ceremony," he says.

"You're coming?" she asks excitedly.

“I will take the leap of faith and come, mostly for you,” he says.

“Thank you so much!”

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Sikelela coming home is unexpectedly. Thobani tells him as he offloads the bags from the boot. Apparently he’s here to talk about something.

He didn’t mention anything when they last talked two days ago.

It’s lunch time, he was just popping in to leave some building material for his house, he’s rebuilding it.

Hubo is with Sikelela in his rondavel, they’re almost the same age so it’s not surprising that they just became inseparable.

He’s going to eat first, he only had a light lunch, he’s starving.

MaXulu is coming out of the house with a basket of laundry.

“You didn’t tell me you’d come home for lunch,” she says looking at Sthembiso.

“I’m here to drop some stuff. Is there any food here?”

“Yes, dish for yourself and Thobani, others have already eaten. Please don’t finish the stew.” She doesn’t trust him when it comes to her food, in fact every boy child is dangerous in that part of the kitchen in this family.

Sthembiso dishes three pieces of meat for himself and two for Thobani, leaving only a few in the pot with no gravy.

They sit on the table with mountains of rice and two litre of Sparletta in front of them. Thobani finishes first, he seems to be in a hurry as usual.

“Going somewhere?” Sthembiso asks.

“I’m just meeting up with the guys,” he says.

“Maybe you can postpone or cancel, I need to talk to all of you about something.”

Thobani brushes the side of his face, “Is it important bhuti?”

“Yes, Thobani. You can’t keep skipping important family discussions and outings to hang out with your friends. You’re not a child anymore, you have to get more involved.”

He nods, “Okay, I will send them a message and tell them I’m not coming.”

“Good.” Sthembiso continues with his food, he needs another piece of meat to eat with the remaining rice.

He catches Thobani staring into space and frowns. “Are you okay ndoda?”

Thobani snaps out and nods vigorously.

“No, out with it, zithini?” – Sthembiso.

He exhales heavily, “I’m sure you know I’ve been trying to track down the Gumbi family.”

“Oh yes, I know that. Has Ma found anything?” Sthembiso asks.

“I don’t think she cares as much as I do. I know the family I belong

to and I will never turn my back to any of you because I'm one of you. But blood is blood, I need to at least know the people I share blood with. Sadly Ma doesn't see it that way."

"I think she's just scared of losing you, you know how mothers are. Did Hubo follow up on the guy who stabbed Sikelela?"

"Until Ma asks him to, he won't dig because he's afraid of going against her wishes."

"Would you like me to speak to MaXulu? I think they understand each other better than they understand other people. So if I can make MaXulu understand it will be easy for her to talk through others."

"I'd appreciate that bhuti."

Sthembiso pats his back and asks him to clear up the table while he goes to the bathroom.

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Hubo is in one of his best moods today. Ayanda and him finally came to common grounds regarding the situation of their son. Soon he will be fetching him to come and visit for the first time, Ayanda still needs to solve her marital issues. But other than that everything is good, it took Qobo eating his own shit for Ayanda to realize that he deserves to know his real father.

Sthembiso and Thobani enter. Hubo pushes the chair to Sthembiso and sits on the bed. Thobani joins him.

“You didn’t tell me you’re coming,” Sthembiso says looking at Sikelela.

“I only decided last night that I need to come here,” Sikelela says.

“Well, it’s great that you’re here because there’s an invitation for all of us.” They’re staring at him, he knows chances of them declining Busizwe’s invitation are very high. “There’s umemulo at the Mshengus on the 13th of December.”

Hubo sits up straight, “I promised Ayanda that I will not do anything that could put Qobo in danger. Attacking the Mshengus sounds fun but my relationship with Qobo would be at stake. Ayanda wouldn’t think twice before...”

“Maybe just let me finish Hlongwane. We are actually invited to attend the ceremony, Londeka will be there too,” Sthembiso says.

Sikelela chuckles, “Invited by who? And what made that person think we’d be delighted to attend?”

“They’re tired of fighting, just like we are. It’s time we try to put things behind us and move on,” Sthembiso says.

Thobani is shaking his head. “What makes you trust them bhuti?”

“Busizwe and I are not friends but we are good now. We’ve talked a couple of times, he’s not the devil I thought he was.”

Hubo laughs, “I can’t believe I’m hearing this. So you’re friends with your father’s killers now Sguqa?”

“It’s not like they didn’t lose their father, as well as their brother and cousin,” Sthembiso says defensively.

“It doesn’t mean they didn’t kill Hlongwane. I don’t see the need to attend their ceremonies, imagine eating their meat and drinking from their cups!”- Hubo.

“Please count me out. It’s not about the fights or anything, I just don’t want to associate myself with them,” Sikelela says.

“Me too, I can’t take risks with my life bhuti,” – Thobani.

Sthembiso heaves a sigh. “I will go because my sister is going to be there too. I don’t know how she’ll feel about you guys letting her go there alone.”

“Londeka is not forced to go there either. In fact she needs to turn down their invitation,” Hubo says.

“Well, it’s Mela’s ceremony, she deserves to have her FRIENDS there.” Sthembiso looks at Sikelela significantly. They still need to talk about his friendship with Mela, but some other day, not now.

He won’t corner them to agree to attend umemulo today but it’s important that they give it a try. Personally, he no longer have space for beefs and civil wars.

“Well, I’m not visiting, I’m here to see both of you,” Sikelela says looking at him and Hubo. “Ntuli has a request,” he continues.

“About?” Sthembiso asks with a slight frown.

Sikelela looks at Hubo, this is a very awkward situation. “He wants inkomo kamama- payment for Vumo’s virginity.”

“You’re kidding, right?” – Hubo.

“Unfortunately I’m not, he’s threatening not to let her see

Nkanyezi's grave if the cow is not paid. I wouldn't have had a problem paying but he knows the truth and he wants to punish Vumo."

"That's bullshit. Who pays for men's virginites? Do you know how many virginites I've lost? Have I sent anyone to ask for cows emzini yabantu?"

"You're a man and you definitely lost your virginity once," Sthembiso dismisses him.

"Did I hold anyone accountable and ask for a cow for something both her and I agreed to?" No, he's not playing, he's dead serious.

"It's culture Hubo. Or you want to send us to the family of the girl who took your virginity and ask them to pay for inkomo kababa? We can do that as well, we don't mind," – Sthembiso.

"That's not the point Sguqa, I'm trying to understand why I must pay a cow for having sex with someone who agreed to it," he glances at Sikelela and mumbles an apology. "Seriously, she's not the only virgin I've slept with, this means I will lose all my inheritance going around on some 'paying for the virginity' stupid tour around Mashoba and neighboring villages."

"Mahubo it's nobody's fault that you chose to be a whore. And you have to remember who you're talking about, Langa's mother. She's not some random girl we don't care about, protecting her means looking out for Langa," Sthembiso says.

"So you want me to follow behind Sikelela with my own cow like a clown? Who even said Vumo's mother wants a live cow? Is she

not the one who's supposed to demand this fine?"

Sikelela shrugs, "She's not around, I don't think she will be present on the day."

"Then who's going to receive the cow? The second wife?" Sthembiso asks with a frown.

"I don't know, I just want this to be done without embarrassing Langa's mother. She's still dealing with the loss of Nkanyezi, the last thing she needs is people talking about her past everywhere she goes."

Sthembiso sighs, "It's better if Hubo gets permission to pay using cash. We can negotiate for a transfer without having to go there and raising suspicions."

"I don't think it can be an online transaction," Sikelela says.

"Well, it's not like Ntuli cares about the book of tradition and culture. He's going to get a bank transfer, that's finally," Sthembiso insists.

"From me?" Hubo still can't believe any of this. It's not like he got anything out of that sex, a whole cow to be paid for shared pleasure sounds ridiculous.

"Yes, unless if you're denying taking her virginity," Sthembiso says giving him a sharp look.

"I don't but I still have questions. Since virginity is a good of value when do men get paid for theirs? Or it's not that important? I'm sure if Aunt Boni pays for mine I wouldn't need to worry about

petrol for the whole year.”

The room falls into horrible silence. Sthembiso is staring at him, confusion is written all over his face. Thobani’s jaw is on the floor. Sikelela doesn’t know who Aunt Boni is but something in that sentence sounded awfully wrong.

SIKELELA

CHAPTER 62

“Fuck!” Hubo curses when he realizes what he’s done.

“Which Aunt Boni?” Sthembiso asks. There’s only one Boni they’re related to, she was around a lot when they were young.

“How old were you?” Sthembiso asks.

“13. Please bafo, don’t look at me like I’m a victim. It was consensual,” Hubo says defensively.

“A 13 year old cannot consent to sex. Aunt Boni is almost two decades older than you and she’s a blood relative to the Hlongwanes.” He’s angry, more than Hubo expected him to be. For him it’s not a big deal, he was not the only young boy who was introduced to sex by an older woman, he talked with his friends at that time and they all agreed it was normal.

“Can we focus on the matter at hand? I will pay the fine that Ntuli wants.”

“Where did it happen?” No, Sthembiso is not going to let this slide. “And how many times?” he asks.

“A few times, please bafo don’t...” Sthembiso shakes his head before he can talk him out of it.

“She’s not going to pay inkomo kababa but she’s definitely going to pay for what she did under the roof my father provided for him.”

Thobani clears his throat, this is awkward. "Can I leave now? I need to charge my phone."

Sthembiso looks at him, something occurs in his mind. A very awkward question he's about to ask.

"Who took your virginity?" he asks.

Thobani's eyes widen. "I'm still a virgin."

"I'm not playing here. Were you old enough to understand what was going on? Did you want to? Did you consent to it?" This is a very complicated subject to have as men, but it's important that he knows.

"She was a year younger than me, I think that explains everything," Thobani says.

Sthembiso nods and looks at Sikelela. His turn, everyone has to confess.

"First girlfriend, she was two years older, but it was okay from both sides," Sikelela says.

Hubo heaves a sigh, "So I'm now the only one with a sad story to tell. Can we move on?"

"Hubo you can't just let it go like that. It's an incest, Aunt Boni is a Hlongwane and she made you commit to incest," – Sthembiso.

"Almost over a decade ago. Honestly it doesn't affect me anymore, I'm good, I don't want to run after her like a bitter bitch," Hubo says.

"Fine, if it doesn't affect you let's go and see Aunt Boni tomorrow,"

Sthembiso lays a challenge.

“For what?” Hubo frowns.

“To confirm that it doesn’t affect you,” Sthembiso says.

“If I do that you’re not going to say anything to her about this?”

“I will, she disrespected my father’s house and put your life in danger. A lot can happen when two people commit an incest; there’s a price to pay.”

Hubo frowns to cover his fear. “Price to pay. Like what?”

“Offending the ancestors has consequences Mahubo,” Sthembiso says.

“Do you think maybe all the difficulties I’m facing could be the result of that?”

Sikelela clears his throat. It’s too late for Sthembiso to take back what he’s said and unfortunately he’s hurting Hubo and instilling fear in him, not really helping the situation.

“You can go Thobani,” Sthembiso says. They will be talk about Mela’s memulo again some other time.

“Can we finalize Vumo’s issue?” Hubo asks.

“We will do the money transfer,” Sthembiso says.

“Thank you.” Sikelela is relieved. He can imagine what the embarrassment of the Hlongwanes herding a cow to the Ntulis would’ve affected Vumo.

"I need to pass by home and see them," he stands up and puts his cap on. He knows they still want to talk about the Aunt Boni situation well.

He shakes Sthembiso's hand and pulls Hubo up to give him a shoulder-bump.

Hubo doesn't even walk Sikelela out and drive him home as usual. He's sitting miserably on bed, Sthembiso is staring at him trying to read what's on his mind.

"Do you at least see any wrong in what she did to you?" he asks.

"I'm not the only one who went through this. And she never hurt me Sguqa," Hubo says.

"So you'd want your son to experience something like that as well? You think it's okay?"

Hubo thinks for a minute and then shakes his head. "No, I would want my son to have a special first experience."

"Then it's wrong Mahubo. Allow me to react to it the same way I would've reacted if this happened to Londeka or Azile or Sane."

"I don't want to be that guy who tells his brother things and gets him to fight his fights. I'm not in primary school anymore."

Sthembiso heaves a sigh, "I respect that, you can fight your own battles. But allow me to address it with her. I'm not going to embarrass you, it won't be a family meeting, just the three of us."

He's like a dog with a bone, Hubo has no choice but to finally

agree to go and confront Aunt Boni about his virginity accompanied by his brother.

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SIKELELA

He brought her a new phone, a smart Samsung A3 Core. He didn't know what else to bring to cheer her up.

He can hear Langa crying from above the yard. A smile creeps out of his face, Langa is the most precious gift he's ever gotten in his life. Like a bright sun that he is, he's the ray of sunshine between him and Vumo right now.

Cebile is with him under the verandah with a basin of water, sunlight and enema syringe bulb. It's that African child time- worst time ever.

"Is he not too young Ma?"

Cebile looks up, "Greet first Sikelela."

"Sawubona Ma," he greets with an amused smile.

"Good. Langa has been crying nonstop, it's a stomachache."

"How do you know? He doesn't talk."

"I'm a mother, I just know," Cebile says.

"Okay mother, I'm just passing by, I didn't even get a chance to

buy bread," he says apologetically.

"It's okay, you were here a few days ago and now you need to save every cent you get. MaNtuli is inside watching TV."

"Is she okay?" he asks with worry.

"Yeah, she's okay. Why are you asking?"

He just shrugs and bends over to hold Langa's hand, giving him some moral support.

"Leave, no baby has ever died from sunlight enema," Cebile yanks his hand away.

He laughs and leaves, Langa is still screaming but he's going to be fine.

Vumo is watching TV, she's dolled up because she knows Sikelela is coming. But she didn't expect him so soon.

He walks in wearing a cabin shirt, Bermuda shorts and white velcro sneakers. When their eyes lock his lips stretch into a smile. He takes his cap off and puts his backpack on the chair, walking towards her for a hug.

"MaGodide, I was worried about you." He squeezes her in his arms.

"Why? I'm fine," she's smiling.

"Yesterday you were crying, that affected me in a way you can never imagine," he says.

“It was just a moment, I’m okay now. What did you bring? You promised me something nice.”

He chuckles, “I will show you once you’ve given me a kiss.”

“Ma is just outside the door with Langa,” she says, blushing and looking away.

“Let’s go and talk,” he says.

Vumo switches the TV off and follows him out.

Cebile has managed to put her grandson to sleep, Vumo takes him to put him in a diaper and then in bed.

“You didn’t tell he’s been crying all day,” Sikelela says as they walk inside his rondavel with the sleeping Langa.

“I cannot stress you about every little detail. Babies cry and I have Ma here helping me,” she says.

“Still, I need you to let me know everything that’s going on.”

“Okay Mister. Can you open the window for me, I think it’s too warm for him here.”

Sikelela opens the window and comes back to sit on bed watching her shush Langa back to sleep after putting him in a diaper.

It only takes a minute for one to be a mother. It takes that push or C-section and then they just figure it out.

“Ngiyanithanda,” Sikelela says.

She smiles, "We love you too. Now Langa is asleep, can I give you a kiss and get my gift?"

He shakes his head with a smile and opens his backpack, taking out a box of her new cellphone. Her reaction is satisfying. She covers her mouth to avoid screaming loud and waking Langa up, then she throws herself in his arms reciting multiple 'thank you's'.

She looks genuinely happy, this is how he wants her to be everyday but sadly life has its own plans.

After admiring her phone she sits on his lap and wraps her hand at the back of his neck, bringing him closer for a kiss. Their lips lock in a passionate, long kiss. His eyes are closed, his hand is running around her waist. He wants to be kissed more, for her to touch him in places no woman has touched in a long time. The time is wrong, so is the place- Langa is sleeping next to them.

He holds her face between his hands and stares into her eyes.

"I sorted it out, there will be no drama," he says.

"What's going to happen?" Vumo asks in a low whisper.

"Sguqa will communicate with your father and transfer the money. I just hope your mother will get a part of it," he says.

"I doubt he will give her anything. He hates her." She's trying to be strong but parents' separation is not something a child can sleep on and wake up okay with it the next day, more especially in her situation because she's at the center of everything.

“Everything will be okay sthandwa sami. Next year we won’t even remember we once went through these hard times. I love you and I’m going to stand by you no matter what happens, never doubt that even for a second.”

“Now I don’t doubt anything, you’re a good man and I’m blessed to have you in my life. I love you too.” She goes for another kiss, his erection is growing just under her thighs. Sikelela is one man who knows how to control his body and use his head in a leveled manner, but is it not too much now? Beside that one day when he did it in her thighs, she’s never taken care of the man between the legs. Now five years and one child later, they still haven't made love.

“My incision has healed, I’m now a normal woman,” she says.

He doesn’t get it, he just tells her how happy he is about that and that she must continue taking things easy and not overwork herself.

So she kisses him again, her tongue swirls inside his mouth, he grips on her buttocks and releases a low moan.

He breaks the kiss breathing heavily. “You don’t have the medication for me but you’re hurting me.”

She smiles, “I have healed Sikelela.”

“But you said three months...” He’s confused.

“Life waits for no man,” she pecks his lips and then licks hers seductively.

“Are you pulling my leg?”

“No, I want us to make love, you have waited for me for too long. I want our love story, from this moment onwards, to be the biggest story anyone could ever tell.”

Sikelela glances at Langa, there’s nothing he wants like that at this moment, but he’s always wanted it to be special.

“Are you sure?” he asks her.

Vumo nods, “A quickie to release you before you leave. I love you.”

It’s like he just heard those words for the first time, he kisses her again and goes to close the door.

They lay a blanket on the floor, leaving Langa undisturbed on bed. Vumo lies on the pillow, he lifts her dress up and slides between her legs.

He’s staring down at her. “I have loved since you were 18, I don’t think anyone can take your place in my heart MaGodide.”

“Nobody has taken your place in my heart either. I know there was time when it didn’t feel that way.”

He inhales sharply and kisses her lips. His massages her thigh, their eyes lock as their bodies crave for each other.

Maybe he should close his eyes...he drops his forehead on hers and touches her coochie.

He opens his eyes toikny

Jenner Zuma's observe her reaction, she looks comfortable, he pecks her lips, closes his eyes again and keeps on stimulating her clit.

He's hard, his shaft is throbbing and begging for a release.

He pulls her panty down to the ankles and brushes her mound. He takes in another sharp breath and kisses her lips. He's waited for this moment his whole life. The first time when he did it on the thighs he was scared and too careful, and then the second time that led to their break-up he was broken and not in his right senses, this is the only it feels so right.

He kisses her again before standing up to take off his pants and look for a condom. He wants more children but definitely not now, in 5 years or so, he will be practicing safe sex until then.

Her incision scar doesn't look scary as he imagined. It's just a mark he intends to worship his whole life. It marks the day he became a father, the biggest blessing of his life. It should also mark the beginning of his relationship with Vumo. What happened prior to that day shouldn't count to anything. Therefore he should love and cherish what they have now, instead of what they lost.

