

DUDU BUSANI-DUBE

THE END



Table of Contents

Title Page

Imprint Page

THE HLOMU SERIES

1

2

Zulu

3

4

Zulu

5

6

7

8

9

Zulu

10

11

Zulu

12

Zulu

13

Zulu

14

Zulu

15

Zulu

16

17

Zulu

18

Zulu

19

Zulu

20

Zulu

21

Zulu

Zulu

Zulu

22

Zulu

23

Zulu

24

Zulu

Zulu

25

Zulu

Zulu

26

Zulu

27

Zulu

Zulu

28

29

30

Zulu

Zulu

Zulu

31

Thando

33

34

Zulu

DUDU BUSANI-DUBE

THE END

HlomuPublishing
493 Silverwood Estate
Monavoni
Centurion
Pretoria

© Dudu Busani-Dube, 2022

© HlomuPublishing, 2022

ISBN: 978-0-6397-1046-4 (print)
eISBN: 978-0-6397-1047-1 (e-book)

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or any information storage or retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the author/publisher.

Cover design by Six Fingaz Media

Editing by Mamsidoll Media

Typesetting by Clare-Rose Julius

eBook Conversion by Book Lingo

publish@booklingo.co.za

Set in 11 point on 15 point Book Antiqua

T H E
Hlomu
S E R I E S

www.hlomypublishing.co.za

THE HLOMU SERIES

Hlomu: The Wife (2015)

Zandile: The Resolute (2015)

Naledi: His Love (2015)

Iqunga (2020)

The Mess (2020)

The End (2022)

1

Everything is fucked up.

Everyone is fucked up.

I'm dying; Mqhele doesn't know. Nobody knows.

Xolie snapped.

Mqoqi died.

My father was an asshole.

My mother made me what I am.

“Remember the Mahlomu Dladla you were before everything got fucked up; before the journey to who you have become began.” That's what they keep saying to me like it's that easy.

I was 22 years old for crying out loud! A virgin who fell in love with a tall man with big eyes and a charm I could never understand or explain. I knew nothing. I have loved this man for half my life; he gave me three children along with the best and worst moments of my life. They say it like I should know who I was when I met him – as if.

My life went wherever he took it. Most times it was roses and diamonds wrapped in happiness, a few times it was kicks and punches laced with blood and tears. I loved him throughout. I loved him even when loving him seemed like a stupid thing to do. My eyes saw him, only him. Even when life proved to me I could look the other way; I could do better and that I deserved more.

“More,” Life said like there is anything more in this world than Mqhele. A man who would skin alive anyone who tries to hurt me, and yet be comfortable being the only person who can hurt me. I have died many times under Mqhele’s love with his penis inside me, and each time his fist bruised my face and made me bleed. I have borne children that look exactly like him, and I have sat back and watched him loving them and them loving him back. I have sat back and watched this family thrive, laugh and love and I have been proud of myself because I know it is all my doing. While my friends – all of them – were doing youthful things and regretting them afterwards, I was raising children, helping to build an empire and sitting on a throne, making rules, and getting what I wanted whenever I wanted it.

I acquired power and it didn’t even take much – just cooking and having all of them sitting around one table eating and laughing. They needed that; someone to remind them that without each other, they were nothing. I gave that to them. Before I knew it, they were all standing in a circle with me in the middle, their big eyes staring right at me, telling me they were nothing without me. I was proud of that too. I had swept scattered broken glass into one place and pieced it together into a beautiful vase in which I put flowers of love, nurturing, children and dignity. While I did that, they made money and they made it for me. I knew it. I could see it in their eyes, their desperation for my approval and their anxiety over the possibility of waking up one morning and finding me gone. I took the hurt and the evil that came with it – the blood, sacrifice and loss. And I mastered the skill of looking away while at it.

I have never hurt anyone who has never tried to hurt me. I live by those words.