He's buried inside her, he just did it with no second thought, he just pushed the tip in until the head of his shaft entered.

He moves his waist, pushing to fit his whole throbbing beast in.

Vumo shuts her eyes, her fingers slightly trembling as she holds onto his arms for support. Snatched, violated, torn apart, touched carelessly and forcefully. That's all in the past now, she's safe here and having sex with a man who's wanted her since she was 18. The only man who sees her worth, loves her to bits and respects her.

"Are you okay?" he asks and Vumo's eyes open. Her fingers are still trembling, she wants him, she's wet for him, but somehow her body reacts to the nonexistent fear.

"I'm okay," she says and drops her hands to hold his waist. They close their eyes again, he's not giving too much away but he's still inside her, which means he's enjoying what he's doing.

"I love you Sikelela," she says running her hands all over his back.

"Mmmm!" he moans and lifts her knees up to his waist. He's still gentle even though he's deeper now.

Sweat starts rolling down his face and covers his upper body. Vumo's enticing moans have died down, they've been at it for over ten minutes. She's now a bit dry and his shaft is still hard as it was when they started. It's a bit painful now but she's taken Mthoko's aggressive hands and forced penis in this very same vagina. Surely she can endure until the man who actually loves her to reach his climax. He deserves that much.

He's able to see her discomfort and pull out. He lies next to her, panting and sweaty, he turns her to sleep on her side and starts

rubbing her clit over again.

Vumo looks into his eyes, trying her best not to look disappointed. Will she ever be enough? He can't even reach a simple orgasm with her.

"We can try again some other time," she says faking a smile.

Sikelela can't look at her in the eyes. Yes they will try again, they have a lifetime together, but today wasn't supposed to end like this.

"Everything feels good, I'm enjoying myself, I don't know what's taking me so long."

"It's okay baby," she says.

"Do you want us to continue?" he asks, he's still hard but deep down he knows he could be fighting a losing journey because he's never taken this long before.

"Let's try again when we are not in a hurry," he says and brushes her lower lip. "I love you MaGodide, please don't ever doubt that."

SIKELELA

CHAPTER 63

LONDEKA HLONGWANE

I have a drafted letter to take home. I finally said yes, he's sending his people over. I'm trying not to think about it as a step towards marriage, a big one for that matter, I take it as him honoring what we have and making it known to my elders that he has good intentions.

Talking about good intentions, I still don't know why him and I are invited to Ntuthuko's house. I don't know if it's MaZwide's idea or his, but it's bad. I will not be able to shut out the picture of Ntuthuko hugging another man, and knowing myself, I will also picture them together, him and MaZwide, and conclude who he enjoys better between them. This is like a live fancy episode of Umndeni.

I came here with my bag packed with fancy clothes. I'm glamored up; lipgloss glistening, eyebrows brushed and chiskop moisturized. I made an effort and put on a tight dress that reaches above my knees and high heels. I mean, it's dinner, why would you show up looking anything less?

"Are you ready?" he asks behind me.

I'm surely ready, but what about him? He's wearing lousy tracksuit

bottoms and forever-old brown T-shirt. What sneakers are those? I cannot see any brand name on them. After trashing Busizwe's fashion sense the last thing I need is him going with me in public looking like this.

"Go and dress up," I tell him.

He frowns and looks at himself with admiration.

"Are you blind? I just changed," he says.

"We are invited for dinner Sgcino. You have to at least respect the hosts by showing up well dressed."

"It's just Ntuthuko and MaZwide, this is like family dinner."

I can't believe he's been married before but he's still so clueless.

"Whenever there's another couple present we should stand out, your looks represent me," I say.

He looks confused, like I just spoke to him in Spanish. This is the same man who's been on and on about making things official with me. Doesn't he know that the simple rules of relationships?

"Please Sgcino, we will be late," I beg with a grunt.

"You don't expect me to wear a suit for Ntuthuko, do you?"

I don't answer, I push him all the way to his wardrobe.

I pick a black golfer with neck zipper, I've never seen him wearing it. I watch him put it on with an annoyed face, it fits him perfectly and hugs his muscles the way I want.

The tracksuit bottom is definitely going too. I pick a jean for him

and black tassel loafers.

He's now a what? A whole snack baby.

"Give me a twirl," I say snapping pictures of him without consent. .

"Mxm, tseg!" He laughs and walks away, caring less about the perfect pictures I'm trying to snap.

"You don't want us to take IG photos?" I ask.

"Hell no," he says.

Men must fall! I take pictures of myself as well and rush to pack my purse.

He holds my hand as we walk out of the house. He's a sweetheart when he likes. He even opens the car door for me.

He settles on his seat and asks, "Do you think your mothers will be angry if they find out I'm related to Ntuthuko?"

He mustn't remind me of the trio's drama! I'm glad I'm not the type that people easily gossip about because that was front-page gossip content.

"They will judge you. You just have to remember that they're old and husband-less," I say.

He chuckles, "Maybe you have step-fathers now."

Never in a million years! A man who would try to become a stepfather would be just digging his own grave. I'd do my best to give him heart attack at least two times a week.

He glances at me, "You don't want a stepfather?"

"Euww, no."

He laughs, "Why? One of them is still very young, she can still get a Ben10."

"There are plastic dicks in stores Sgcino, no woman needs a man anymore."

"Are you saying you don't need me, you can survive with a plastic dick?"

"Yes," I say boldly.

He smirks, "Okay, please don't touch me tonight."

Yiks! Who said I was going to touch his black dick anyway? Just thinking about his balls makes me want to puke.

I grab a bottle of water and gulp half of it down.

"What's wrong?" he asks.

"I'm thinking about your dick and I want to puke," I say.

He breaks into laughter.

I'm starving.

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SIKELELA

When he got back in Durban he called Vumo but her phone went straight to voicemail. He then called his mother to ask if everyone was okay, which she confirmed they were, emphasizing on Langa who's now a good boy. He's worried about Vumo because she didn't take it well when he pounded her until she turned dry without reaching a climax. She must be thinking he's not attracted to her, or he wasn't feeling her for whatever reasons. But the truth of the matter is that he enjoyed the deed, his head was just not clear enough. One second he was there and next he was in the past. He didn't think it would be that hard to start on a clean slate, like nothing ever happened.

He sends her a long text reminding her how much he loves her. Then he calls Hubo, to check up on him.

Hubo answers, sounding surprisingly okay. It's strange, given everything that happened earlier today.

"When are you seeing the champ?" Sikelela asks.

"I'm counting hours now. How's Langa?" – Hubo.

"I spoke to Ma a few minutes ago and she said he's okay," he says.

"If Langa is okay then why do you sound like a horny man who's been denied sex?"

He's almost right, except that he wasn't denied, he just fucked up.

"I'm just tired and I'm still going to work and I'm going to stay up all night," Sikelela says.

"Didn't Sguqa say anything to you? You need to quit that job,

honestly," Hubo says.

Well, that will never happen, he will never quit his job for anything. He was lucky enough to be employed by one of the best security companies in the country, that's the job the Dlamuka ancestors gave him and he will never throw it back on their faces.

"Sguqa hasn't talked to me about anything," he says.

"He probably has a lot on his mind. Look, I wanted to actually ask you something. More like get your permission."

Hubo wants permission? This is new.

"It concerns Vumo's ex, Mthoko,"- Hubo.

"What about him?"

"I need to see him, him and Thobani could be half brothers. Sguqa wants me to get to the bottom of it."

"As long as he stays far away from my family," Sikelela says.

"I'm sure he learnt his lesson. Do you want me to keep you updated?"

"No, thank you," Sikelela says.

"How is our friend, Mela?" Hubo asks.

"We don't talk everyday but I'm sure she's fine where she is. Why are you suddenly her 'friend' and so interested in her?"

"Oh, please don't tell me you are jealous? You can't own two women."

He clicks his tongue, "Bye, let me know if the champ is at Mashoba, I will come bearing gifts unlike the other uncle who hasn't bought my son a bottle of purity."

"You didn't tell he eats, I don't know anything about babies," he's offended. As much him and Vumo don't get along, Langa is his nephew, in his veins the Hlongwane blood runs.

"I was just saying, I need to drop the call and get ready for work. Have a nice whoring day!"

"From the bottom of my heart, fuck you Sikelela."

Sikelela bursts into laughter before dropping the call.

He tries calling Vumo again, this time it rings, he's relieved.

Vumo answers, "Baba KaLanga."

"Why did you switch off your phone? I've been worried about you."

"Everything I do worries you this day. Now I'm worried, why are you always so worried? I'm with your mother, she will tell you if there's something wrong with any of us."

She's right, he's always paranoid, especially when he can't get her on the phone. He's always expecting the unknown to happen and it's not healthy at all.

"I'm sorry, I just...give me time, I'll get used to it. How is my boy?"

"He's okay. Ma was right, I think it was an upset tummy," she says.

"I'm glad she's there with you. So, I've been thinking, how about

you come over Thursday? I will be off at work, we can spend the day together before you go home for the ceremonies on Saturday.”

“I would love to, but I hate travelling with a little baby,” she says.

“You don’t have to travel by taxis, I will ask Hubo to...”

“No, thanks.”

“Okay, I will ask Thobani, not Hubo,” he says.

“That’s better, I will have to ask Ma first, you know she’s attached to Langa.”

“It’s just one day, I’m sure she can visit Uncle Vusi or something.”

Vumo laughs, “You’re a good stepson.”

“I know I’m a blessing to have in life,” he says, laughing too.

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LONDEKA HLONGWANE

One nightmare anyone can experience in life, or should I just say me, it is walking on the host struggling to set the table. Which then compels you to be a good guest and offer a hand. MaZwide bored me today, I wasn’t here to set the table and do all this hard work. But I can’t be lazy when I have a guy sending his uncles for me in a month.

Him and Ntuthuko are standing outside. Ntuthuko is smoking, the other guy is eating a banana and chatting his heart away.

“Nobody is going to steal him,” MaZwide says.

I keep staring at those men outside. “I wouldn’t care even if they stole him. He’s annoying. And wena? You’re glowing than you were when I first saw you at the studio.”

She laughs, “It’s what happens when your husband’s hobby is to shower you with love.”

Chips wena! I nibble on fries while she sets the cutlery.

“Is he romantic?” I’m asking because the other guy is not romantic at all.

“You work with him, I’m sure you’ve seen the kind of person he is.”

“Yeah, but I don’t know him as a husband. I know that he loves fine clothes, he wears earrings and dyes his hair, but I don’t know Ntuthuko the husband and babakhe.”

She smiles, “Well, he’s a supportive father. Our sons are in a private school, they get everything they want from their father, he’s educative and emotionally supportive as well.”

Interesting! I’m about to finish this small bowl of fries, I hope she has more because dinner hasn’t started.

“And as a husband?” I ask.

“He’s the kind of a husband that sends flowers, takes you out on dates frequently and plans family vacations. And he’s very, very, very spontaneous.”

“But MaZwide you don’t look spontaneous,” I say.

Lawd, she looks offended. When am I going to learn to shut up?

“Don’t judge a book by its cover,” she says.

“You’re right. So how is it like to be married to him?” I’m now investigating for personal purposes.

“There are highs and lows in every marriage, but we love each other and we will honor our vows no matter what.”

“Is it true that every marriage has its secrets?”

She chuckles, “Probably. We all have secrets in life. Some things you just have to sit on as a wife to protect your husband.”

I’m wondering if she knows, or at least suspects, that her husband has eyes for men as well.

“And nobody can know your husband better than you,” she adds.

This one makes me laugh. “You mean I don’t know Ntuthuko more than you, even though I work with him everyday?”

“No, he’s my husband, I know everything about him, especially since he’s such an open person.”

I’m now tempted to ask but I’m not going to be that woman who comes to the family and scatters the tables.

She calls them inside, Ntuthuko and the other guy, and gives them water to wash their hands. If it was me they would’ve walked to the kitchen sink and came back. But it’s MaZwide, she’s treating

them like handicapped kids.

“It looks like I shouldn’t have eaten that banana,” the other guy says sitting next to me.

MaZwide smiles, “You can pack some to eat later. That’s a nice T-shirt you have there.”

“Thank you, I didn’t even know I had it until your sister forced me into it.”

With Ntuthuko everything is a talent. “She can be a stylish and do wardrobe arrangements,” he says.

“As long as I’m not one of her clients,” the other guy says. I give him a look, I deserve to be given my flowers while I’m still alive, he can just compliment me.

I grab a plate and fill it up, almost with everything on the table. I did mention earlier that I was starving.

Ntuthuko clears his throat, “Don’t forget about next week. I wouldn’t recommend a dumpling for you.”

So now I get food recommendations? Who does he think he is?

“I’m hungry Ntuthuko. What do you expect me to eat? Salad and drink water?”

“That would be better. We don’t want another wardrobe malfunction because of sudden extra kilos,” he says.

It happened once, I’m not offended, I’m annoyed. This is a family dinner, he shouldn’t be reprimanding me about work. I understand his concerns but he’s doing too much.

“Wait a minute,” the other guy says, darting glances between him and I. “Are you telling her what to eat?”

“She’s my model Sgcino,” – Ntuthuko.

Why do I sense a fight coming?

“Before she’s your model she’s my woman. You cannot tell her what to do with her body.”

“Unfortunately I can, she signed the contract, she knows what’s up.”

He looks at me with his eyebrow raised up, he looks angry. “You signed a contract not to eat what you like?”

“To stay in shape,” I say.

“Are you out of shape now?” He’s shouting at me, not the person he’s angry at.

“No,” I say.

“Then eat anything you like on this table. I don’t tell MaZwide what to eat and not eat,” he says and puts another piece of meat on my plate.

“Be careful Sgcino. She enjoys what she does and she’s good at it. Next week she’s going to Durban Fashion Week, it’s an opportunity of a lifetime.”

MaZwide places her hand over his. “Can we eat in peace and not talk about work? There are children sleeping under the bridge, let’s not make a mountain out of nothing.”

He looks at her, their eyes lock for a second, then he picks his drink and takes a sip. He's calm.

"I need the bathroom," I tell Sgcino. I love him again, he just stood up for me.

"I will go with you," he says.

My eyes widen. He announces our bathroom break on the table. Now what are we? Pee twins.

We enter the bathroom, he's walking behind me. We fuck and do all the crazy stuff together. But I've never had him accompany me to the bathroom. I don't want to pee with an audience, it's creepy.

I look at him, he frowns and asks what the problem is.

"Look away, I want to pee," I say.

"Why? Do you have a new vagina that I don't know of?"

He's the other guy again.

I lift my dress up and pull my panty to my knees and sit to pee. As if I'm not uncomfortable enough, my pee sounds like a shower, there's a buzzing sound I don't know of.

"Oh God!" He covers his nose and looks away.

I really don't give a fuck, I told him to get out. This is the bathroom, I'm free to fart here. I wipe myself and flush the toilet and then wash my hands.

"Are the windows even open here?" He's now being dramatic.

He grabs my waist from behind and trails kisses at the back of my neck.

“Are you okay?” he asks.

“Yes, I’m good. I’m used to Ntuthuko,” I say.

“Beside him, are you sure everything is okay with you?”

I frown, “Yes, why are you asking?”

“Nothing sthandwa sami, when are you going home to give your brother the letter?”

Why do I feel pressured now? “I don’t know, maybe during the week.”

“Okay, I love you uyezwa?”

He’s weird.

I nod.

SIKELELA

CHAPTER 64

HUBO

This is the day he's fought for and looked forward to for the last couple of months. He should be over the moon that he's finally about to meet his son, but he's nervous instead. What if Qobo doesn't like him? He's used to Mdluli being his father. Mdluli is more mature, he reads the Bible and everyone adores him. On the other hand he's the most hated guy in Mashoba, well at least not by ladies, but his name is bad and he's never been a father figure to anyone. This is a commitment for life, there's no going back from here.

Once he steps out of this car and enters the Mdluli gate, coming face to face with Qobo for the first time, he's a father for life, there's no going back.

For the first time in forever, he takes a deep breath and closes his eyes and prays.

"Hey God, I know you and I don't usually talk. But can you do me a favor today? Give me the strength to be a father that my son deserves. Amen."

He parks outside the gate and walks inside the yard. The last time he wore a suit was for Sthembiso's wedding. Everything else made him look like a boy for this day, he needed to up his game and look like a serious man, and this suit gives him that.

Ayanda is already waiting for him at the door with her husband next to her. He doesn't hate Mdluli any less but today he's grateful that they finally agreed to do the right thing. Now he just hopes Mdluli never find out about what Ayanda and him have been doing behind his back because that would ruin this whole co-parenting set up.

Mdluli makes sure he marks his territory by holding Ayanda's hand as they head towards the lounge.

They already have drinks on the table, non-alcoholic obviously. He was hoping he'd see Qobo but he's not in the room yet.

"Where is he?" he turns his head to look at them.

"He will join us shortly," Mdluli says.

They all settle on their seats, Ayanda fills her husband's glass with grapefruit juice and passes the box to Hubo to pour for himself. So much hospitality!

He's not interested in their juice, but he promised Ayanda he's now a humble man with a leveled head, so he drinks it.

"Hlongwane I'd like to clear a few things before we proceed," the husband might be too much for him to bear.

But he nods, praying for his buttons not to be pressed.

"I humbly ask for you not to instill any of your beliefs on him. He's yours as much as he's ours, I'd prefer if we don't put a label on him."

He inhales sharply, "Too bad Mdluli, I will be paying what's due to

you and introducing him to his ancestors. You took things too far, I need to do everything right to make sure he turns out okay.”

Mdluli looks at Ayanda with his eyebrows snapped. “He’s taking him away?”

“No baby, he’s not. We agreed on him taking necessary steps in helping Qobo. Remember?” She seems to have a way of talking through him. “We can discuss the surname issue as we go,” she adds.

He nods and looks at Hubo, “Is there anything you’d like to ask from us?”

“No.” Time wasters!

“Okay, you can call him mama,” Mdluli says and plants a peck on Ayanda’s cheek. It’s cringy to watch.

They sit in silence after Ayanda has walked out. There’s no love lost between them. Mdluli expects him to be grateful and he doesn’t really feel the need to because he never refused to take responsibility, he was lied to and kept from his son.

A little man in Spiderman tracksuit appears held by his mother. He’s a spitting image of Hubo. Hubo feels tears burning his eyes as he watches him walk in and jump onto Mdluli’s lap. He looks at Ayanda and feels disgusted all over again. How can she keep them apart for so long? How dare she hides his blood?

“This is Luqobo,” Ayanda says pulling him from her husband’s lap.

“He can talk but sometimes it’s hard to hear him. He mixes sounds and some he mispronounces.”

She then asks Qobo if he sees the person sitting opposite them. “That’s your other Dada,” she tells him.

The ‘other’ doesn’t sit well with Hubo but it’s all about making Qobo comfortable. Ayanda pushes Qobo towards him, who looks hell nervous.

“Say hello dada,” Ayanda instructs Qobo.

His son looks at him in the eye, behind this Spiderman tracksuit and cute face lies naughtiness.

“Hello dada,” he says.

Something in Hubo’s heart settles into place and builds up into a beautiful nest. It’s going to be there forever. He lifts the boy to his lap and shakes his little hand. Qobo finds the handshake funny and laughs his little lungs off.

“Hlongwane, Masenga sileka, uyaphila Ngwane?”

Mdluli clears his throat, Ayanda quickly holds his hand and flashes a fake smile that reprimands him fast.

Hubo’s eyes and ears are on his son. This person who’s changed his life within a second of walking into it. Hello new world!

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SIKELELA

They have loved each other in and out of time. They say true love is when you choose to be together even when there are million reasons for you to be apart.

His mother refused to let Langa travel, he humbly asked for Vumo to come for this night, she will take Langa on her way back to her father's house tomorrow afternoon. Ntuli agreed easily to the money offer Sthembiso made. It doesn't feel right with Sikelela that they had to pay for Vumo to be allowed to see their son's grave, but he cannot fight with her father, it's the last thing she needs.

As they enter the Bayside Hotel where he booked for them to spend the night Sthembiso calls.

"Am I disturbing you?" he asks. He's the easiest to talk to, Hubo becomes a nightmare when Vumo is the subject. Sthembiso knows that he's here with Vumo trying to rewrite his wrongs and to just spend the night with her before she goes home for Saturday.

"No, we about to check in at the hotel," Sikelela says.

"Okay, just forward me your banking details. Hlongwane wouldn't have wanted you to do everything on your own. Your first child has to paid for by your father, in this case by me," he says.

"That's not necessary, you already paid for Hubo's part,"- Sikelela.

“I insist. Send me the details,” Sthembiso says and drops the call before he becomes more stubborn.

They check in first and get their keys then he sends his details on their way to the room. He doesn't live a flashy life, he doesn't afford it. Luckily Vumo was everything but she never put any financial pressure on him throughout their relationship. She deserves this night out after everything she's been through. Just the two of them, away from everything and everyone for one night.

“Oh my goodness, this room is amazing!” She's happy. It's all he wanted, to see her smiling again.

Notification comes in reporting money coming into his account; R50 000.

“Whaaat?!” He gasps. This is just too much. Even if he was paying all three cows for the damages this amount would be too much.

He calls Sthembiso right away; he's pacing up and down and sweating. He's always worked hard for his money, he doesn't just take money from people. And Sthembiso has done too much for him already with the twins and Vumo.

“Are you oka...?” Vumo doesn't finish asking the question, Sthembiso has answered the phone.

“Sguqa I'm receiving a huge amount of money here. I thought you were just giving a hand, not...”

Sthembiso cuts him short, “That's not my money, but our father's. You need to come and get your car soon, you have a family now, you can't be making Langa travel by taxis to the clinic.”

“Wait, I know you mean well but that’s not necessary. I work and I’m able to...”

“Provide for your family, yeah I know. My girlfriend is calling, I have to go.” Call ended!

Vumo is looking at him confused. “What’s going on?”

He throws the phone in bed and exhales heavily. “It’s Sguqa, I’m going to call him in the morning. For now I just need a hug.”

He pulls her to his chest and hugs her with a huge sigh of relief. He kisses her on the forehead and sits with her on the bed with his hand linked into hers.

“Do you think Langa is crying?” he asks.

“No, he’s used to your mother and I left enough milk for him,” Vumo says.

“I hope they don’t trouble each other,” he turns his eyes to her. “How are you feeling? How did this week treat you?”

“It was okay, I’m looking forward to the weekend, I want to get over it and come back to my life.”

He raises his eyebrow, “Your life?”

“Langa, his grandmother and you,” she says.

His lips stretch into a smile, he pulls her for a light kiss and looks at her in the eyes. He loves her, that’s without any doubt now. “I want us to talk about what happened the other day,” he says.

She exhales softly and nods. She's still a bit embarrassed but those things happen. They happened with Mthoko, a lot. The only real sexual experience she's had and equally enjoyed was, sadly, with Hubo. Hubo knows a side of her that no other man knows yet, not even the one who has her heart. She hates him for that, for knowing her body to that extent. For being able to reach those places with her and giving her lifetime memories. It's not something she can wipe off, whereas it's not something she can live with and cherish. Sadly they're now in each other's life forever.

Sikelela squeezes her hand and says, "I didn't know it was going to be that hard. I felt bad MaGodide because when I said I forgive you I meant it. But in the middle of it things just started coming back. I lost focus, my body was there with you, everything was okay, but my mind...it was somewhere else."

"What were you thinking of?" she asks.

"Everything baby. There's been a gap in our relationship, someone filled it for that certain amount of time. Before that there was...my brother," he says with a hard swallow. "I'm walking a path that has been paved for me by other people and that scared me because I didn't know what your expectations were."

"But Sikelela you've had other people too," she says, she's hurt.

"I know. But at least you don't know them," he says.

"I know the old woman, you made us sleep in the same room. I imagined everything you did together, it hurt me but I had to get over it because I was the one who wronged you first. It doesn't hurt any less because I love you too."

He wipes his forehead and locks his eyes into hers. "I'm sorry," he says.

"It's okay, I just want you to be comfortable with me," she says.

"But you didn't look too comfortable either, your fingers were trembling the whole time."

"The last person I had sex with was Mthoko and it wasn't great. He was hurting me, so I just needed to keep reminding myself that it's you, not him, you'd never hurt me."

His eyelids weigh double, he blinks rapidly, locking back tears. He didn't punish Mthoko enough for what he did and now he cannot do anything because he could be Thobani's half brother.

"MaGodide I will never hurt you like that, and from now onwards nobody is going to have any advantage to hurt you. Not while I'm still alive," he says.

"Thank you." She rests her head on his chest, surprisingly she doesn't feel the need to cry over the past today, she's here, it's all that matters.

"I need you to promise me one thing," he says in a low whisper, playing with her fingers.

"Okay, what is it?" she asks.

"That we will never have secrets, even if it's something that may break one of us. I love you, I don't wish for us to go back to that place where we were not talking to each other."

"I will be honest as much as I can. I promise you."

He locks his lips into hers and kisses her for good two minutes before pulling something out of his pocket.

“This is not how we do things, I take these things as flashy games. But I know women love them, and I love everything that my woman loves, I want to do everything in my power to make you happy, so...” He opens a box with a ring. “This is a promise ring. With it I want you to know that I love you, I will never hurt you and I’m going to marry you when you’re ready.”

“Sikelela!” she covers her mouth in shock. He pulls her hand and puts the ring on her right finger and then plants a kiss on her cheek.

There’s a knock, he goes and open. It’s their dinner being delivered with a bunch of roses with a card written for her.

“When did you do this?” she asks, amazed.

“Indoda ayibuzwa,” he says locking the door after the lady and coming back to her with a beaming smile.

“This has to be the best day ever! Please take pictures,” she says, posing on bed with her roses, making sure her ring shows. He’s forced to be in a video for Whatsapp status too. They’re genuinely happy, smiling and kissing each other a million times.

He’s tired of taking videos and pictures, he snatches the phone and puts it away. She’s not impressed with that, Sikelela laughs

and kisses her neck.

"It's not funny Sikelela!" she says when he pushes her down on the bed.

"I'm sorry, uyezwa?" He lies between her legs and tucks her face between his hands to passionately kiss her.

"Wait, I'm hungry," she says with giggles when his hands touch over her panty.

"I'm also hungry," he says with a smile and pulls her panty down to her ankles. "Waze wamuhle," he says looking at her recently shaved coochie.

"Baby let's eat first, do you know how hungry I am?" She puts her hands over her coochie.

Sikelela removes them and plants a kiss on her mound. "You're hungry?"

She laughs and covers her part again, "Not hungry there. At least not too much."

"Okay, I'll just look and touch, I won't do anything."

"Swear first," she says.

He laughs, "I swear."

She removes her hands, he puts his fingers in and rubs her until she's wet.

"I have another finger, it wants to touch too," he says.

"Another finger?" she asks.

He pulls the hard shaft out of his boxers. "It just going to touch."

"That's a big finger, don't you think?"

"It's not, check this out." He rubs his tip on her clit and moves it down to her opening. He rubs it around a few times and looks at her.

"Please my love, I just want to calm it down before we eat, kancane nje."

"I thought you were just touching," she says with an eye roll.

"You're wet. Is it not for me?" He sucks her lower lip and looks at in the eyes, silently begging.

"It's for you," she says, licking where his lips sucked.

"Then open for me MaGodide, I'm dying." He searches for the condom in his jacket and puts it on.

"Hold on to me baby, I will never hurt you."

Vumo wraps her arms around his waist, he enters her slowly, maintaining the eye contact. "You're the only person in the world that I wanted to do this with."

"It feels so good Sikelela, don't stop," she bites her lower lip and moans to the pleasure.

"It has...always been...been you Vumo." He releases a low groan and digs his fingers into her hips. "Uhhh, yuuuh baby!"

"There baby...I love you Sikelela," she screams, biting her lip and buckling up her hips to meet his thrusts.

Everything feels right when the time is right, it's not about who's wrong or right, good or bad.

SIKELELA

CHAPTER 65

Cebile is stressed, her precious grandson will be spending the night away from her. Maybe she needed more children, she still loves babies way too much than she thought. She's the one ensuring that Vumo packed everything, including medication and enema syringe bulb just in case Langa gets sick.

Muzi has arrived, he's sitting with Sikelela outside. Sometimes they're good uncle and nephew, it's his wife who becomes a problem.

Cebile noticed that Sikelela looks happy today, if he wasn't so dark he'd be having pink cheeks everytime his eyes meet with Vumo's.

"I wonder what you gave my son," she says to Vumo accusingly.

"Oh nothing Ma, he's just happy to be home with his mother," Vumo says.

She rolls her eyes, "He doesn't even look at me, the only person he keeps staring at is you."

Vumo giggles, she just has to come out with it, otherwise Cebile will keep asking and speculating. "We are in a good space. I'm sure you won't appreciate the details."

"Who? Me? I want the details, that's my son. What did you give him?"

Vumo laughs, "It's inappropriate to tell you.

Cebile's mouth hangs open, "MaNtuli you two have a little baby, Langa is only two months old!"

"It's your son, not me," Vumo says.

"So I was here with your crying baby and you two were busy disobeying the rules and putting his life in jeopardy?"

"How did we put his life in jeopardy?"

"By doing what you did before the right time you're hindering his growth."

Vumo laughs, "How are we hindering his growth? He's his own person, not attached to our bodies."

"Fine, but if he only starts walking at three years old just know that Cebile will not be carrying babies on her back, I have a man to focus on."

"That's just a myth Ma, don't worry, you'll see Langa is going to be a normal child."

"If you say so, anyway did you two experience any obstacles?"

Vumo blushes, "No, we talked first, it made everything easy. I love him."

"If you two are happy, you know I'm happy as well. I shouldn't be hugging you, you were up to no good last night, but I have to wish you a good journey. I hope everything goes well tomorrow." She opens her arms and hugs the mother of her grandson.

“Thank you Ma,” Vumo says with a sigh of relief.

“Are your clothes in the basket too? Tomorrow I’ll be doing laundry while waiting for Sikelela’s uncle to come back with the meat.”

“Do you know my father? He might not give them any meat,” Vumo says.

Cebile laughs, “Say that again, your father is a strange man.”

Sikelela walks in with Langa. It’s always a pleasure to see his two favorite women getting along, but he needs time with Vumo, Thobani has arrived to fetch her.

“Ma can you hold Langa for a moment? I need to talk to his mother before they leave,” he says passing Langa to his mother before she even agrees.

“Naze nangigugisa bo!” Cebile takes Langa feigning anger but she smiles as soon as her eyes land on his little face. “Khehla la mamkhulu!”

Sikelela frowns, “You’re not his mamkhulu, you’re his grandmother, ugogo.”

“Shut the fuck up!” Cebile says and goes to the bedroom.

Sikelela looks back at Vumo standing in front of him looking like a young makoti with her head wrapped in a scarf.

“You look beautiful,” he says.

She smiles, “Thank you, your mom helped me tie my head.”

“She’s competing with me that one.” They both laugh. He holds her hands. “You’re coming back on Sunday, right?”

“Yeah, I have to prepare for tomorrow and clean the aftermath tomorrow before coming back the next day.”

“Has Qambi arrived?” he asks.

“Yes, she said she’s there already and it’s awkward,” she says.

“You’re going to be okay, right?” Vumo nods, he kisses her hands and exhales softly. “I’m not going to leave Sunday, I will wake up early Monday morning and go to work. I will wait for you to come back.”

“Owkaaay,” she looks at him trying to understand what’s up with the smile.

“Sunday I’m going to Mashoba, I have a car,” he says.

Her eyes widen, “A car? When did you buy it?”

“It belonged to my father, they want me to have it,” he says.

“Is your license renewed?” she asks excitedly.

“Yes, now I will come home as I wish, you will never take taxis unless you want to,” he says.

“You’re going to teach me how to drive?”

Sikelela chuckles, “Of course baby.”

She kisses him, they hug each other tightly for what feels like an eternity. Until Sikelela's uncle calls him outside saying his brother is waiting. It's Thobani, he's here to take Vumo and Langa to the Ntulis.

"I love you baby, please don't switch your phone off," he says giving her another tight hug and lip kiss.

They all walk her to the car with her bag and Langa. Cebile gives a long list of instructions, Langa is the most special baby in the world, he has to be handled with care.

Sikelela and Thobani chat for a minute before he drives off.

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Vumo traveled safely, they talked before he went to bed. She saw Nkanyezi's grave and she's happy about how it was built. She was yet to talk with her father but Sikelela trusts he did everything to make sure their first meet-up goes smooth. Ntuli has nothing to be angry at Vumo for; they complied with all his demands.

As he closes his eyes and drifts to sleep he finds himself sitting on a leather chair in what looks like a newly-built hut at the Hlongwanes. He's sitting with his father, it doesn't feel like he's sitting with a man he never have had a relationship with, everything seems normal. Langa is sitting on the floor playing with a little boy, they almost look alike.

Mkhonto is talking about the importance of them, the brothers, holding each other's hands and helping one another heal from all

the pain they've been through. He emphasizes on how proud he is of Sikelela for saving the family from the curse.

"I'm grateful to MaNtuli as well, I just wish things could've ended up differently. But you did your best, you never lost the core of who you are, you did what a man does. I'm proud of you, son."

Sikelela takes a deep sigh and looks at him. "When are you leaving?"

It's like Sikelela just told him to get up and leave. "My time is up, I have to go. If Sthembiso doesn't come home on time because of his wife, it's your duty to make sure that Thobani comes back, I don't want him to stay with those people." He bends to give kisses to his two grandsons and walks out.

Sikelela closes the door after him and sighs. Langa's milk bottle is almost finished, he needs to boil water and make another one because Vumo is not around with breast milk.

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He's woken up by his uncle early in the morning. It's about time they leave with the cow and goat, the second cow will be settled with cash.

"Are you okay?" Muzi, his uncle, asks pushing his chest. He can be this annoying.

"I'm good malume. What do you need me to do?"

"Nothing, just wake up."

How hard it is to be a black child! He puts his T-shirt on and makes his bed.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” His uncle asks.

“Yeah malume, I just a strange dream, that’s all.”

“What dream was it?”

“I dreamed of Hlongwane for the first time, my father. It was just strange.”

“Was it a good or bad dream?”- His uncle.

“I don’t know malume. He was there with me and Langa, I guess the other boy was Hubo’s son. He talked about a lot of things, mostly good things. I just don’t understand why he visited me.”

“Maybe because you’re taking this huge responsibility, not all boys do this these days, they just impregnate and run.”

“Maybe you’re right,” he says and takes his toothbrush and toothpaste.

“I’m proud of you as well, you know that right?”

He chuckles, “Malume you don’t really care. Your sister and wife haven’t been talking for months and you haven’t made one attempt to sit them down.”

“Your mother is stubborn,” Muzi says.

“Oh, so she’s to be blamed? Malume you changed soon after getting married.”

“Who remained the same after getting married? I just needed your

mother to adjust in not being a princess anymore, I have a queen now.”

Sikelela laughs out loud. “Miss me with those titles. So your wife is above my mom?”

“That’s not what I meant,” Muzi says.

“Do you even know that you have a brother-in-law now?”

Muzi’s eyes widen, “What?!”

“I guess I’ll be taking lobola for the dethroned princess since you no longer care about her.”

“Who is that man? Is he from the village? I don’t want her to be associated with another...excuse me, but a shit of a man like your father.”

Sikelela shrugs, “It’s fine. Uncle Vusi is a good man, I’ve met him, my mother is the happiest I’ve ever seen.”

“I have to meet this man too. Hhawu, kukhona osedla emzini kababa!”

If he was a girl he would’ve just rolled his eyes, his uncle is not that too concerned about his mother.

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VUMO

The cow is being slaughtered outside, Sikelela's uncles are inside the house and they haven't gotten even a drink. The grocery was bought, Qambi and her got here yesterday to help his young wife with the preparations. Everyone knows that whenever there are guests, especially the in-laws, they have to be served. But things are different at the Ntulis, her father has changed his mind over night, he's forbidden the cooking to take place. In his words the Dlamukas are here to pay for their sins, at this stage they're still on his bad books and don't deserve any good gesture. It's when they bring lobola where they will be welcomed with food and drinks.

His second wife understands, she's on his side, Vumo's mother is not here.

Qambi has to speak up for her sister, this is mistreating her in-laws, nothing less.

"Baba," she stands and clears her voice. "I contributed to the grocery, the Dlamukas need to be cooked for."

"Who do you think you are going above my head and your mother's?" Ntuli roars with anger.

"I'm your daughter, I have a say in what happens today as much as everyone. Vumo is my sister," Qambi says.

"You're not going to cook for people who made my daughter pregnant without marrying her. Until I see cows in my kraal they're just dogs."

"Baba you had me before you and mom got married, and I'm sure

my grandfather never treated you like this.”

“You were forced down my throat, just like your mother. Of course your grandfather never treated me anyhow because he wanted me to marry his daughter by force.”

Qambi frowns, she looks at Vumo, they’re both confused.

“What do you mean you were forced? You never loved my mother?” – Qambi.

“Your mother knows the truth, our parents got us together, even when I told her I didn’t want another child with her she still got pregnant with her.” He points at Vumo and her breath almost stops. “But still I accepted both of you and her. I raised you up and all you did was to disappoint me. You’re even better because you were unlucky, you got raped. But Vumokuhle disrespected me big time.”

Langa is getting uncomfortable, he can sense his mother’s change of mood.

“But I’m here, trying to correct that Ntuli,” Vumo says.

“You had to kill your own baby before you realize that you were not on the right path.”

“What do you mean I killed my baby? It’s not my fault that they were born the way they were born and I did everything in my power to make him live.”