Would I love Mqhele this much if he wasn’t who he is? If he didn’t come with such baggage and darkness? Would he even turn me on if he wasn’t so dangerous? I don’t know; I don’t think so. If someone had asked me these questions when I was 22 – before I looked up and saw a tall man in front of me; before I sat on the front seat of a taxi and heard a maskandi song; before I couldn’t stop a smile from reaching my lips and before I sat

on the front seat of that dodgy Sprinter – maybe I would have had a clearer answer. But I was just a girl then. I knew nothing; I had seen nothing and I loved only two men then: my brother and my father. I've lost both along the way, my father to death and my brother to himself. And somewhere in between, I lost Mahlomu Dladla to Hlomu Zulu.

I know Hlomu Zulu better because I never got a chance to know Mahlomu Dladla. Maybe she would have chosen never to get married or have children. She would have lived on a monthly salary in a basic three-bedroom house and she would have had normal people's problems, like having no money for petrol and wanting to be loved unconditionally. Honestly, I cannot relate to her. I have tried but I don't see her anymore.

“Hlomu.”

There is a way that he says my name like he has his own meaning for it. It's like he can never, ever live without saying it. “How long have you been up?” he asks.

It's been a while. It's funny how things have flipped and I'm the one who can't sleep anymore. I wake up and stare at him sleeping peacefully. And then dark thoughts mostly come.

“A few minutes,” I lie. “You were tossing and turning.”

More lies. He was sleeping peacefully. It's been four months now, but the two months before that were hell. He remains beautiful, grey-haired – age, acquired wisdom and all.

I had to let him back home after Mqoqi's funeral. It felt like nothing else; like nothing bad that had ever happened to this family mattered after Mqoqi's death. It didn't just shred our hearts into pieces; it shredded the family too.

We don't randomly gather in one house anymore because the feeling of something missing gets too consuming and we can't be who we used to be. We can never go back to that. And so here were Nkosana and Zandile, burying themselves in vegetable gardens and kraals back in Mbuba. The Montshos were keeping Qhawe busy with their unending drama. Nqoba and Gugu were trying to find their way back to each other again.

Mqoqi's death has been a unmournable one. Nobody wants to accept and move on from it. Nobody wants to talk about it too – not to each other.

But Mqhele did. He spoke to me about “intwana, the softest one”. We, ourselves, were just hanging by the thread when he moved back home. I didn't want him to come back, but I knew I couldn't let him be out there alone. He had to come to me to talk and cry. Besides, I too needed him. I needed his vulnerability and his tears because I have none.

The pain of losing Mqoqi sits like a hard rock in my belly, but the guilt of knowing that I was the reason behind all of it haunts me every minute I'm awake – it keeps me awake at night. I should have stopped him from doing whatever he was trying to do with Lale but I didn't. Because him being away doing stupid things wherever he was meant there was no chance of him accidentally telling someone what he knew. And so, one evening he got on his bike, chased the moonlight and never returned.

And for him, because I knew his brother was his world, I nursed Mqhele back into being human for two months full. And then one morning he woke up different, eyes alive. He spoke more than four words; he ate his breakfast without being begged to. He went out to shave his hair and beard and he didn't grab a beer from the fridge. Instead, he washed one of his cars with his teenage twins and went out to get ice cream with his daughter. At night, we made love and he wrapped his arm around my shoulders as I lay my head on his chest. And then he fell into sleep, a deep and peaceful sleep. It was like something came and took whatever was wrong with him and gave him peace – the peace I once had. I did not sleep at all that night. I'm used to it now. We have to leave in three hours and I have not slept at all.

“We're not going with you, Hlomu,” he says. “We can't.”

He goes back to sleep. I'm not understanding this... it's 7 am. There was a time when he couldn't sleep past 4 am.

2

Six months.

That's how long it has taken us to gather the strength to do this.

As to why, of all places, Mqoqi would choose this place to die, baffles me. He had everything; he could have gone anywhere, but no... Concordia became his place of choice.