“The ancestors were angry with you, had you acted like a good girl that I raised you would’ve called me and asked for my help.”

“So you wanted me to grovel to you after kicking us out like dogs?” She’s crying. This man is triggering feelings Sikelela has worked so hard to heal and bury.

“Your pride and lack of morals killed your son Vumokuhle.” He turns to Qambi, “You can give them drinks.”

His wife follows him out. Qambi takes Langa and puts him on the reed-mat with his blanket. She hugs the fragile Vumo. “You know none of what he said is true. It wasn’t your fault that Nkanyezi lost his life, I’m sure he knows how much you loved him wherever he is.”

Vumo wipes her tears and nods. She needs to go to Nkanyezi’s grave again, she needs to have a conversation with him, his spirit.

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SIKELELA

He’s been taking naps the whole day. His uncle is finally back with two men who accompanied him. His mother is happy, they came back with the meat, which means it’s family braai time.

He’s tired, he doesn’t feel like engaging but knowing his mother he knows she’ll make a big deal about it. So he drags himself out and joins the chaos in the kitchen.

His uncle can’t get over the cold welcome they got at the Ntulis. They use to have a good relationship with Vumo’s father, maybe

because her mother was around. This time they only got a 2l of Coke and that was it. Cebile gives them stew left-overs and bread; they keep crying about hunger.

“Mshana here tells me he now has a stepfather,” Muzi says looking at Cebile.

Cebile turns and gives Sikelela the African-mother-eye. It’s not a secret but he didn’t have to run his mouth.

“I don’t butt in your business with your wife, maybe we should not talk about my personal affairs,” Cebile says.

“If that man is coming here in my father’s house he’s my damn business,” Muzi says.

“I’m not living in your father’s house, clear your eyes and look around you carefully.”

“Sikelela you see what I was talking about? This icy princess is...”

Sikelela sighs, today he’s not in the mood for their grown sibling fights.

“I need some water,” he stretches his arms and stands up.

His mother’s phone beeps, she reads the message with a frown and asks Sikelela to sit.

“What’s going on?” he asks.

“Vumo’s sister is sending me a message; they want is to come over urgently,” Cebile says.

“Why?” Sikelela frowns.

Cebile's hands are shaking, she's fighting back tears but keeping a strong face.

Sikelela's phone rings too. But it's Sthembiso, not Qambi.

"Sikelela where are you?" he asks.

"I'm home but we are about to go, Vumo's sister has asked us to come over."

"Just wait for us, we are coming now," Sthembiso says and drops the call.

Them? Him and who? His mother has rushed to the bedroom, his uncle and his friends are focused on their bread and stew.

Maybe he needs to go to his room and change too. He rushes to his rondavel and changes his clothes. Then he calls Vumo, he needs to know why they're needed there.

It's answered by a woman who calmly tells him everything is fine.

Okay, maybe there's something else.

Within 10 minutes two cars pull up above the Dlamuka homestead. Hubo, Sthembiso, Thobani and all his three Hlongwane mothers are here. This keeps getting stranger. They all fit in two cars, he's riding with the boys, it looks like they're avoiding having any kind of conversation for some weird reason. Sthembiso keeps cutting him off if he asks why they're going to the Ntulis. They must know something for them to drag all the mothers to go to the Ntulis. It's unlike Hubo to see him and not try

to annoy him; he's awkwardly quiet.

People are still crowded at the Ntulis, there was free meat, how could they go home?

Maybe not, they're someone being carried out of the house, she looks unconscious. Looking closer he notices that it's Qambi. Something is wrong!

"What happened? Where's Langa and his mother?" he asks loud, for anyone who has the answer to respond.

Sthembiso holds his hand as they walk towards the house where Qambi was carried out.

Cebile collapses to the door stoep, "MaNtuli you cannot do this to us!"

Nobody has said anything to him. What can't Vumo do? To who? Why are people crying? Why can't he see her and Langa? Why is Qambi unconscious?

SIKELELA

SEASON FINALE

CHAPTER 66

They tell him at the door. His mothers, they already knew but they couldn't bring themselves to tell him in the car. He doesn't understand, it doesn't sink in or make any sense, but he knows that he needs to find his son.

He paves his way in, she's still hanging with a rope around her neck, people are standing on the windows, some are inside the house and crying. When he walks in all eyes turn to him, he's looking for Langa, he cannot see him here.

"Where is my son?" He's looking at Ntuli who looks broken and remorseful.

One woman tells him Langa was taken to his grandfather's bedroom, he rushes out leaving everyone with his late girlfriend.

There's another commotion with Qambi, people are running with water buckets and towels. He walks past them and heads towards Ntuli's bedroom, one room he's culturally forbidden to enter, but today is not about the rules, he gets inside and finds a young girl feeding Langa his bottle.

He picks him up with his bottle and blanket and walks out. MaJiyane walks up to them in the yard and asks if he needs any help. She takes Langa from him and walks to the car.

Sthembiso comes to him and shakes his shoulder. He asks what he wants to do; whether he wants to leave or to wait until the body leaves.

Sikelela just looks at him and asks, "What's going on?"

Sthembiso takes a deep breath, "Langa's mother committed suicide."

"That's not true, Vumo did not commit suicide."

"I'm sorry brother, but she did, they say she left you a letter, maybe it explains what made her take this decision."

He snaps angrily, "She did not commit suicide. Yes she's dead, but she did not kill herself."

"Okay," Sthembiso nods.

They walk towards the house where Vumo is; the body is waiting for the police, their van just pulled up.

Vumo was okay, that he's sure of, they talked earlier today, even though she sounded pissed he was able to convince her that food is no big deal and they laughed about it. This, here, does not make sense. Yes she has a rope around her neck, she's not breathing, she will never look into his eyes again and tell him she loves him. But still, she wouldn't take her own life.

"Who killed her?" he asks at the door. His eyes are on Ntuli, today they'll see a side of him he was sure he buried after becoming a dad.

Cebile has calmed down, now she needs to calm her son because

she's seen that look on his face a number of times and in those times she had ended up paying hospital bills and attending cases at the Chief's home.

"Sikelela not now," she begs.

He paves his way through a few people and stands in front of Ntuli. "What did you do to her?"

His second wife stands, she has crocodile tears in her eyes. "Son, please calm down, we are all traumatized by this."

He holds his left ear, scratches it a few times before grabbing Ntuli by neck. Screams fill the house.

Thankfully Sthembiso walks in and pulls him out before Langa loses both his parents; one to death and another to prison. Knowing Sikelela he could've strangled Ntuli to death, this is also another thing he will have to verify in a later stage Because Ntuli is Langa's grandfather.

"Let's go home Sikelela!" Sthembiso says forcefully pulling him towards the car. "Don't do this to Langa, please."

Sikelela's attempts of breaking free are in vain, Sthembiso is more powerful than he thought.

"Why did you bring me here then? Huh?" His lips are trembling, he's covered in sweat, his eyes are shed with blood instead of tears. He's angry, dangerously angry.

MaJiyane is already in the car with Langa, Sthembiso sits on the wheel and drives off. They pass the ambulance; Qambi is in a

critical condition too. Anything can happen and sadly their mother is not even there.

By the time they get at the Dlamukas Sikelela has calmed down, or so does he look. He leads MaJiyane inside the big house, surprisingly his uncle is still here, maybe he fought with his wife and she told him to stay this side.

There's no milk, that's the first thing he remembers as MaJiyane takes a seat with Langa on her lap. He blinks rapidly and sniffs back and sits flatly on the floor. He's not crying about the situation, he will deal with that after he's dealt with whoever hurt Vumo, he's crying for his son right now.

Sthembiso looks at MaJiyane, "What are we going to do Ma?"

"I will call Azile to come with a tin of milk," she says.

Langa doesn't drink formula milk, Vumo pumps for him, he can't adjust like this. As if he senses the sorrow surrounding him, he starts wailing. His cry pierces through Sikelela's heart, he starts scratching his ears aggressively, Sthembiso lifts him up and walks out with him. His uncle is clueless about comforting, or he just doesn't care that much.

Sthembiso has been in this situation, he knows half of the things he might be going through. But it's hard for him as well, he doesn't know what to say. He's been there, he knows that no words are enough to numb the pain. He started being okay when Giana

came into his life, she shifted him from pain to light.

“What do you want us to do except killing Ntuli?” he asks Sikelela.

Sikelela doesn't answer, his head is buried between his hands.

“You loved her bafo, I'm sure this had nothing to do with you,”-
Sthembiso.

“I want to be alone,” he says.

“I respect that but I'm scared to leave you all by yourself. I will just sit here and shut up.”

Sikelela gasps for air and lies on his back. His temple has a web of throbbing veins, his eyes look inflamed and swollen.

“Langa needs you, you need to be strong for him,” Sthembiso. He said he was shutting up. And his choice of words isn't helping, how do you tell a grieving person to be strong? Sikelela is allowed to be weak.

“I'm not saying put on a brave face, you're allowed to cry as much as you...”

“Please don't!” Sikelela whispers, he takes another huge breath and slightly shakes his head. “I'm one person who gave love a chance. More than enough times, I kept trying, I kept giving, I kept opening up, I kept making myself available. I'm not saying I'm special but I deserved a shot at happiness.”

At least he's talking, he's letting it out. Sthembiso nods, “You did.”

“Then why would she give me hope and then leave? Vumo knew me more than anyone. She knew how far I'd go for her; I would've

laid my life down for her. Whatever it was, I was just a phone call away." He sits and looks at Sthembiso like he's the one with all his answers. "We broke up because when she needed me she did not pick up her phone and called me, even though she knew how much I loved her, I mean I would have swapped my shift and came home to comfort her when she lost her position in the village. She knew that very well, but she didn't call me, she decided to find comfort somewhere else." Drops of sweat roll down his face, mixing with tears. He wiped it all with his T-shirt. "48 hours ago we talked, ironed things out and made new promises. Vumo promised to be open, to pick her phone and call me whenever she feels low or needs help. But guess what has happened? Vumo did not call me, she decided to find comfort in death. Anything I've ever done for her never meant anything. Every sacrifices I made, every penny I spent, every tear I shed. None of it made me enough for her to trust with her soul."

Sthembiso exhales softly, "It's death Sikelela, nobody can predict it."

"But I'm talking about Vumo. She trusted Hubo's dick more than me. It's what she chose when life threw her at the bottom. Now a rope, she's chosen a rope over me!"

"I understand you feel betrayed and hurt right now. But at least you know you gave it your all. There's no 'what if' from your side. You have nothing to be ashamed of. There's nothing you could've done differently because everything you did was enough." He looks at Sikelela, there's no hope in his eyes. "It's going to be hard but one day you will be able to look back at everything you went

through and be proud of yourself. Because you never cracked, you did not change who you are because of the dynamics of your relationship with her.”

Sikelela rubs his temple, “My head is pounding.”

“Let me go and look for painkillers in the car,” Sthembiso says standing up.

“Pills? Get me umsuzwane (fever tea).”

Well, he is Sikelela, of course he will sniff umsuzwane and the headache will disappear. He won't drink pills.

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HUBO

Ntuli was at odds with Vumo, conclusively her babies as well. So it was advisable that Langa leaves with Sikelela, now he's instructed to collect Langa's bag and everything that is his. The body has been taken away. Qambi rushed to the hospital, she's in everyone's prayers.

After the police read through the suicide note with judgmental faces they gave it to Ntuli's second wife, Vumo's present mother. None of the things written were directed to her or her husband so she gave the letter to Cebile. And Cebile asked Hubo to keep it in the car with Langa's bag.

It's not his place to read it, or to grieve Vumo's death. He cannot

be openly sad about her death. They didn't get along, hardly talked about what happened between them and how it affected them as individuals. He chose to hate her, that's how he dealt with her being his brother's girlfriend and all the secrets she kept from him and how she made him feel invalid and unimportant when he met her the second time. She did the same; she hated him for her own reasons.

When he opens the folded letter, just to take a sneak peak, his name is here. This better not fuck up his relationship with Sikelela. His hands tremble as he holds the letter straight and starts reading;

"I'm not sure when you're going to read this, that's if you even read it. Knowing you I know that you're angry at me right now and it's going to take time for you to forgive me. But I know eventually you will, because unlike my father you understood me as a human not immune to mistakes. By the time you read this, hopefully, I will be reunited with our son Nkanyezi.

I did not end my life because I did not want to live anymore. Our future was promising, you're everything a woman would want Sikelela, everything! I wanted more mornings waking up in your embrace, I wanted to see Langa grow, I wanted to witness him getting the unconditional fatherly love you and I never got to taste - because I know you're going to be a great father to him. But my life wasn't just filled with positive aspects to look forward to everyday; I struggled Sikelela you know that. One day I was okay and the next I was not. After that mistake I made everything just

felt like fate, like a payback. I don't know how many times I tried to convince myself that Mthoko wronged me, no matter what I did to him no woman deserve what he did to me. Nkanyezi's death too, I told myself not all conjoined twins make it alive after separation, that it was normal that only one twin survive. That was me on the days I chose to be positive and give myself some worth. But some days I'd remember what I did to end up with Mthoko and pregnant with twins away from home. Then I'd remember that it was all my doing, I brought all that pain to myself, I deserved it.

Yesterday and the day before, in fact this whole week, I was my happiest. So happy Sikelela that I forgot how disappointing I am as a child, how imperfect and undeserving I am. I forgot about my mother's misery, that I'm responsible of. I forgot about my sister who's homeless because of me. I forgot about Nkanyezi's death which used to chip at my soul every minute. Until I got here, then I was reminded of everything. I chose to put an end to self-doubts, to everyday questions and regrets, to the worry I give you everyday. You've ran enough errands for me, you have listened to enough sad stories, you deserve a break.

I want you to know that I loved you. You and I had our imperfect love story. I don't think there has been a day when I didn't think of you, in pain and in pleasure. Things didn't go the way we wanted, I disappointed you, just like I disappointed everyone I cared about. I know you forgave me but I also know how hard it was for you to live with what Hubo and I did. It can't be that you were normal after that, because the truth is, I wasn't normal either.

I never hated Hubo, not the way you think I did. He gave me my first experience, no matter how hard I tried to make that reality go away I just couldn't erase it, because it did happen and it left a mark in my life. At some point, regretfully, I wanted you to be like him. I wanted you not to care too much about doing what's right. That was before I realized that Hubo and Sikelela are two different people. I could not erase the memories I had of him by turning you into him. I had to live with him in my head lying on top of me, introducing me to every dirty things I never thought existed. Because he's one of the bad choices I made, I chose to do those things with him, him and I created those memories together (not sure if he remembers or cares.) I had to let you be, because you're an amazing person as you are. But God had to make Langa look like him. I guess He wanted me to accept that imperfect part of my life.

I did not hate him, I just coped by hating him. I hope he finds love one day.....”

His hands are sweaty, he puts the letter on the other seat and takes a deep breath. His feelings are not clear about this. She gave some details he would have Sikelela rather not reading about. They were not necessary. But he finds comfort in her wishing him well, he needed it.

SEASON FINALE

SIKELELA

CHAPTER 67

...Sikelela please don't allow any woman to come and change things between you and Langa. You are all he's got now. I know we talked about this but I still ask you to live a little. Your mother always told me you started smiling after I got into your life. But I know that's not entirely true, you also love attending traditional ceremonies and celebrating your Africanity. Why don't you take time and explore how far your interest goes? Maybe visit a different tribe and see how they do things. I swear you'd love the Sotho culture. Travelling is not about having champagne in the boat and taking pictures, you can still travel and be Sikelela, doing what you love.

Don't allow my absence to bring you down, I'm sure the new world will bring me joy and I hope that I will be accepted with all my flaws. Now it's time to focus on you and in the future. Leave what we had in the past and only take good memories with you.

Tell your mother that I'm grateful for everything she did for me and for believing in me so much. I know she's still shattered right now, but please tell her the support she gave me was enough, I didn't kill myself because anyone failed me, or because I didn't have enough support system. I'm sorry I didn't get to meet Uncle Vusi, I promised her I would, but she must know that I wish them nothing but the best.

Lastly, our son. Please tell Langa he was the ray of sunshine, a twin of miracle and great survivor. I love him more than..." Sikelela squashes the letter and throws it away. She could've told these people all these things herself, if she had this much to say why did she take her own life?

"I hate this bitch! I'm the only person who believed in her, I gave her my heart and she gave me nothing. A fuckin' used pussy and lies."

"She gave you a son," Hubo says. He's trying to hide his emotions, with everything that's written on that letter mourning Vumo's death would send wrong signals. Sthembiso and Thobani are okay, they're allowed to be sad.

"You may have introduced her to things as she writes in honor of you, but do not tell me how to feel Hubo! He's on his feet, this is the first time he's hated a man with his blood this much, even the hate he had for his father is nothing compared to what he feels for his brother. Hubo and Vumo took from him, they turned his life upside down, he's been miserable because of them. Blood may have prevented him from seeing the truth but he sees it now, whether they knew each other back then or not, Hubo played his part in making his life miserable and now he thinks he can defend his whore.

"I'm not telling you how to feel, I'm just saying..."

"You're just saying amasimba!"

Sthembiso pulls Hubo to the side and asks him to leave. It's either that or he's burying one of them. He didn't see Vumo's suicide

getting between them, they moved past that incident a long time ago.

Hubo leaves, Sikelela is pacing around looking ready to hurt someone, luckily Cebile has arrived and taken Langa.

“I hope he’s not your brother because Mthoko won’t be eating his supper tomorrow, he’ll be herding the ducks,” Sikelela says to Thobani. He doesn’t care what he’s saying or who he’s hurting right now, he just wants someone to pay. Ntuli is out of the equation, he cannot kill him because of Langa, but Mthoko’s days are over.

“You will go to jail,” Sthembiso tells him.

“I don’t care,” he says.

“You don’t care that Langa will grow up without both his parents?”

“You are here sgora, aren’t you? You will take care of him. Or even better his mother’s fuck-buddy will do the honors.” He takes something under the mattress and pushes it behind his waist.

“Sikelela where are you going?” Sthembiso runs after him.

He’s walking out. “To see Qambi.”

“And the gun?”

“Go fuck your Karen, Sguqa.”

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Qambi was born with a heart condition called aortic stenosis. It

was never treated, but luckily she's able to live a normal life unless situations lead her into arrhythmias. She was the one to discover Vumo, she had left Langa with her and said she's going to take a bath. After 30 minutes she began to feel uneasy and decided to go and check what was keeping Vumo so long, only to find her only sister dead.

She ran out of breath and collapsed. Their mother has been informed but she can only attend to one problem at aq time; obviously sitting on the mattress for her late daughter. After the neighbour who came with Qambi to the hospital went back home she was left to the hospital staff.

She wakes up hoping it was all a dream. She's not unfamiliar with the hospital, she's usually here when shit has hit the fan- her heart weakening. Vumo shouldn't have been the one to kill herself, she had every reason to live. A man who loved her despite all her flaws and short-comings, a handsome son and loving mother-in-law, if she wished she wouldn't have to work a day in her life because Sikelela is a providing man. On the other hand, her, born with a heart condition, raped when she was young and almost had her rectum destroyed, her boyfriend dumped her for confronting him about his cheating ways and blamed everything on her fear of sexual intercourse.

With Vumo gone and her mother dry and out of option, she's not expecting anyone to come and check on her. So she's a bit surprised when the nurse tells her she has a visitor.

Sikelela walks in, her heart sinks immediately because out of all people he's the one she least expecting to see.

He drags a chair and sits.

"Qambi how are you feeling?"

She doesn't know how to answer this question, she just shrugs.

"I'm feeling betrayed. Your sister betrayed me Qambi," he says.

She exhales; he's in pain but so is she.

"I don't think I'll ever love again," he says.

"You will, maybe not now or anytime soon, but one day you will heal and be okay. I'm here to help with Langa if you need me."

Sikelela exhales and asks, "What happened to you?"

"I fainted, I'm going to be okay."

"What did Ntuli say exactly?"

"A lot of things, I'm not ready to talk about it."

He nods...

She looks at him, "I don't have answers, if that's what you came here looking for, I just know that she loved you."

"No, I knew you'd be alone, I passed by to make sure you're okay."

"Thank you," she says, careful not to sound too vulnerable or emotional.

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LONDEKA

I couldn't go to Durban Fashion week, I cancelled in the morning when my sickness got worse. This means I have a man baying for my blood- Ntuthuko. His response after my text was; "we will talk about this Londeka." Knowing him I know he's going to have a severe punishment for me. I'm ready for it, whatever he wants I will just comply. For now I have a tall man hovering over me with a bowl of Jungle Oats. I have threw up twice but he still wants me to eat.

"You need to eat," he keeps preaching.

"I will eat when I'm feeling well Sgcino," I snap.

"It's 11:23 and you have nothing in your tummy."

Lord!

"Because I keep throwing up."

"You need to keep trying."

Is he a food police or what? I sit with my eyebrow raised. He's never cared whether I eat breakfast or not. Lately he's been very clingy, he's in my place a lot and doing things for me like I have no hands. I don't remember bewitching him, why would a black man give his woman breakfast-in-bread three mornings in a row? I didn't win lottery, I don't have pending insurances, what did I do?

"What's going on?" I ask him.

He frowns, "What do you mean?"

"You are acting weird Sgcino."

He clears his throat, his eyes run away from me, right there and then I just know he's hiding something. Whatever we did to men!

"You said there will be no secrets in this relationship." I'm begging while mentally preparing for an explosion as soon as he reveals the secret.

He's clearing his throat again. Something big is coming.

"When was the last time you had your periods?"

Oh, I thought he made someone pregnant or something.

"I had an injection two months ago," I say confidently.

"Is it 100%..."

"I don't get my periods, if that's what you're asking."

He sits and rubs his hands together- his sign of frustration.

"Mistakes happen MaHlongwane, nothing is ever 100% effective."

"I know," I'm getting worried. Where is this going?

"I just think you eat a lot lately, you are always sick especially in the morning and you are gaining weight. Don't you think maybe the Hlongwanes have welcomed the Zulus?"

"I'm not pregnant," my voice is breaking, I have tears burning my eyes. I'm not ready for that, that's why I take injection every three month, I have a career to nurture, I have a contract to abide with

and Sgcino knows all of this.

“Let’s confirm with the doctor,” he says and touches my cheek.

I yank his hand off, I’m crying, this is all his fault.

“Please babe, you know everything is going to be okay no matter what the outcome is. I’m ready for anything, be it’s having a family with you, that has always been my dream.”

“Okay, what about MY dreams?” I ask.

He doesn’t have an answer, life is all about men getting what they want, isn’t?

I don’t speak to him on our way to the doctor. I’m on my phone researching about pregnancy; what are the chances? On Facebook there are a lot of women who got pregnant while on contraceptives. I’m scared, I already see the shadows of my crumbling future before me. Nine months is a long time to walk around with the evidence of sex. Moreover, I don’t like babies, one of my own sounds even more scary. Come on, I’m a baby too, I need my own mom. I can’t need my mom and have someone needing her own mom from me too.

He’s ecstatic, he’s the one telling the doctor everything. He was right about me gaining weight, I have 10 extra kilos and I want to cry. I don’t look fat, do I? My BP is ridiculous, taking the pregnancy test is just a confirmation of what Sgcino said this was. The doctor congratulate both of us, I don’t think my brain is still functioning, it feels like my head is just a big thing on top of my

shoulders, I feel light-headed and almost trip and fall as I stand up.

“Are you okay?” Both him and the doctor are panicking.

“I’m hungry,” I say.

He looks at the doctor and tells him I have been throwing everything up. The doctor suggests an orange and lot of water. So I’m pregnant, I’m going to be a mom while I don’t even have a clear point of mother reference.

Sgcino goes to buy the orange, he comes back with a whole sack. I’m sitting on the pavement next to the car with my bag lying next to me with some of its contents scattered on the pavement. My mouth is dry, I was looking for my lipgloss when I remembered that I’m pregnant and just threw everything on the pavement. I mean what is the point of having moist lips when you’re pregnant and about to get in a very nasty war with your agent?

“Is everything alright?” He’s looking around at everything that is scattered on the pavement.

“Yeah,” I say.

He bends down and collects everything and puts it back in my bag. He asks me to get up and get in the car.

“I will peel our orange,” he says loading the sack at the back seat.

“I don’t want it peeled,” I say.

He frowns, “I don’t understand.”

I lay my hand out, he hesitates, I narrow my eyes in a murderous threatening way. He unties the sack and takes one orange and

passes it to me.

“Let’s get in the car,” he says.

“No, I will eat here.” I mean, I’m pregnant and jobless, I must as well sit on the pavement and suck the orange like a hobo. When he realizes that I won’t budge he stands next to me and let me be.

I finish the orange and dust myself up. There’s a car pulling up behind ours, the driver looks like one of those wealthy municipality seniors who give tenders to their relatives. I greet him...I can feel Sgcino’s gawking eyes on me.

The corrupt man greets me back with a hesitant smile on his face.

“Bhuti awunawo bandla uR2?” I ask as humbly as one could be.
(my brother, don’t you have R2)

I hear a very annoying voice behind me saying, “Whaaat?”

The man searches in his pockets, he looks confused but sympathetic at the same time. He gives me R5, I get on my knees chanting endless ‘thank you’s’. As soon as he walks away my arm is yanked, I turn to a man trembling with anger.

“What are you doing? Are you an actress now?”

“No, I’m pregnant.” I get inside the car and put my R5 in my pocket.

He gets inside as well, he’s furious.

“Why are you asking coins from strangers?”

“Because I’m pregnant,” I say.

“You are not the first woman to fall pregnant. Did I deny the pregnancy? Did I say I won’t help you get back into modelling after giving birth? Did I say I won’t talk to Ntuthuko and come up with another plan? What have I done Londeka? Huh? Why are you embarrassing me like this in public? The nerve to ask another man’s coins while I’m standing next to you! Angihlupheki mina Londeka, ungangenzi nje isihlupheki.” He starts the car, I fasten my seatbelt because I’m here for a ride.

Mission accomplish! Men want their feelings to be nursed and egos to be massaged while they don’t give a hoot about women. Nobody is going to have a good day today, not under my watch!

He drives straight to his house without asking me. I choose silence, sometimes it’s gold. My phone beeps as we pull up, it’s a text from Hubo.

Langa’s mother committed suicide- the text says.

I’m lost for words. Sikelela has been hell-bent in bringing his family together. I can’t believe it was all for nothing. I’m not going to call Langa’s mother selfish because I don’t know what goes through a person’s mind before they decide to take their own lives. I’d like to believe suicide is the last option, it’s something you do when you have exhausted all options. I feel for Sikelela more than anyone.

“Babe, Sikelela’s babymama killed herself,” I say, still in shock.

“That’s tragic. When? Today?”

I shrug and grab a screenshot of the text and send it to Mela.

“So you are the little bird now?” He doesn’t look impressed by my journalism skills.

“I’m pregnant,” I say.

SEASON FINALE

SIKELELA

CHAPTER 68

LONDEKA

I'm home, I had to come as soon as I can. I wanted to go and see Sikelela but his mother said he didn't sleep at home but he texted saying he's fine. I suppose I'm just going to be here and avail myself as a big sister. I don't want to repeat the same mistakes I did with Sthembiso and Zime. I'm also looking for an opportunity to give Sthembiso the letter, I know when they find out about my situation they'll think he's just doing this to cover the shame, not knowing he's been begging me for months.

I'm with my sisters in the kitchen, we are having snacks. Times like this remind me to check on my loved ones. People are dying, some in silence and some in misery. I don't want neither of them to suffer the same fate as Langa's mother, I'm here for them, I will never judge them.

"So how's everything going?" I ask.

"Good," they say in unison.

"Everything good? Boys? Books? Life?" They're laughing at me. They're like twins, always together.

"Well, Azile has a tattoo," Sane says.

Okay, let's pause...I'm looking at Azile and I'm judging her. Tattoo?

"Nothing spooky, I inked my initials," she says.

"You know your initials, why do you need to ink them on your skin?" I ask.

She shrugs, "It's cool."

It will be more cool when her father's trio sees it.

"Where is it? Show."

The girl undoes her shirt, the tattoo is her boob. Who inks initials on the boobs?

"You know you cannot remove that, right?"

She chuckles. She doesn't take it that seriously, it's just me who's fearing for her life. I grew up in the Satanism Era where other kids claimed to have gone to the atmosphere and met Nicki Minaj and Lil Wayne and came back on earth to cause car accidents, all because of tattoos.

"Anyway, I want to ask you guys how do you feel about being aunts?" I ask.

"We haven't met the babies yet," Azile says.

She's referencing to Qobo and Langa, and I'm talking about them becoming aunts through me.

"Let's say it's me who gets a baby," I look at them with a cover-up smile.

"Without getting married?" – Saneli.

What a difficult situation! I take a sip of my milk and tell them yes, without getting married.

“That would mean you’re doing unprotected sex and you are not on contraceptives,” – Saneli again.

“Will that make me a bad role model?” I can’t believe I’m this hungry for their validation.

“Pretty much,” Saneli says, she doesn’t hold anything back.

Meanwhile Azile tries to massage my ego and tells me it wouldn’t change how she looks at me.

“But why wouldn’t you use a condom?” Saneli. I need this child to leave me alone. “Is it nicer without it?” she asks and Azile breaks a short chuckle.

I’ve never been so shy.

“No, mistakes happen,” I say.

“So you’re having a baby?”

I don’t know how much I trust them not to spill the beans yet. So I deny and say I was just asking to get their opinions.

Before things get more intense I decide to go and see if Sthembiso has returned from his house. He’s rebuilding there, everything seems to be in a hurry, I think he wants to sneak his white doctor in without any disturbances.

I find him outside with a toolbox. He looks up and smiles, he

didn't expect me to be home.

"Did you ditch your Fashion gig for us?"

I wish it was that simple, but I say yes to get on his good books.

"And then what's in that envelope?" he asks.

"Your letter from Sgcino," I say.

His eyebrows crease, he wipes his hands and takes it.

"I'm getting married!" I announce.

"Ummm, nope, you're not." He doesn't even open it, he puts it on the bench and goes back to what he was doing.

"You don't want him to pay lobola?" I'm disappointed by his reaction. I thought he'd be happy, my bride price will go to him.

He exhales heavily. "Have you thought about it or you're just caught up in love?"

"I have," I'm confused.

"So what is it going to be? You're becoming a Zulu wife or your brand ambassador and modeling thing?"

"I can do both," I say.

He laughs out loud. I'm not sure what's funny, I will do both, Sgcino promised me.

"And you believed him? You think a man like him is going to have a wife who parades for cameras half-naked for a living?"

"He got me into it," I say.

“There’s a difference between wife and girlfriend. As a wife you’ll have to bear duties of being a wife in the village, give him children and keep his house warm,” he says.

“I can do that,” I stay by my word.

He sighs, “I will talk to your mothers.”

That’s more like it!

“Where is Hubo?”

“He went to see the boy who could possibly be Thobani’s brother.”

“Oh I thought he’d be with Sikelela.”

His heavy sigh somehow stresses me out. Sikelela and Hubo are inseparable, why wouldn’t Hubo be there for Sikelela and not worry about where he is? I understand Thobani’s matter needs to be attended to as well, but Sikelela’s is more crucial at a present moment.

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STHEMBISO

Giana called and said she was coming. She could feel the distress in his voice over the phone. Vumo’s death has affected them in a way that nobody else can understand. She mentioned losing Nkanyezi in the letter, that’s all on Sthembiso. He knows he played a part in it, Giana also feels the same as way.

She parks a distance from his half-built house, Sthembiso comes out in casual shorts and runners. It's a chilly afternoon, there's a lot on his mind now with this Londeka's sudden interest in marriage. He doesn't trust her decision, as wrong as that may sound but he doesn't. Londeka can let a poor guy pay lobola for her and then wake up the next day changing her mind. Maybe her mothers can talk through her.

He gets in the car, Giana's, and takes a long held breath after closing the door. Then he turns and asks if he's getting any kiss.

Giana smiles. She's been missing this man but she knows if they start with kisses they may end up not talking about what she came here for.

"How are you feeling?" she asks.

"I'm okay," he says.

She tilts her head to the side. He's lying.

"Really, how are you?"

He exhales, "Guilty."

"Only one was going to survive anyway, don't put all the blame on you. You did what was asked of you."

"I know, but I still feel let down. I thought they'd protect Sikelela's heart after the sacrifice of his blood. Vumo saved their family, why did Mkhonto, specifically, let her down?"

"How is he doing?" Giana asks.

"We don't know where he is. He's hurting, my biggest worry is him

and Hubo, there's an animosity between them and I don't know if they will ever get along again," he says.

"Why? What happened?" – Giana.

"It's about their past with Langa's mother. Things just went south in the blink of an eye and I'm scared for both of them."

"They're going to work it out, just believe in them, blood is thicker than water." She brushes his head, forcing a few chuckles out of him.

"You can't just touch my head, I'm a man," he says.

"Yes, MY man," she argues with a challenging stare.

He surrenders, she keeps brushing his head, it's helping him relax and feel safe again. He asks if she wants to see the progress of the house.

"As long as we don't go to the rondavel," she says.

He laughs. "Why are you scared of the rondavel?"

"Because the last time I got inside it I had my back turned against tables and my panties torn," she says.

"I'm a gentleman now," he convinces her with an alluring smile.

She gives in and agrees on the condition that no risks will be taken because of lust again. He promises to comply but he knows his Giana, she wouldn't say no to him, they haven't spent time together in a long time, surely she misses him too.

The car parks in the yard, he holds her hand and takes her inside the house. Maybe the house had to burn, it was necessary for his healing process. Now he can stand here and not even think about Zime. Giana's arm is around his waist, he's taking her around showing her what's been done and what's missing. He extended the house with two more rooms, now he has nephews, they'll grow up and want to sleep over at their big uncle's house.

He leads her to the main bedroom and stands behind her with his arms wrapped over her shoulders.

"This is where we will be making sex," he says.

She turns and looks at him.

He smiles and pushes loose strays of her hair behind her ear and leaning down to steal a quick kiss.

"You're obsessed with sex, it's not healthy."

He laughs out loud. "Look who's talking!"

She frowns slightly and asks, "What do you mean?"

"I mean, do you want to taste some chocolate?" His hands have dropped to her waist, he's been going through a lot and sometimes sex is the best therapy.

"You want me to give you a head?"

He releases a deep breath, his front is growing hard behind her butt. He lifts her hair and trails soft kisses behind her neck. "Yes, please."

She moans, arching her back and feeling more of his erection.

His hands scoop her boobs and massage them. He's breathing hard behind her ears, she's getting wetter and the urge to kneel down and give him what he wants is growing.

A loud voice disrupts, it's Londeka.

"This has to be my room!"

Sthembiso exhales deeply and lets go of Giana. Why is Londeka here? He's never cared to come and see his house.

"Who's that?" Giana whispers in panic.

Before Sthembiso answers the intruder shows herself. Her eyes widen when she sees Giana, she pays no mind to the displeasure on Sthembiso's face and walks closer.

"This is my brother," she says.

Giana forces an awkward smile and looks back at Sthembiso. You don't disturb a horny man! He looks livid.

"I'm Giana, his friend," she says.

"With benefits. You're white." It's a statement that sounds like a question.

"I'm Irish," Giana says.

"That's just another version of white." She walks in and looks around. Sthembiso is standing against the wall, thanks to Giana who stood in front of him and helped him hide his erection from his sister.

Londeka looks at them, "So?"

“So what?” Sthembiso asks.

“You’re not going to tell her anything about me?”

“You’re annoying,” Sthembiso says.

Giana gasps and looks at him eyes-widen.

“He’s mean by nature. I’m not annoying, he’s lying. So how did you move from the twins surgeon to his friend?”

“Ummm, it happened naturally, I guess,” – Giana.

She nods and smiles. “How many times do you cut your hair in a year?”

Sthembiso releases a low grunt.

“It depends on which length I want them in and when. I don’t have a specific number,” Giana says.

“Which shampoo do you use?”

Sthembiso breaks his silence. “Please leave, you can ask her these questions some other time, we are in the middle of something.”

“No, I want to ask now,” Londeka says.

Giana smiles, maybe Sthembiso wasn’t lying, she’s a bit extra.

“You’re disturbing us,” Sthembiso says firmly.

“No, I’m not, you were just standing. You don’t tell me anything about her, you have introduced her to Hubo and Sikelela and left me behind. Shoot me if you want.”

“Londeka don’t...” Giana intervenes before another sibling rivalry starts. What a handful family!

“We can have lunch together some time next week,” she says.

“Who’s paying?” Londeka asks.

“Him,” Giana points at Sthembiso.

“Okay, cool!” She smiles and walks out.

When Giana hears her talking outside she turns to Sthembiso with her eyes widen. “Oh, wow!”

“At times I’m also like, wow. But she’s my sister, she loves me in her unique way, I’m sure she’s going to love you too,” he says pulling her back.

“If she gets you worked up like this I think she’s going to be my favourite,” Giana says.

He smiles, “Why do you hate me so much?”

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SIKELELA

He slept in Effingham, he wanted to be alone, without anyone asking him how he’s feeling a million times. He woke up and went to work, it wasn’t his shift but he reported in anyway. From work he caught a taxi to Empangeni, from here he’ll be heading back home to his son, hopefully feeling better.

He should've killed Mthoko back then, he shouldn't have spared him. How dare he hurt Vumo like that? She was beautiful, any man who got her was lucky. Who the fuck is he to think she was his toy? Today he's going to see his life flashing in front of his eyes and he will wish he could turn back the clock and make better decisions.