I am standing in a room where Mqoqi lived his final days. A desk, a computer, a floor-to-roof bookshelf, and things. It is so him. Everything about it says Mqoqiwokuhle Zulu, the book lover and reader who was soft on the inside but a daredevil on the outside. Bikes, fast cars, nightclubs, guns, women and murder were his life... books, love and softness were his soul. He died trying to live the latter.

This house, we can't do anything with it. It belongs to a Zothile Mkhize, and she's six, embroiled in some child protection services mess somewhere in KwaZulu-Natal. Nobody knows where her mother is and honestly, I do not care to know. We have come to pack up what was Mqoqi's life here and take it home to where he is buried.

There were times when all of us in one place meant noise and laughter. There'd be light conversations – girl conversations. Sometimes we spoke about the men but only the funny, crazy stuff. We've always avoided getting into conversations about what this family really is and what we have allowed, accepted, and protected. We've always been united, though,

mostly in happy times. The bad times separate us into cliques. There's Xolie and me; Gugu goes to Zandile; Naledi has sisters, she goes to them. I can count on one hand the number of times all five of us have had to sit in one circle and talk about the dark stuff. And in all those times, never once did we think about discussing what would happen if one of them was to die. About what would happen if the eight Zulu brothers weren't eight anymore. If we had discussed that, and maybe planned for it, we probably wouldn't be here doing this in complete silence.

They all agreed that I should be the one to pack up the things in the office. Gugu and Zandile are doing the main bedroom. Naledi and Xolie are in the small one, the one that has a single bed with a pink headboard. When we were driving here, the last thing we all expected was a house like this. It's too modest, too plain and too homely for what Mqoqi was.

When he disappeared, his brothers said he had gone to Mozambique to deal with the issue of the police there, blocking our trucks from passing through. It sounded a bit strange because we all knew Mqoqi wasn't exactly a good negotiator, but so much was going on in my own house that I wasn't interested at all in Mqoqi's whereabouts. His absence was good for me; it meant I didn't have to bump into him and be reminded that he saved my life, again. And that he knew what I did, or that he thought he could love me better than his brother does.

The movers we came here with have taken all the furniture out. What I'm here looking at now are his books, on the built-in bookshelf lining half of this wall. This shelf is far smaller than the one he had at his house back in Gauteng, but I feel like he kept the ones he loved the most here. I used to tease him about his choice of books because he had this strange obsession with boring writers.

"And yet you read all of them to the last page. I'll write a book about you one day," he'd tell me.

I always laughed at that, but that was long before. After the night he told me he was in love with me, I stopped taking anything Mqoqi said as a joke.

Many things have shocked me in my life, but that one messed me up completely. I had never looked at him that way, and to be honest, I was mad at him, at the fact that he told me about it. It tortured me. It made me ask myself many questions, like what my life would have been if it were him instead of Mqhele. I hated myself for even thinking about it. We would have read books, drank coffee together and maybe even travelled the world. But that would have been it. He probably would have loved me better, but definitely not more. And besides, he too had his own demons, and maybe they would not have been suitable for mine.

A Thousand Splendid Suns. It's a book I lent him many years ago. In fact, I forced it on him when he went on and on about how he didn't like fiction. I'm going to keep it because Mqoqi left nothing. No kids; no explanation for why he left his family to live here and nothing for me, not even words about how he expects me to get through this life thing without him here to save me.

There are condoms in the first drawer of this desk, two memory sticks and a business card belonging to a Faizel. We all know who Faizel was now, and Gabby and the cop who arrested him. The boys told us everything. But Lale, nobody knows where she disappeared to. And you know what? It doesn't even matter, because she won't bring Mqoqi back.

"I found this in the bedroom," Zandile says.

She didn't want to come here. She insisted she needed to be around Nkosana all the time because she thinks he's losing his mind. But he, Nkosana, insisted that we all come here together. He said they couldn't do this themselves. That's the same thing Mqhele said to me this morning before he covered himself with the duvet and fell back to sleep.

"Hlomu, I found this," she says, widening her eyes. How does she not have at least one wrinkle on her face; she's bloody old!

"Sorry, I was just thinking about—" I stop, no need to tell her about it. We don't talk about it. "What is it?"