As he turns to the gate there's a car parked, Hubo's. What is this idiot doing here? He was very clear on what he's going to do to Mthoko. If Hubo is here to warn him then he's in for a very mean surprise. No Vumo-Fuck-Buddies-Association is going to stop him from doing what he's already planned.

He walks inside the yard, it's very quiet, people seem to be indoors. He goes straight to Mthoko's room, the door is slightly open.

Hubo notices him standing by the door with a gun in his hand. Shit is about to go down. He merely came here to talk about Thobani's identity situation. Mthoko recognized his father from the picture Hubo showed him. He didn't know his father had another child, he never told them even in his deathbed. They're trying to get hold of family elders, that's what has kept Hubo here for this long.

"Sikelela don't do that!" Hubo jumps up on his feet.

Sikelela already knew he was here. As much as he hates Hubo at the moment, he has no intention of hurting him because, just like him, he's a father. Qobo still needs his father.

“Get out Hubo,” he says.

Now Mthoko realizes what’s going on. He’s seen this face before, it’s one that he prayed to never see again in his life. He gets off bed and takes backward steps with his eyes widely open. He just found out about Vumo’s suicide and he’s hurting just like Sikelela.

“He is Thobani’s brother,” Hubo pleads.

Sikelela has stepped inside, he’s standing with his gun pointed at Mthoko. “I don’t care, Vumo was Qambi’s sister as well,” he says.

“I know bafo, but he didn’t kill her,” – Hubo.

That just infuriates Sikelela even more. Yes, Mthoko didn’t take a rope and tie it around Vumo’s neck but he played a damn part in it. He gave her the push and for that he has to pay with his life.

“Get out Hubo!” he repeats.

“You will go to jail.”

“I don’t care, get the fuck out!”

Hubo takes a step forward. Just as he does Mthoko goes for the window in a high jump. There’s some commotion, Hubo tried to prevent the situation when he saw that Sikelela was attempting to fire and pulled Mthoko from the window. He thought they could talk, Mthoko needed to stand still, Sikelela would’ve eventually calmed down.

But unfortunately Sikelela fired, aiming at Mthoko, and Hubo got in the way. He’s the one lying on the floor with Mthoko’s bullet.

It takes a minute for Sikelela to see what he’s done. It’s too late,

Mthoko has ran for the hills.

"Hubo? No, no, no!"

SEASON FINALE

SIKELELA

CHAPTER 69

“Hubo please don’t do this to me!” He’s turning Hubo around with trembling hands, there’s blood all over his shirt. “Bafo open your eyes.”

Hubo slowly opens his eyes, “Idiot, I’m not dead, you shot my arm.”

“I didn’t mean to shoot you, please don’t close your eyes again, I’m going to take you to the hospital and hand myself to the police. Just hold on, they’ll take out the bullet, you’re going to be okay.” He’s rambling all this lifting Hubo off the floor.

“Ay futsek!” Hubo curses and grabs Mthoko’s shirt to wrap it around his arm.

People are outside their rooms in alarm, the landlord immediately recognizes Sikelela and runs back inside the house with a loud scream. Everyone starts running and hiding. So he’s now a monster everyone is scared of.

He’s not carrying any documents but he will drive and face whatever comes his way. Hubo sits on the passenger seat, now he’s started feeling the pain, he asks Sikelela for water.

“Drive fast before I lose too much blood,” he says, wincing in pain. He’s not angry, he understands Sikelela is still under the cloud of

anger and Mthoko is the easiest to target and take his frustrations out on. But he's disappointed because in all this he did not think about Langa. Isn't parenthood about putting your children before anything else? Vumo is not worth him losing his freedom and going to jail leaving Langa an orphan.

Sikelela laid unconscious in this very hospital and now his brother is here because of him. They're attended urgently, the slim nurse recognized Sikelela's face and made everything possible for them. She's wearing a weave today but Hubo can still see her without the blonde haircut, she's still attractive.

"Are you my nurse?" he asks.

"I'm everyone's nurse." She gives Sikelela a slight frown with a hidden smile and walks away with Hubo's file. Maybe spending the night here won't be a bad thing, he might leave this hospital as somebody's man.

Sikelela is sitting quietly on the chair.

Hubo looks at him, "You look miserable, please clear your head and have a straight story when the police arrive."

"What straight story?" he asks.

"We went to see Mthoko to discuss the issue of Thobani's identity. Right? Then someone came in and fired a shot."

"People saw me, Mthoko will tell the truth as well, what's the use of me lying?"

“Nobody saw you shooting, they saw you coming out of Mthoko’s room with me,” Hubo says.

He shakes his head. “They’re not stupid.”

“Ok, so what? You’re going to change the story we just gave the nurses and say something else to the police? Your gun is not licensed, they might dig more and find out you also killed Mshengu and you could be locked up for a very long time,” Hubo says.

“Don’t I deserve it?” he asks.

“You do. But I don’t deserve to have my brother going to jail and it’s my feelings that matter the most here,” Hubo says.

Of course, it’s his feelings that matter. Sikelela heaves a sigh just thinking about what his mother is going to do if anything happens to him.

“Where’s your phone? You need to call Sguqa,” Hubo says.

“It’s in the car, I think. Thobani also needs to come, I don’t have my license with me, I might be going to jail too.” He rises from the chair and walks out as the nurse walks in. Hubo still has a bullet stuck in his arm, he’s scheduled for theater at 8pm.

“Your Brazilian weave is beautiful,” he compliments, staring at the nurse.

“It’s Peruvian, thank you.” She’s trying not to be smitten by this guy because he’s not the first patient to take chances with staff members.

“Do you still have blonde hair?”

She frowns, “No...have you seen me before?”

“I was here visiting my brother when he was admitted here after being stabbed. How could I have not seen this beauty?”

“I’m at work!” she warns, but not firm enough.

“Then promise me I will see you when you’re not here so that I can tell you how beautiful you are without turning you on.”

Is this guy serious? She looks at him in disbelief.

“Who said you’ll go out? You could die here.” For a nurse that’s a very unprofessional statement, but it doesn’t matter, she can just say he was harassing her, which isn’t far from the truth.

“Let’s make a deal then, if I don’t die you will give me your number and agree to come on a date with me,” he says.

“Jesus Christ, I’m at work. Can you be like other patient and keep quiet?”

Hubo smiles, she’s even more beautiful when she’s angry. Normally he wouldn’t go for a petite yellowbone because of stereotypes around them, but damn here he’s taken.

“Deal?” he asks.

She sighs, “Fine, now will you shut up and only talk when you’re asked to?”

“With pleasure, ma’m. Please give me something for pain before I shut up.”

Yeah neh...

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STHEMBISO

They ended up at a BnB, he couldn't let her go back to Durban with spending some quality hours with her. After everything that has happened this week he needed this time. Just to forget about his problems for a while and enjoy himself.

He's yet to get used to Giana's screams. Sometimes they get to him and make him wonder if she's still screaming because of pleasure and not pain. And the fact that she turns red when he spansks her butt. It makes him feel like he's aggressive.

"You're still okay?" he asks pulling out and lifting his eyes to her.

Her hand immediately runs to her clit, it looks like a small button, she tweaks and rubs it. It shows that she wants more, so he removes her hand and laps on her clit with his tongue a few times before entering her again.

"You want it baby?" he asks fully buried inside her.

"Yes, give it to me!" She opens her legs wider, very boldly and daringly.

He's tempted to just pound her mercilessly. But she's the size of a baby, what if he hurts her?

“Bambelela,” he says, he wants to be held.

“Huh?”

Oh snap.

“Hold me.”

She wraps her arms around him, their lips connect in a very steamy kiss, he moves slowly with his eyes following hers everywhere they go.

“I love you Giana,” he says.

She’s breathing heavily, she manages to confess her love too before her voice disappears in the moans.

“Thank you for coming into my life, without you I don’t know where I’d be.” He closes his eyes and applies more pressure to his strokes. It feels good, so good. “Oh Giana, uyipha kamnandi indoda!”

Whatever that means, she wants him inside her all night long.

“Yes, fuck me baby!” she says and licks the side of his neck.

He groans deeply and presses his dick in one spot. She feels the walls of her cookie contracting and splashing out some juices.

She bites his neck and releases a suppressed scream. That sends shivers through Sthembiso’s body, his body convulses, he knows if she keeps biting his neck like that he’s going to...

Giana licks and smooches the side of his neck.

“Baby wait, you’re...Giana yima phela baby...ooooh” His body fails

him, he spills hot cum inside the condom and drops his head over her shoulder breathing like an athlete who just ran a marathon.

What is this woman doing to him?!

He wipes her and lies next to her calming his heavy breaths. Giana plants a soft kiss on his forehead and cuddles him like a child. Maybe this is the kind of love he's been yearning for. He doesn't feel like he needs to be half human for Giana, she's always willing to meet him half-way. Which makes this different from the relationship he had with Zime- he's not saying, but maybe different in a positive way. With Zime he knew he had to hide her and protect her from all the bad in the world. Giana is different, she's just not that kind, if Sthembiso was to go to a war she'd be running behind him with extra bags of bullets. That's just how she is, he's wherever he is and wanting to help.

"What are you thinking so deeply?" she asks.

"You," he says.

"You're thinking about me while lying on my boobs?"

He chuckles, "Yeah, I'm lucky."

"Oh yes, you're damn lucky."

He runs his finger on her chin with a soft gaze fixed on her.

"Do you see yourself having kids with me?"

She fakes a yawn. "And that Zulu man emerges again! Can't we adopt cats or something?"

“You want my mother to send cats around?”

She laughs, “She can send us.”

“Okay, but you do see yourself spending your life with me?”

“Yeah, I do,” she says.

That warms his heart. It’s been a high road but she’s here now, he doesn’t think he will ever look back. Well, he owes her another round even though she’s responsible for his premature spill.

His phone rings as he pushes his hand between her legs.

It’s Sikelela...

“Babe I have to answer this.” He sits up and answers, “Sikelela, I’ve been trying to get hold of you.”

“I’m at the hospital with Hubo,” Sikelela says.

“What? Why are you at the hospital?”

Hubo’s voice interjects; “I’m in ICU.”

ICU and yelling over the phone? Sthembiso is panicking. This is no time for games.

“Sikelela what happened there?”

“He got shot on the arm,” – Sikelela.

“Shot? When? By who?”

“By me,” Sikelela says.

The phone almost slips from his ear. He knew they weren’t

getting along but he didn't see it spiraling out of control like this.

"You shot your brother?" He's fuming. He respects Vumo and would never throw his cheap opinions in what went down with the whole Hubo drama. But now, wow!

"It wasn't for him, he got in the way, I wanted to shoot Mthoko," Sikelela says.

A deep breath Sthembiso! Giana has sat up, she's looking at him and signaling with her hand for him to tell her what's going on.

"Have the police come?" he asks.

"Not yet, Hubo wants me to lie but I know it won't work because Mthoko is going to be a witness, people saw me as well."

"He's just being a bitch," – Hubo's voice chirps in.

Sthembiso sighs, "Which hospital?"

"Ngwelezane," Sikelela says.

"Okay, hide the gun and stick to what Hubo tells you. I'm going to come there first thing in the morning, I will call someone to come there now."

"Thank you."

He drops the call and looks at Giana. She knows there's another problem, she opens her arms and lets him lie on her chest.

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Giana went to the hospital with Londeka while Sthembiso hunted down Mthoko to buy his silence. He can't have Sikelela going to jail, they'll get rid of the gun and hopefully stick to the story of a stranger coming in and shooting Hubo. From what they told him nobody else saw Sikelela shooting except Hubo and Mthoko. They can bury the hatchet and move on, this has gotten too chaotic while Vumo is not even around anymore.

Londeka is on the way to the hospital with Giana, she's like an automatic part of the family. Always there when shit hits the fan. Sthembiso asked for their mothers not to be told yet because they'd panic. It's better Londeka goes there first and confirms the situation.

She's feeling nauseous again, they've already made two stops with her wanting some fresh air and gulping down bottles of water.

She turns on the aircon and takes off her sweater. She's hot again.

Giana takes a single glance and asks, "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm good."

"You're a model, right?"

Phewww! She fakes a smile and nods.

"I suppose you have a very strict and healthy diet. But you can always visit the doctor and check up, because you will never know," Giana says.

"I'm not sick Giana!" she snaps.

"Alright," Giana focuses on the road.

A moment passes, she feels better and puts her sweater back on. This isn't how she wanted to get to know Giana. She wanted it to be over prawns and sushi, with her puppies running around and her English confusing her confusion.

"My brother trusts you," she says.

Giana smiles, "You think so?"

"Yeah, he does. More than he trusts me actually, he doesn't want me to receive lobola, he thinks I'm not ready."

"He's just being a brother, he loves you," Giana says.

"I love me too, he just needs to trust my decisions. Imagine if I don't marry Sgcino in the next two years, by the time I finally do he'd be 40, grey-haired and looking like my father," she says.

Giana holds back and doesn't laugh. She didn't think she's involved with an old man. It's just not her.

"You love him, I think that's what matters," Giana says.

"Yes I do, he's an awesome son-of-a-witch."

Giana laughs, this drive is all kinds of things. Whatever his mother did to her, she messed with the wrong one.

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Sthembiso was directed to Mthoko's friend house by his landlord. He asked a few questions about the incident and he could see that the landlord wasn't sure what happened either but she knew that a dark boy who once killed her dog had come over again. Now he wants to see Mthoko before anyone else sees him.

There are two boys sitting outside the backroom he was directed to. One is smoking and another one sitting with a newspaper.

He greets and says, "I'm looking for Mthoko."

The one reading the newspaper looks at him, fear suddenly flitting across his face.

"I'm Thobani's brother," Sthembiso says quickly, before he runs thinking he's in danger.

"Oh, why are you looking for me?" He's not relaxed.

"Can we talk privately?"

Mthoko folds the newspaper and passes it to his friend then follows Sthembiso to the car parked up the road. He stands a few feet away and asks again, why is he looking for him?

"I believe you and my brother, Sikelela, have some issues and he's attacked you in the past," Sthembiso says.

He nods, he's still uncomfortable.

"Vumo committed suicide, he's angry. You abused her, right?"

Mthoko drops his eyes, "I was drunk, it wasn't my intention."

"But you did and it damaged her. I'm not saying you are to be

blamed for everything because she had other issues, but what you did was evil, no woman should be beaten and forced into sex just because one is drunk. You still drink now, I suppose, but you don't beat your sisters. And when you're drunk you didn't beat other men, you were drunk but somehow you were able to avoid what was going to hurt you," – Sthembiso.

"If I could, I would apologize to her over and over again. I regret it, I was willing to change for her before she left me," he says.

"Fine, you didn't change. I'm just here to ask you a favor, let her son have his father around," Sthembiso says.

"How am I supposed to do that?"

"By keeping Sikelela's name out of your mouth. Tell whoever is asking that he came with Hubo to discuss what you and Hubo were discussing and someone came in and fired a gun."

"And if I don't? My life is in danger."

"Then Sikelela will be arrested, I will get him the best lawyer and bail him out and then come and kill you," he says.

It doesn't sound like a threat even though it's one.

"You're asking me to say I wasn't attacked even though I was, and put my life at risk?"

"This is the only option that won't put your life at risk boy," Sthembiso says and takes out a small brown envelope from his pocket. "R5000, I will make sure Sikelela never comes after you again."

“Only R5000?” This is too little, this man is driving a whole Benz.

“This is not Generations on TV, I’m not Gadaffi, R5000!”

Mthoko hesitates for a moment, but there’s so much he could do with this amount of money, especially if his newly-found brother wants to go home with him.

“Fine, I won’t say anything. Please keep your promise, next time he won’t leave me breathing, he will kill me,” he begs after taking the envelope.

“Don’t worry, he’s going to move on from this. This stays between us, if you betray me your ancestors will betray you when I put my hands on you.” This is the side of him Giana hasn’t seen yet, sometimes he has to allow himself to be a Hlongwane.

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By the time he gets to the hospital Londeka and Giana have left. It’s a good thing because Londeka would’ve asked him a thousand of questions. It’s visiting hours, Sikelela is here as well, he was dropped off by the man who was asked by Sthembiso to accommodate him last night.

Sthembiso is still mad at him, he ignores his greeting until they’re in Hubo’s ward.

“You fucked up. Ma is stressed out, she doesn’t know where you are and she still needs to be strong for Langa. Do you know how much baggage you’re putting on her?”

Sikelela exhales softly, "I know."

"Good, then snap out Sikelela, you're allowed to grieve but don't gamble with your son's chance of having a good upbringing," Sthembiso says.

"I will...pull myself together, I just need time."

Sthembiso pats his shoulder, they walk in.

"Is this the ICU?" Sthembiso asks.

Hubo lifts his head, "What does it look like? Where are my fruits and mahewu?"

"You're not sick, you got shot," Sthembiso says laughing.

"I am sick, thanks to your brother who shot me. He's been wanting this I guess, he only truly forgave Vumo."

"I'm sorry bafo, can we not talk about her?" – Sikelela.

There's that awkwardness again.

Sthembiso looks at Sikelela, "I know you were hurt, you've already proved that you're hundred times better than Hlongwane. It's time to catch a breath bafo, please. Just breathe, it's okay now."

Sikelela nods...maybe he did too much, he does need to breathe.

"I know for a fact that Hubo loves you to death..."

Hubo frowns, "To death?"

"I will tell him to shoot the other arm," Sthembiso threatens, they both laugh.

“I’m serious here, you’re brothers. Even if you weren’t nobody should kill anyone, you’re both fathers, you have kids to raise.”

Sikelela nods, he cannot say sorry enough to Sikelela. From here he wants to focus on the funeral and moving on and raising his son as a single parent.

“Okay, listen y’all, I think I have found love,” Hubo announces.

They look at each other, they’ve both heard this line a dozen times in this lifetime.

“This time it’s real,” Hubo says, desperate to convince them.

It’s never not real, that’s how it always is.

“Congra!” Sthembiso says.

SEASON FINALE

SIKELELA

Chapter 70

One Month Later

LONDEKA

I'm glad Mela finally forgave me, we asked Saneli to stand in for me since I can no longer participate in the dance on umemulo. I'm not showing yet, only the people I've told know that I'm pregnant. And that excludes my family, which is a bit problematic because they don't know the reason why I pulled out from umemulo. In my mother's mind I will participate in the dance, just not by Mela's side. They're coming too, everyone is going except Sikelela. I don't think him and Busizwe will ever see eye to eye, Busizwe is not the problem he's willing to talk peace, but my father's twin is not about that truth and reconciliation life.

My phone rings as I help Azile gets ready. It's MaZwide, I can't say we are besties but we always talk. Now we have more to relate to because she's a mother and I'm pregnant as well. I'm still not sure if she knows exactly what Ntuthuko is, but something tells me she'd do anything to keep her husband's integrity. There are times

where she just preaches loyalty and protecting your man's name, which always leave me wondering- MaZwide are you really that open to men's bullshit?

"Mnaks," I say. That's what we call each other, I guess it's cool to say if you aren't really sharing with the person.

"Mnaks are you busy there?"

Surely I am, but Azile can wait, abantu basemzini are importanter.

"No, we can talk," I say dragging a chair and signaling at Azile to continue fixing her hair.

"We are coming to umemulo, Melamina invited your man and he asked us to come with iminjonjo and a blanket for you since it's a ceremony in your village," she says.

"Are you kidding me?" I spoke to Sgcino last night, he didn't tell me anything like this, as far as I know he's attending something at his uncles.

"No, we are getting ready as I speak. So your mother-in-law has given me a concoction, isihlambezo, she knows that you're pregnant and she wants it to be a smooth one."

Oh gosh! Sgcino and I had a lot of agreements. One being keeping this pregnancy a secret until I finish my first trimester, then we would tell our families and he'd come and pay for the damages. But it looks like I'm the only one holding the end of our deal, MaNgcobo already knows.

"She wants me to trust her concoctions?" I ask, MaZwide laughs.

I mean, she's pro-Vuyo, why would I trust her with my pregnancy?

"Well, I'm bringing it and some maternity dresses that she wore when she was pregnant with Sgcino," – MaZwide.

"MaZwide tell me that's a joke. She's five times bigger than me, what the hell? And why would I wear 1982 maternity dresses? Pre-apartheid designs?"

She's laughing hard, I can already tell that they're ugly. We chat some more before saying goodbye. I didn't prepare anything on my side because I didn't know they're coming to umemulo, Sgcino didn't breathe a word.

I feel like MaNgcobo wants to control this pregnancy already.

"Sis' Londeka you're pregnant?"

My chest dries up. This one has been listening the whole time?

There's no denying it now. But how do I make sure this doesn't leave her chest?

"Yes Azile, but it's still a secret," I say.

"Okay," she continues staring at me. I think she's expecting to see a baby's finger poking out of my stomach or something.

"Are you not scared?" she asks.

"Of having a baby?"

"Giving birth," she says.

“I haven’t thought about it.” I just know that one has to push the head out of her vagina after hours of period-like pain.

“They say it’s painful,” she says, looking scared on my behalf.

“If it was painful as they say you think mom would’ve done it twice?”

She thinks for a second and then shrugs her shoulders with a smile. Exactly, if it was painful as they say it is, nobody would’ve gotten pregnant twice. They’re exaggerating, this whole ‘kuyanyiwa elabour ward’ is exaggerated, babymamas want to eat social-grant money alone.

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BUSIZWE

The presence of the Hlongwane wives and Saneli Hlongwane wearing isidwaba with Mela had already raised many people’s eyebrows. Everyone knows the mouse and cat of Mashoba, why are they suddenly attending each other’s ceremonies?

The ceremony has started. Mela is out of her shell and having the time of her life dancing with other girls. Well, she had a few shots but Busizwe doesn’t know that. Guests keep pouring in; maidens from neighboring villages joining the dance and groups of young men from different villages trolling in, one after another.

Finally, the Hlongwane group led by Hubo arrives. It’s them and

their cousins and some of their close employees. They're wearing camouflage jumpsuits, all of them. They stop below isigcawu and start chanting a song.

One group stands, they walk off, leaving isigcawu with their shields and cudgels. Some women are picking their children and walking away too.

People are scared, that's what this is.

The only way to calm everyone down is if the Mshengus show unity with the Hlongwanes. Busizwe sends the village headman to welcome the Hlongwanes so that they can join isigcawu.

The groups seated are chanting their own song and the Hlongwanes are coming in with theirs. Busizwe stands with his hands up, silencing the seated groups, and then joins in to the Hlongwane song. They all sing one song, the Hlongwanes sit at the back, nobody lifts a spear. Everything goes back to normal, women are ululating again, the group of men that was ready to leave rejoin the crowd.

Londeka and Azile are late, MaXulu is getting irritated because she asked MaJiyane, the only wife who knows how to use a smart phone and doesn't cancel phone calls when she's being called unlike others, to charge Sthembiso's tablet so that they can take dozens pictures of their girls. These are the proudest moments of being a mother of a Zulu girl, just seeing them show off their beautiful bodies and dancing with confidence. Luckily Hlongwane gave all three of them baby girls, nobody has time to envy another

one's daughter. Her Londeka will be there, dancing as well. Londeka has always had a great body, with small firm breasts. She will be framing today's pictures, her one and only baby girl. She's taken good care of herself, her boyfriend has already come to ask for her hand in marriage, he doesn't look like the type that makes promises and doesn't keep them. Maybe this coming year they'll be taking Londeka to her marital home. Oh, Hlongwane missed out! He would've been so proud of their daughter.

MaDlamini sees Azile joining the dance and ululates the loudest.

"Take pictures MaJiyane, why are you standing? Azile is there!"

MaJiyane draws the tablet pattern...was it Z or S? She tries both, it says the pattern is wrong. Maybe her fingers are moist; she wipes them on her dress and lifts the tablet up on her face and draws the pattern again.

"Ey sisi, I think I've forgotten the pattern," she says.

MaDlamini turns with her eyebrows snapped. This woman can't be serious, now that she's taken Sanelisiwe's pictures she doesn't want to take pictures of other girls.

"Mamncane don't do that, it's witchcraft," she says.

MaJiyane wipes her hand and tries again. It fails.

"We need Sthembiso to unlock it," she says.

They both look at MaXulu whose neck is stretched out looking for her daughter- Londeka still hasn't joined the dance and she's

nowhere in sight.

“Sthembiso is in the crowd, how are you going to get him?” she asks.

“I will call him, hopefully his phone is with him,” MaJiyane says taking her Samsung tucked inside her bra. She moves away from the crowd and calls Sthembiso’s phone.

It rings a couple of times then a white lady answers. It’s not voicemail, she’s just speaking English.

“Hi, Sthe left his phone with me, he’s in isi...isicha...isichawu,” she says.

“Is that MaBhathila?” MaJiyane asks with a smile.

“Yes, it is,” Giana responds, she was told this is how they call her.

“Are you there in the memulo?” MaJiyane asks excitedly.

“Yes, I’m here, in the car,” she says.

“Come inside, with us,” MaJiyane says.

She agrees, how she’s going to spot them in the crowd is none of MaJiyane’s business.

“Guess who’s here?” she says to her sisterwives rejoining them.

“Londeka?” MaXulu asks.

“No, MaBhathila,” MaJiyane says.

They’re happy, everyone loves Giana. But, taking pictures should

be the first priority. They ask about the pattern, MaJiyane tells them MaBhathila will sort it out.

Giana is the only white person in the audience, MaDlamini spots her first and raises her hand. There's so much attention on her, nobody expected a white woman in umemulo, nobody knows who she's here with. Sthembiso invited her but left her to drive here with Londeka and Azile because apparently men don't ride to traditional ceremonies like this, unless they come really far, he had to come by foot with his brothers and cousins.

"We didn't know you are here," MaJiyane says.

They've squeezed her between them, she was getting overwhelmed by the attention her skin colour attracted. People's focus has shifted back to Mela who's taken the front line dancing with Saneli and two other girls.

"The patten was Z or S, I don't remember which corner it started from," MaJiyane says to Giana.

"Let me see," she takes the tablet and unlocks it in one attempt.

They're amazed, no wonder she's a doctor, she's really clever.

MaDlamini wants to be taught how to take pictures, she wants to take Azile's pictures herself because MaJiyane is not that good with the camera.

MaXulu is worried about Londeka, she keeps looking around, everyone's daughter is here.

“Do you see Londeka?” MaJiyane asks Giana.

“She’s in the car, let me call her.”

This is a relief for MaXulu, now she can take pictures of her daughter too.

“I also want to learn,” she says.

MaJiyane is the lecturer; she’s showing them how to click on the camera. She’s not very patient with MaXulu’s big finger that trembles and cancels everything.

Giana comes back from a call with Londeka, there’s an argument taking place maybe she can help before this escalates.

“You can set the timer and the camera will automatically take pictures after the time you set, without you touching it,” she says.

“Really?” they all say in amazement.

“Yes, I will take some too because iPhone take clearer pictures.”

What a wife material! They’re impressed.

Very impressed until Londeka appears behind them wearing a sheath dress and bomber jacket.

MaXulu asks, very unimpressed, “Why aren’t you dressed like other girls and dancing with them?”

“It’s cold Ma,” Londeka says.

“And you’re the only one special enough to feel cold, all those girls have cow skins?” - MaXulu.

“It’s cold when she needs to dance for her friend’s memulo, but not cold when she has to strip naked to advertise those ineffective products of hers!” – MaDlamini says with a chuckle.

Giana focuses on taking pictures, it’s better she stays out of it.

“Are you pregnant?” MaJiyane asks.

Londeka’s eyes widen. “Umh, no...I’m not.”

“She’s pregnant sisi, that’s the only reason!”

MaXulu pulls her aside, her two partners follow.

They take her away from isigcawu, when they’re at a safe distance they start drilling her with questions.

“Why did you ask Sanelisiwe to stand on your behalf?”

“Because...ummm...I thought I’d be sick today,” she says.

They know she’s lying, they’ve lived long enough with her.

“You’re now a sangoma Londeka? Take your jacket off,” MaXulu instructs, she’s enraged. All this time she’s been waiting to brag like other women and this child decides to arrive wearing jackets.

She slowly takes her jacket off, she knows that they’ll see the changes even though nothing much is showing yet. They were born pregnancy-analyzers.

“I said it!” – MaJiyane says.

MaXulu’s face falls with disappointment. She’s been looking

forward to this day only because she wanted to see her daughter dance.

“How far are you?” she asks.

“9 weeks,” Londeka says, a part of her is relieved they just caught her, she was going to get tired of hiding, and Sgcino already told his mother anyway.

“Did you plan it?” MaDlamini asks.

“No, I was on injection, it happened anyway and Sgcino is happy.”

“You dated a nyanga and expected injections to work?”

“He’s not a nyanga,” she says laughing.

Her laugh annoys MaXulu.

“This is not funny, what do you know about being a mother?”

Londeka shrugs, “Nothing, I will figure it out.”

“Are you still working?”

“Yes,” she says.

They’re confused but whatever, she’s disappointed them for this day.

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A few guests just arrived, they must be coming very far because nobody seems to know them. Umemulo is about to come to an end, a young girl in her late teens enters isigcawu with blanket

and reed-mat under her arm.

Azile leaves the dance and goes to Londeka, they talk for a minute then she goes to the girl with the blanket and sits in front of her. It wouldn't be Sgcino if he doesn't pull a little surprise, the blanket is pinned with Eclairs sweets all over it- Londeka's favorite at the moment. On edges there are R200 notes pinned. Azile folds the blanket after taking a few sweets and takes it to Londeka.

"You didn't tell us the Zulus are coming," MaXulu says.

"They only told me this morning, I didn't know either."

The young girl from Sgcino's family takes two crates of beer and 12pack of Savanna to the group wearing camouflage jumpsuits. And then takes six pack of Coke and bucket of scones to MaXulu and Co. They share with the guests standing next to them.

"You need to respect this boy, don't give him drama," MaXulu advises as MaDlamini pours Coke into her tumbler.

Londeka shares a look with Giana, what a sudden change of heart! They're now happy with Sgcino.

MaJiyane's phone rings, she asks Londeka to hold her drink and steps aside to attend to the call. It's Mjabulisi Xulu, her heart skips a beat, she looks back at her sisters before answering.

"Xulu you can't just call me," she says in almost-whisper.

"You're not fair Phindile, you know I think about you, it's hard not to call you," he says.

She takes a deep breath. "I'm married Xulu, married to your sister's husband for crying out loud!"

"You honored your vows and stayed loyal to your husband until death did you apart. I just want to make you happy, that's all."

"I am happy," she says in a firm voice.

"Then why are you scared to come and see me? A happy person wouldn't mind, it's not like I'm going to add anything if your cup is already filled."

Another deep breath! Mjabulisi is a good-looking man in his mid-forties, he's been single for three years, he started pursuing her after that visit he made to try and reconcile Londeka and Sthembiso. It's been very hard for MaJiyane because as much as Hlongwane is no more she still feels like she need to stay loyal to him.

Hlongwane took her with Thobani, raised him as his own and gave them the best any man can give in this world. The Hlongwanes welcomed them with open arms, including the wives. What are they going to think when she starts messing around? Yes she's only 40, she still has feelings that need to be nurtured, but maybe her love life was supposed to end before 40. Life begins at 40 cannot apply to everyone.

"I will call you later," she tells him.

"I will hold you to it Phindile."

He's not lying, he will. Londeka must've taken after him, this is hard.

THE FINALE

SIKELELA

Sikelela's identity has been a subject for a very long time. A lot has happened, there were a lot of issues rising in between, but the Hlongwanes have finally managed to do what Mkhonto couldn't do; bringing his second son home. A day after they paid for the damages and made a request to change his surname so that Langa's cultural needs can be taken care of the right way, they send Sthembiso and Mkhulu Hlongwane to the Dlamukas with a goat.

Cebile's brother welcomed the goat and sent another one to accompany Sikelela to the Hlongwanes. It's slaughtered to report his arrival and eaten by the family. They slaughtered two more sheeps for celebration.

It's not as exciting as anyone thought this day would be. Sikelela hasn't been himself since the passing of Vumo. His mother asked him to cry and let out his emotions at the funeral, she was scared of him bottling things up. He didn't cry, he sat at the front with the Ntuli family and stood behind the crowd at the cemetery avoiding seeing the coffin going down at all costs.

He doesn't talk about it, he doesn't like when her name is mentioned. Not even Hubo is able to get through him; he's just a heavy man to be around.

Qobo is here too, Cebile's obsession over being a grandmother is nothing compared to what MaDlamini is doing. She doesn't let Qobo out of her sight not even for a second. Hubo had to beg her to let him come to the kraal with Qobo. He hasn't showed off his son enough inside the kraal, these people need to understand that he's somebody's father now. But that wasn't the only reason he wanted Qobo to be with him, Boni had just arrived.

"See, mina angichami amanzi kapopo," he brags to the crowd.

Sthembiso is the one without a child; he catches the stray bullet and shoots back. "If I was you I'd be watching my mouth, if Qobo tells his mother what you're saying you'd be kissing fatherhood goodbye. Don't forget these are monitored visits."

That's not far from the truth, Ayanda is probably waiting for him to make one mistake then she'd be running to her ugly husband.

"I will give her a second-born," he says, just so he doesn't lose this argument. Him and Ayanda can never be together again. She's remains the only woman to play him in his life.

He sits next to Sikelela, they've been talking but their relationship surely took a strain after what happened.

"Have you spoken to Mela?"

"About?" Sikelela asks.

Hubo frowns, "I thought you were friends."

"No, we haven't spoken, I sent her a gift after umemulo and she thanked me via a text," he says.

“Oh yeah, how is Qambi?”

“She’s back at work, doing okay.”

“And you?” – Hubo.

“I’m fine,” he says.

That’s only how far their conversation can go. He pulls Qobo to stand between his legs, Langa is a replica of him, it’s like he’s looking at a toddler version of him. It’s unfortunate that he cannot see Nkanyezi through anyone unless if he takes a mirror and looks at himself or imagine Londeka as a boy.

His son died, just like that. He thinks about Nkanyezi more often these days, and his mother too. He wonders if they’ve been reunited in the other world. He’s doing all this, fixing his surname issues, so that he can solve Nkanyezi and Langa’s issues- twins come with a lot of them.

Hubo is entertaining the crowd, it’s getting cold outside for Qobo; Sikelela takes him and goes inside the house. He finds Londeka with Langa, she’s very helpful with him and very interested in how diapers are changed and how to make his bottle.

“Is he not giving you any trouble?” he asks.

“Not at all, he’s an angel. I hope mine will be peaceful like this too.”

He pulls a chair and sits with Qobo on his lap. He looks at Langa sucking his bottle on Londeka’s arm and thinks about how far

they've come. From the time he wouldn't drink the bottle and rather cry until his little voice dried up, to him learning to adjust and warming up to Cebile. He's a 4 month old who's been through pain since birth.

"How are you feeling?" Londeka asks.

Everyone keeps asking and he only gives one answer;

"I'm fine," he says.

"Do you miss her?" Only Londeka is brave enough to ask him this.

He's just looking at her for a minute then he nods. It's been a month and two weeks and he still haven't deleted her number and their chat log. He still reads their Whatsapp messages in the deep hours of the night and wonder if she can see him from wherever she is. If she can see how miserable he is without her.

"It will get better. I know, Sthembiso has been there, time and new experiences heal,"Londeka says.

"I hope so," he says.

"I wish I could've met her yazi. Even Qobo's mother, I need to make time a d see her. Maybe on Thursday after my maternity check-up."

Sikelela frowns, "You're pregnant?"

"Yeah," she says.

Wow, okay. This was unexpected.

"What was the rush?" he asks.

She chuckles, "No rush, it wasn't planned."

"I see," he's not happy for her, he can never be. But she's a grown girl, she knows what she's doing. "How is Mela?"

"She's okay. Don't you guys talk anymore?"

"Not so much lately," he says.

"So you don't know that she's moving to Cape Town?"

He shakes his head and tries not to show how much this actually shocks him. She once talked about moving away but he didn't think it would happen this very same year.

"She is, I'll be sending my child there every weekend," Londeka says jokingly.

Or is it not a joke? This is Londeka, you'd never know.

"Do you still like her?" Of course she wants to know.

Sikelela exhales faintly, "I don't know."

"Too early to tell?" she asks.

"No, it's just...we don't want the same things in life. Just like me and Langa's mother before she died, it would be another miserable love story with no happily-ever-after," he says.

Londeka smiles, "You want happily-ever-afters?"

"No, I want to be loved the right way. I don't want to ever fight for my spot in anyone's life, I want to love, not to fight."

Londeka passes him two crispy fries- not his favourite.

“Don’t worry brother, you’ll find someone, you’re only 35.”

“I’m 35?” Sikelela chuckles and passes the fries to Qobo.

“They look alike,” she says looking at Langa on her arm and Qobo sitting on Sikelela’s lap.

“They do,” Sikelela says.

“I’m glad Langa didn’t look like you, imagine!”

He laughs, “Like us, you mean?”

“At least I’m a girl, I can put on make-up and look different. It’s harder for you boys, if you’re ugly you’re ugly, you have to accept it.”

“I’m beautiful inside, sadly not many people can say the same about you.”

Londeka laughs, “I don’t give a fuck, I’m not going to change.”

“Wait until you get married and go to a new family. I’m telling you, you’ll be crying everyday getting your make-up washed and scaring everyone.”

Londeka laughs harder, Langa is staring up at her curiously, Qobo has decided to laugh along even though he has no idea what is being talked about.

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In the other rondavel Azile is pinned on the chair and surrounded by MaJiyane and MaDlamini. They want to know about the tattoo;

why? They heard about this on the streets, people cannot stop talking about the Hlongwane girl with a boob tattoo.

“What kind of embarrassment is this Azile?” – MaDlamini.

“I’m sorry Ma,” she says.