"I don't know; it has your name. It was under the pillow."

And she didn't open it? A whole Zandile! Clearly planting spinach in Mbuba has changed her. It's a white envelope with a memory stick inside.

"I'm sure there's a laptop in this house somewhere..." she says, sounding rather anxious.

I spoke too early; she hasn't changed at all. The day Zandile stops being nosy will be the day cows eat beef.

"I'll look at it when I get home," I say.

I put the memory stick back in the envelope and toss it in my handbag.

There are so many unspoken words between us. We've always worked well together, but not this time – we don't know where to start. We haven't even spoken about the return of the guns and entourages of cars that drive in front of us, behind us, beside us wherever we go. Personally, I'm too old for this shit now. If Mqoqi's death hasn't taught us that we can't continue like this, I don't know what will. What they need to do is to gather all their enemies in one place and ask what needs to be done to get them off our backs, and then do it.

"We should burn this stuff," Naledi says.

She's piling a suitcase and a gym bag.

"I think so too. The big suitcase has women's clothes," Xolie says behind her with a box full of toys and children's books, drawings and two stuffed animals.

The clothes belong to Lale, which is strange because we were told she had packed and left. We could debate this, argue that she might come back for them, or that we can't destroy things belonging to a child that Mqoqi loved so much. They are her connection to him, besides this house and some of his money. Peter laid everything out in the open, but we were clear that he must be the one to deal with it. We aren't going out there to look for Lale and her child. The problem though is that Mqoqi made me the executor of his estate, and if there is one thing I will not do, it is to raise Sandile's child.

We follow each other out, straight to the corner where he smoked his weed and set fire to the things. The brothers didn't really give us clear

instructions on what to do when we got here. We all just knew that we needed to bring what was left of Mqoqi home. We don't know what happened to the remnants of the bike; it's probably in a scrapyards somewhere.

All his cars and other bikes are in Mbuba. The house in Bedfordview belongs to Mpande, but Sbani lives in it, with Mhlaba now that he is officially a free man. Mqhele drove Mhlaba back to Sun City two days before his official release date. And he was there at the gate to pick him up when he walked out like he didn't have breakfast in my kitchen just two days earlier.

"Bomama, kungakuhle sihambe kusakhanya." It's our driver for today, Ntuthuko. He's right. It's a long drive back to Gauteng, and the men who brought us here seem restless. We have packed what we needed to pack and burned what we hope died with Mqoqi.

"Mqoqi died in a bike accident, so why do we have guns and all these cars going with us everywhere all over again?" Gugu asks. I've been lost in thought again, and it's good for me because the last thing I want on my mind is the acknowledgement that we are on the highway behind a truck carrying what is left of Mqoqi's life. "I'm just saying that..." Gugu again.

We made Naledi sit in the front with the driver on purpose because she's always the one asking useless questions. The driver is new, and he still doesn't understand how things work around here. He talks to us and he chips in on our conversations. Xolie says he isn't bad.

"These men can lie, I'm telling you. If there is one thing they can do..." Gugu is still talking.

Why are we stopping?

"Roadblock," Ntuthuko says, and quickly turns to look at us at the back.

His eyes are assuring yet his forehead is creased as if shocked by the way we all freaked out when the car stopped. I don't know where they found him, but they must really trust him.

My handbag has been sitting on my lap throughout this trip. I don't want to put it down because I feel like I'm carrying Mqoqi in it. I have that

envelope and two memory sticks inside it.

He left me yet another thing, and a large part of me believes it will break my heart.

Zulu

“Amasimba lawa bafo, this is not how we do things.”

Qhawe doesn't understand that I'm tired; I need this to end, and I need it to end now. I'm sitting here worried about my wife, whom I had to send to some stupid small town, not knowing what could be waiting for her there.

“We need to end this. We are the ones with everything to lose,” I say. Lamajita don't understand that we can't be doing things the same way anymore, that these are not some stupid people that we can get rid of – these are the Bhunganes.