She doesn’t look apologetic at all.

“Why did you draw it in the first place?”

Azile shrugs, “I just love art.”

“So your body is an art gallery?”

She laughs. “No Ma, tattoos don’t kill, they’re like ear-piercing.”

“No, they are not. Can you wipe it off?”

“No, it’s inked deep in my skin,” she says. She’s relaxed, she knew they’d be like this when they find out, she was prepared.

Hubo walks in, he looks a bit drunk.

“What’s going on here?” he asks.

“Don’t tell me you drank alcohol wena! You know your babymama will cause too much drama over this,- MaDlamini.

“I took a few sips Ma, don’t make it sound like I hate my son.

That’s a little-me, my twin, I love him to death.”

“Where did you leave him? You took him from me saying you want to spend time with him,” MaDlamini asks.

"Ay Ma, you're lovey-dovey with Aunt Boni, I don't trust you."

"What?" His mother is confused.

"No nje, no! I'm going to look for my boy and keep him away from the Bonis of this family," he says walking away.

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MaJiyane is fuming, this day started well and ended up with Saneli telling everyone she's attracted to girls. They're just taking their frustrations out on Azile and her tattoo. Their real problem is with Saneli but she's still too drunk to be confronted.

After drilling Azile with questions and being laughed at she goes to her bedroom to catch a breath.

As if whoever it is was waiting for her to be alone, her phone rings.

It's none other than Mjabulisi. She has ran out of excuses, how else is she going to avoid this man.

"Xulu," she answers.

"Phindile," he says.

"What do you want?"

"You know what I want; I want you."

"I'm married," she hisses.

"Is that the only excuse Phindile?"

"Yes." Oh Jesus, that was a trap question.

"Xulu no, what are people going to say?"

"They don't have to know," he says.

"So you want me to sneak around like a teenage girl?"

"Whatever you're comfortable with, as long as I get to show you love and spend time with you."

"Seriously though Xulu, you can have any woman you want. I'm your sister's sisterwife, so I must go from her husband to her brother?"

"You worry too much, just take a deep breath and think about it," he says.

"I have thought about it, I'm just scared."

"We will keep it a secret until you feel comfortable enough to let it be known."

"I don't think that time will ever come. How are my children going to look at me?"

"Listen Phindile, you deserve to be happy, not to live your life living up to what a 'decent' widow should be. Come over tomorrow, I live alone, nobody will know you were here."

She clears her throat, "Why are you inviting me to your house?"

"For once, just trust me. I won't hurt you, I promise. Not tomorrow, not ever," he says.

That 'not tomorrow' plants some nasty ideas in her head, he's probably not even thinking about that.

"Xulu, just two hours," she says.

"Okay, two hours and I'll let you go."

"Fine," she agrees.

He thanks her multiple times before ending the call.

What did she just agree to? This is Sthembiso and Londeka's uncle, MaXulu's only brother, if this comes out she'll be judged and hated almost by everyone in this family.

But the body wants what it wants.

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Hubo bumps into Sthembiso in the yard on his search for Sikelela and Qobo. He asks if Sthembiso has seen them.

"They're with Londeka, do you have a minute?"

"I have an hour bafo," he says staggering forward.

"We need to talk to Aunt Boni."

He grunts, brushing his face in frustration. They've planned confronting him before but Hubo changed his mind. He doesn't want it to look like he's a victim.

"Nope!" he says stopping Sthembiso with his finger.

"Look at you Hubo, you're drunk because she's here, you can't even spend time with your son well," – Sthembiso.

“Then tell her to leave, uwena isgora sikashibhoshi layikhaya.”

“You don’t need to say twice,” he turns and heads to the kitchen where Boni is playing the family good aunt with MaXulu.

MaXulu turns her head and frowns as he walks in.

“Why are you walking in like a police officer?”

He clears his throat, “It’s cold outside, sorry.”

“Let me get your father’s jacket for you before pneumonia kills you.” He’s still his mother’s babyboy.

MaXulu leaves the kitchen leaving him with his so-called aunt.

“Ya wena,” he says.

Boni snaps her brows.

“Sthembiso! Is that how you talk to your aunt now?”

“Aunt, my foot! You think I don’t know what you did to Hubo?”

Her eyes almost pop out. It’s written all over her face, she can’t even deny it.

“I need you to leave and never set your foot here again.”

“Sthembiso I was young myself, I didn’t know what I was doing at that time and Mahubo...”

“Don’t you dare say he agreed because you know very well that he was too young to make such decisions. On the other hand you were old enough to know what you were doing.”

“Sthembiso...”

“Leave Boni, before this turns into something ugly. I don’t want you anywhere near my brothers and their children.”

MaXulu walks in to the awkwardness, she was just a second away from hearing the nasty exchange.

“Is everything alright?” She’s looking at Boni who’s putting her shoes on.

“Yes, Aunt just received a very urgent call asking her to go home,” Sthembiso says and looks at her.

She smiles faintly, “Yeah sisi, one of my cousins fell sick.”

“Oh, I hope she gets better. Take some meat before you go.”

Sthembiso gives her a look- don’t you dare take any meat!

She looks at MaXulu, “Don’t worry sisi, I’m in a hurry.”

MaXulu sees her out of the door and comes back to Sthembiso shaking her head. This is very weird.

“I hope she’s not rushing to anyone’s man,” she says.

Sthembiso chuckles, “Who knows, she could be chasing a Ben 10.”

“Ay wena, don’t say that about your aunt. Have you talked with your sister?”

“About the new products in her company? Yes.”

“Didn’t she tell you that you’re about to become an uncle?”

“Whaaat?!”

“Yes, she’s pregnant.”

“Londeka is pregnant?” He can’t believe it. Londeka is everything but not naïve, she wouldn’t just fall pregnant.

“And Azile has a tattoo, Saneli claims to be a lesbian,”MaXulu says.

This one makes him laugh.

“A lesbian?”

“Yeap, she just told me and her mother after drinking those beers in cans.”

“She’s drunk too?”

MaXulu nods, “You need to have a serious talk with your sisters later. All three of them. Remind them what it means to be a Hlongwane.”

“You want me to lecture them?” Sthembiso asks with a smug look on his face.

“It’s your job,” MaXulu says.

“Right?” He takes out his cellphone and types a short text:

I’LL BE WARMING YOUR BED TONIGHT, - sent.

These women will handle their own children because on his side he has a very tight pussy to handle the whole night.

EPILOGUE

SIKELELA

Langa is not sick, he's not sure why his mother called and said it's urgent that he comes home. It has been only three days since he rightfully became a Hlongwane, he's working tomorrow morning, his mother doesn't seem to put that into consideration. He can't drop everything and come home just because she's feeling lonely.

Cebile comes humming a song with a bowl of samp and boiled cow gut. She puts it in front of him and compliments her new cooking recipe.

"Ma you didn't call me here for food, did you?"

"No, your uncle asked me to call you," she says.

"My uncle is in Durban," Sikelela says with a frown.

"Vusi," Cebile clarifies.

Vusi hasn't been around a lot, he's not sure whether he's happy or annoyed to find out he was summoned here by him.

"Eat up, he will be here any minute from now," Cebile says and takes Langa from his arm. She's accepted Langa as her second son, Vumo's mother couldn't take him even if she wanted to, Ntuli doesn't want him in his house with his wife, Qambi is also busy trying to take care of her mother. Sikelela couldn't have taken Langa anywhere else except bringing him home to be raised by his mother while he works for both of them. It's easier now

because he has a car, he comes home anytime he misses his son.

There's a car outside, his mother runs to the mirror and fixes her headwrap. Sikelela can't stop himself from laughing. This old-age love is fun to watch.

"You have something on your back," he tells his mother.

Cebile makes a quick turn in front of the mirror. He bursts into laughter; this is the hardest he's laughed since Vumo's death.

"I'm going to slap you hard," CeBILE says pointing at him angrily.

Vusi walks in, already wearing a smile on his face. He's smiling at his beauty-doll, everytime she sees her he falls in love over and over again.

"Who's getting slapped?" he asks.

"Me," Sikelela says.

"No Macebi, don't threaten a child." This just reminds Sikelela why he likes Vusi; he's always on his side.

"How are you boy?" This one he's made peace with, he calls him boy as if he's 12. He's asking with his hand on Sikelela's shoulder.

Sikelela shrugs it off, "I'm good, I haven't seen you in a long time."

Vusi sits with a heavy sigh. "I've been trying to sort out some family matters."

"Did you manage to solve them?" Sikelela asks.

“No, not everything gets fixed in this world, no matter how much faith and money you’re willing to put in,” he says.

Sikelela nods, “Yeah, I know.”

Cebile comes with Vusi’s food put on a tray and covered. It’s even those plates nobody touches unless it’s Christmas.

“Thank you, I have been hungry,” Vusi says pulling the tray and taking the plate and putting it on his lap.

“I know you’ve been hungry,” Cebile says with a smile.

These oldies talking about hunger, you can’t even be sure they’re talking about food hunger. Sikelela leaves the table and goes sit on the mat laid on the floor for Langa.

“Eat fast boy, we need to go somewhere,” Vusi says.

He’s not sure what’s going on yet, he’ll just respect Vusi as his mother’s smile-keeper and go wherever he asks him to go.

He finishes his food, Vusi is not even halfway with his plate. How can he eat quickly when there’s a woman blushing in front of him? Sikelela dumps his bowl in a basin and takes Langa and goes outside with him.

He’s no longer a baby now; he looks around and makes baby sounds. Most of the time they fight about the thumb that he sucks.

Sikelela sits on the verandah and lays him in his arms. He starts kicking his feet and pushing his hand into his thumb.

“Girls will laugh at you, boys don’t suck thumbs,” he’s having a conversation with him while they fight over his little hand.

“Langa!” he says firmly and removes his thumb from his mouth again.

Langa starts crying. He lifts him up to his chest and kisses his cheek before rubbing his back. He’s calm within a minute.

“I’m just looking out for you,” Sikelela tells him.

He’s quiet for a moment, then he burps. Sikelela feels something running under his T-shirt and laughs.

“That was not cool Langa, you know I don’t have a wife, I wash my own clothes,” he stands and carries Langa like a sack of potatoes and goes back inside the house.

Cebile screams, “How are you holding the baby? Huh!”

“Ma this is not a girl, and beside I’m not going to drop him.”

“No, I don’t care. You hold him properly, this is not a doll.”

Sikelela gives Langa to her; the proper holder of babies.

“I’m going to change my T-shirt,” he says walking out.

“Be fast and come back, I’m done here,” Vusi says after him.

It turns out Vusi just wanted to accompanied down the river, nothing much. If he wasn’t his mother’s boyfriend Sikelela would’ve told him straight that this is bullshit. They’re carrying bags for God knows what. Sikelela’s is empty, Vusi is carrying

bottles of water.

“Let’s go that side,” Vusi says pointing down the river where there’s a big rock and stones.

Sikelela doesn’t argue, he follows behind with his empty bag. Maybe they’re here to fish, who knows.

“I want us to gather these stones, choose medium-sized ones with some weight,” – Vusi.

“Please don’t tell me we are here to gather stones!”

“Just do it, you’ll understand.”

Phewww! Sikelela bends down and starts picking them. He collects a pile quickly and looks at Vusi’s side; he hasn’t collected much.

“Need help?” he asks because he’s an elder, they have backaches and all those things.

“No, here,” Vusi throws a highlighter pen to him. He then walks up to where Sikelela has collected his stones and sits on the ground behind him.

“I want you to write everything you’re carrying in your heart on each stone. Every pain, every baggage, every regret.

Sikelela frowns, “What is this?”

“You’ll see, start writing,” Vusi says.

He’s not used to this kind of stupidity, writing stones, really?

“You can take your time,” Vusi says. He chose a quiet side of the

river for a reason, he's heard about Sikelela's hard heavy from his mother. He wants to be helpful, he loves Cebile with her son and grandson. Of course he cannot step to the father role, and he doesn't need to, he's comfortable being an uncle to Sikelela.

"I don't know what you want me to write," Sikelela says after spending over a minute thinking.

"Let's start with Langa's mother's death. Have you healed?"

Sikelela shakes his head.

"Write it on the stone," Vusi instructs.

Sikelela writes on the first stone; MAGODIDE'S DEATH.

Then he turns and looks at Vusi. This time Vusi doesn't suggest anything, he wants him to do this on his own; to identify his struggles by himself.

He picks the second stone and writes; NKANYEZI'S SHORT LIFE. He puts it aside and picks the next one.

REJECTION- he's been carrying this one since he was old enough to understand that he'd been rejected from his father's life. He carried that feeling of being rejected throughout his teens and adult life.

NOT BEING ENOUGH- God knows this started before Vumo came into his life. She just continued where everyone left off.

INSTILLING PHYSICAL PAIN ONTO MYSELF OR OTHERS TO FEEL OKAY- His ears will be the witness of this. Along with every other boy and man he's put his hands out there.

ABANDONMENT- Thanks to his father who never showed up (now he understands why but those feelings don't just go away) and his uncle who decided to abandon him as soon as he got married.

MY MOTHER'S HEAVY BAGGAGE- Hopefully nobody judges him for this. His mother is his whole world but there has been times where her words has been sharp and they cut very deep. There has been time where she projected her feelings towards him, whether it was about her own relationship with Mkhonto or about his own love life- Cebile is always too opinionated.

THE MSHENGUS- The Hlongwanes may have forgiven them but he doesn't think he ever will. It's just not how things roll in his life; they crushed one of biggest dreams. If it wasn't for them he would've met Mkhonto some day and they would've talked. Not now where he can only speak to him through impepho.

Before he knows it he's written almost on 12 stones. He takes a deep breath looking at the pile in front of him.

"Is that all?" he asks without turning his head to Vusi.

"You've written everything?"

"Yes," he says.

"Put all of them inside your bag," Vusi instructs.

Mad! He puts all the stones he's written inside his bag.

"Let's go," Vusi says.

He has to carry a bag full of stones on his back. This is very

stupid.

Vusi leads him as they climb up the valley. The bag is heavy, it's fuckin' stones.

"Are you okay?" Vusi asks.

He's sweating behind him. "Yes."

Vusi expected it; Cebile always tells him how stubborn Sikelela is.

They join a small cattle route, Vusi walking with his hands in the pockets.

"Where are we going?" Sikelela finally asks.

"Just taking a walk. Is there a problem?"

"No, there's no problem."

Good, Vusi keeps walking. They've entered a bush, they're crossing it and joining the gravel road across.

Sikelela makes a stop under the tree shade. He unhooks the bag's arm in attempt to having a break.

"No Sikelela, you don't take off the bag, that's your soul."

He frowns, his whole face is covered in sweat.

"You can get rid of the stones but if you want to keep on carrying your baggage let's go."

So he can get rid of the stones, this is good. He opens the bag...but which one?

"You can let go Sikelela," Vusi says.

He looks at everything he's written. Nope, he's not getting rid of any.

Vusi signals with his head; they need to keep walking.

They cover another long distance. Sikelela's shoulders start aching, his back is stinking wet.

"Wait," he says to Vusi out of breath.

Vusi stops and looks at him.

He opens the bag and takes out one stone. He can get rid of the Mshengus, they're not worth weighing on him this much. He throws their stone away.

They resume their walk, the bag is still heavy.

He asks for another stop. He can let go of the grudges he held against his father. It's enough now, he's grown, has his own son.

Rejection as well, he can let that go. It's not on him, he's not the one rejecting people, why must he carry other people's negativity?

By the time they turn onto the road leading back to Hlabathini he's gotten rid of almost every stone. There's only two left; Vumo's betrayal, as he calls her death, and Nkanyezi's short life.

"You're not getting rid of that?" Vusi asks.

"No," he says.

“But you want them to rest in peace?”

“I want...yeah, I want them to rest in peace and be good angels to Nkanyezi.”

“Then let them rest, don’t hold negative feelings towards them. What they would want is you to be happy so that Langa can grow up in a warm home.”

Maybe Vusi is right, it won’t help him being miserable for the things he cannot change. He needs to accept that they’re gone so that he can be a father Langa deserves.

He empties his bag.

Vusi watches with an approving nod.

“We should rest, my knees are killing me,” he says.

They should be, he’s been acting like Caster Semenya forgetting that he’s 90.

They sit under the shade of tree, Vusi takes out two bottles of water from his bag and passes one to Sikelela.

“You didn’t need to carry all of that in your heart. Look how drained you are; physically, emotionally and psychologically. You need to introspect every now and then, see what’s weighing you down and get rid of it. Nobody and nothing deserves to occupy your heart in that manner. Don’t allow them, don’t allow it.”

Sikelela nods, he throws away the empty bottle of water and lies on his back.

“I’m tired,” he says closing his eyes.

“What your body feels is exactly how your soul has been feeling with all the baggage you’ve been carrying. We need to go, you’ll sleep at home.” Vusi shakes him, they stand up and take off.

Cebile has been waiting patiently. Langa is sleeping on her back, when she sees them walking in she rushes and puts Langa to bed. She wants to know how it went, she’s been on edge because Sikelela has never had any kind of father and son walk.

“And???” She’s looking at them walking in with empty bags.

“We are good,” Vusi says.

She looks at Sikelela, her poor son looks tired.

“You’re okay?”

“Yeah, I’m okay.”

This is strange, they’re just good, both of them?

“Everything went well?” she asks.

“Yeah,” they both say.

“Wow!” She pulls the chair and sits.

She’s happy, it’s just that she didn’t expect it to be smooth.

“You made it to the list,” Sikelela says.

Her eyes widen. “What did I do?”

“For always talking bad about my father.”

She sighs, "Okay, maybe I deserved that. But you can't replace me, you know that?"

"I can, in a snap of a finger," Sikelela says.

"No, you can't, I'm your mother."

"I can find another mother, don't think you're irreplaceable Gogo kaLanga."

She throws a kitchen cloth at him. Vusi shakes his head with a smile on his face. In life he's had to let go of things to find purpose, they'd be fine too, he knows it.

Sikelela stands, "I will take a bath and go to bed."

"Don't forget to fetch your son, he'll be sleeping with you today," his mother says. She's sleeping with her man today, she wants no disturbances.

Sikelela looks at her with his eyes wide. Now he regrets requesting for a stepfather!

He goes to his rondavel feeling light. Lighter than he's ever felt in years. He takes his phone from the charger and calls Hubo.

They haven't been the best of buddies lately.

"Hello stranger," Hubo answers.

"That's very girlish. What are you doing this coming week?"

"Are you planning on taking me out on a date?" So stupid.

"I'm not your whore. I want us to go out with the boys, I don't know to where, we'll figure it out as fathers," he says.

“Man, I don’t know where kids go to have fun? Creche?”

“I don’t think they go to creche,” Sikelela says.

“Okay, let me Google what does a 3 year old and 4 months old do for fun.”

Sikelela chuckles, “Let me know when you find something. We are such a mess of fathers.”

They both laugh.

Creche or wherever babies go to have fun, they’ll be there.

This is to new beginnings!