I organised this meeting because I know it is me they want, and before they get to me, they will go through everything that means anything to me. They had no other reason to go after Mqoqi, except to send a message to me. We grew up with these men; they knew how much I protected him. Mqoqi did the craziest shit, and he did it because he knew he had me, he had us, and then he decided to die and leave us with this shit.

“Asibabulali ngani vele? Bringing them to our house, Mqhele? Giving them a platform. They will start thinking siyabasaba, that's what going to happen and I'm not going to—”

“Nqoba! Kahle mfethu, we said we were done with that.”

“Done with what? They are not done, that is the reason they are back.”

We can't act like we didn't know this day would come. I asked everyone to come here unarmed because I have no intention of turning this into a warzone. The instructions to Nkangala were clear: search everyone at the gate, make sure nobody enters this house with weapons. If we are going to have a war in this dining room, it will be with fists, and it will be the survival of the most violent. What I want is for us to sit across from each

other and talk. They must tell us what they want, and we will give it to them. If it is me they want, it is me they will get. Nkosana didn't come. He doesn't want meetings; he wants to kill the Bhunganes – all of them.

My phone beeps; it's Nkangala. They are here. I signal to Mpande to sit down. He drinks up what's left of the whiskey in the glass and places it on top of the TV stand. He started drinking soon after Mqoqi's funeral and nobody tried to stop him.

They walk in, one by one until 13 of them are standing over us. There's only five of us. I see Mthunzi, Siba; Mashiya is married? That's Nobanga and Mdingi next to him. I don't recognise the rest. It must be their sons. Mahlubi is not here.

“Madoda, ningahlala,” Qhawe says.

They don't look like they came here to sit. But the look on Siba's face is that of self-satisfaction. That we, the Zulus, have humbled ourselves enough to invite them into our house. I assured him on the phone that we come in peace, and he laughed. Perhaps because peace is a thing that can never exist between us. The younger ones sit down on the floor, knees up. The older ones fill the longest couch. Never in my life did I ever think this day would happen. Sambulo is still standing. Of all my brothers, he's the one that didn't protest doing this.

“You've killed our brother, now I think we're even—”

“No.” Siba raises his hand to stop him. “We didn't kill your brother. He shot himself in the head,” he says with a little smile on his face.

“After you raped his woman and forced him to watch—” Mpande adds.

“His woman? I thought that was the wife of the man owayeqonywe umfazi wakho,” Mthunzi says, looking at me.

I feel my brothers looking at me. They don't know anything about what Sandile claimed before he died. They just know him as the dumb ass I snatched her from.

I'd deny it, but I can't because even I am not sure if it is true or not. Mqoqi tried to convince me it isn't, but once someone claims they fucked your wife, it isn't easy to believe otherwise.

“Don’t talk about my wife, Mthunzi. I asked you to come here because this can’t go on forever. You lost Zwakele because of me. We’ve lost Mqoqi because of you. Can we now put an end to this? Sibadala manje.” I hear a laugh; it’s coming from the floor. This boy laughing must be Phakeme’s age. He should be at school, not here.

“Ankel, we are not here for tea and biscuits. Asiwona ama celebrity thina. Iphi imali kaBabomkhulu, lemali enambulalela yona?”

I hear Qhawe breathing heavily next to me. Nqoba pulls out a cigarette and leaves the room. I have Sambulo; he’s the only one that’s still calm. I don’t trust Mpande’s state of mind at this moment. If Mqoqi was here, he’d have turned this into a brawl by now.

“Is that what you want? Money? Because surely, we can’t bring Zwakele back, and you won’t bring Mqoqi back, so how much do you want?”

“Everything you have,” some little shlama on the floor says. I hear Mpande laugh from the kitchen. He’s dashing yet another stiff of whiskey with water and ice. This is not how I wanted things to go here. I was hoping they’d ask for a few million and get the fuck out of here.

“I told you lezinja zisos’nyela la.” Qhawe finally speaks. Mthunzi blocks Mashiya with his arm when attempts to charge at Qhawe.

“Give us an amount, that’s it.”

“Half of all the money you have,” Siba demands. Nqoba and I look at each other. They don’t know how much money we have. It’s clear they’ve been keeping tabs on us, but we all know they aren’t smart enough to dig that deep.

“Kulungile ke madoda, ayiphele la.” I know my brothers will fight me on this, but it’s the only way.

We watch them leave. Nkangala gives them back all their guns at the gate. I turn to look at my brothers and I know there is no deal here.

“We’ll empty all of Mqoqi’s offshore accounts, sell his houses and cars, that should be enough.” I’m just trying my best here. I know these fools don’t believe in any of this; they want these men dead.

“Where was Mahlubi?” Qhawe asks.

I was looking forward to seeing him.

3

My last appointment with Charity was a month ago.

I keep asking her if I'm dying but she never gives me a straight answer, just prescriptions, pills for iron deficiency, pain killers, and sprays for sinusitis.

I've been very honest with her. I told her I had never been in an accident but that my husband banged my head on the toilet seat once, more than a decade ago. She looked at me in awe, as if she'd never seen such things, which was strange because she's a doctor; she sees these things all the time. I told her about the baby I lost too and that was when she started talking about therapy. I said no thanks because I'd definitely need maybe 50 years of therapy if I were to start now.

I'm here today because although the nose bleeds are not as frequent anymore, my periods have become four days of torment. I bleed clots, large clots and on every second day of each period, I endure the heaviest flow, accompanied by excruciating pain in my thighs and back. I told her that over the phone on Monday. She wanted me to come in immediately, but I couldn't because I had to be in Concordia yesterday.

"Wele." When will she stop calling me that? It's annoying. "Let's do a pap-smear and ultrasound," she says. I haven't been to a gynaecologist in a year, but I won't tell her that. It's embarrassing really. She doesn't give me

any pills this time but promises to call me when my pap-smear results return from the lab.

“I googled cervical cancer.” She keeps her eyes on the paper in front of her. I want eye contact.

“You don’t have all the symptoms, Hlomu, just minor ones. It could be this cyst that you have that’s causing your problems; it can be removed,” she says. The thought of someone cutting me open sends shivers down my spine. I just wish she’d tell me what exactly is wrong with me because my body is telling me something is really, really wrong.

“Do you remember Fortunate Nzuzza? From school? You *must* remember her.” There were so many Fortunate in high school I doubt I’d remember one even if I tried. “Well, she’s having her 40th birthday party next Saturday at Waterfall Estate. You can be my plus-one.” I nod, even though I know I’m not going there.

I get up to leave just as my phone rings. It’s Mqhele – the fourth call since he left the house. I told him I was going to have my braids washed, and yes, Charity’s practice is next to a salon. I’d like to think that whoever he has following me wouldn’t be specific about which door I entered at a strip mall in Olievenhout township.

I feel the dizziness as I get out of the car. I’ve learned how to handle it, stand still and hold on to something, then it will be gone in a few seconds. I fell last Thursday. Nope, I didn’t faint. I was walking down the passage and I lost my balance and fell, but I got up and everything was fine again.

... ● ...

“I’m going to visit Langa.”

“Mmmmm, when?”

“As soon as you speak to someone to sort out my visa, and by soon, I mean tomorrow.” He throws what’s left of the cigarette on the ground and

comes to stand in front of me at the door.

“Tomorrow?”

“I want to leave this week so that I come back before schools reopen.”
That’s reason enough, isn’t it?

“I’ll get the visa sorted, but...” But nothing. I say thank you and go back inside.

If this was a year ago, I would have thanked him with a hug and a kiss and maybe we would have ended up on the couch bonking like rabbits. But also, if this was a year ago, he would have complained about me leaving and I would have had to beg and convince and manipulate until he said yes. Now I’m not about that anymore, and he seems too occupied by something to be needy and clingy.

Besides, he once left this house for a full month – the most confusing time of my life. Some days I felt empty and lost, and then on other days, I felt like I needed him to be away. It had been a hectic period where I had no control and no say. He was polite about it, but a polite Mqhele is something to worry about, especially because he had stopped touching me. No matter how hard I tried, his body just wouldn’t respond to me, and that was a problem because our first step to fixing things had always been sex. He came back after three weeks, but I closed the door in his face because I had already decided. I could see my life clearly without him, but divorce wasn’t an option. It’s still not an option.

It’s funny how Mqoqi, with all his feelings for me, is the one keeping us together.

Last night, as I watched him leave the bed and walk to the bathroom, I knew he was distressed. I heard his pee and water running as he brushed his teeth and when he came back to the bedroom and grabbed the pack of cigarettes and lighter on the pedestal, I wondered how he’d feel if I was to be honest and tell him I could do with a break – a month at a hotel or a tent somewhere in a bush. He’d freak out. He’d think I’m leaving him and he’d want to know what he did wrong. I’d have no answers because what wife would tell her husband that she just needs to be away from him and the

children she carried for nine months? A taboo thing, if not selfish, bordering on evil, people would say.

He stood on the balcony, smoking and watching the rain. He's always loved the rain. He never stays inside the house when it's raining; he sits wherever there is shelter and watches it pour. Langa is always the one that goes and sits with him. Msebe hates the rain; it makes him anxious and irritable. It's weird because I always thought he was the one that would grow up to be his father in every way. But as he grows, I see me in him and more of Mqhele in Langa.

My boys. They are almost men now, tall and pitch-black like their father. They don't know trouble or pain; they have never wanted for anything. They have been loved and protected all their lives. They have never been hungry, never had to fend for themselves and they have heroes, ones they can touch and point at. They think the world of their fathers and they are proud of their surname. OZulu, oMageba, os'Thuli ska'Ndaba! They are called that a lot.

I told Nkosana once that it was important for all these kids in this family to know where their fathers came from, that they came from nothing. But he said to me, "Hlomu, it's not their burden. Where we came from has nothing to do with them."

I listened to him and I let it go. Not because I agreed with him, but because... where would I even start? Children, your fathers stole and killed to give you the life you have and we, your mothers, let them. We stayed at home and made sure that after everything, we gave them love and self-worth. We looked into their eyes and assured them that there was nothing wrong with who they are. We comforted and pleased them at night. We laid our heads on their chests and assured them they had us forever, that our love beats everything, that it was all justified... That's the truth, but who tells such truths to children?

He found me still in bed, still naked from the lovemaking and still attracted to the smell of nicotine on his hands and his breath. I opened my thighs and let him have me again. After all these years, he still moans and

groans; he still enjoys me and I still enjoy him. He still comes inside me and I still love it – a piece of him inside me. And then afterwards when I sit in the bathroom peeing out his sperms, the need to leave him and go far, far away to look for Mahlomu comes. I forced a smile when I came out of the bathroom, long enough for it to turn into a real smile and I forgot. I forgot how I would rather be somewhere else.

So, I found myself with my head on his chest, his sweat sticky on my cheek and his arm warm around my shoulders, but his fingers were not pressed on my arm, so I knew there was something – it always means there's something when his whole body is wrapped around mine, but his hands are floating in the air. He probably doesn't know that I know because his habits have changed over the years. Maybe it's growth, time or things that have happened or maybe things that he has had to let go of.

He doesn't eat that much ice cream anymore.

... • ...

It's already 5:30 am and the kids have to be woken at 6:30 am and get ready for school, except Langa. He wakes up at 5 am, every day.

"I'll drive them to school," he says. He's been doing that a lot lately, and he's been here, in this house, a lot. "I'm thinking we should do lunch today, drive to Centurion for that cake place you love so much."

If he could see my face, he'd wonder why I've just gone sour. I don't even like that place or all those baked things they have so much of, but I eat them anyway – a lot of them. He's been trying to get us to go there again for two weeks now, and I want to go, just not with him. Not in the middle of the day, the only time I can have my peace. Besides, I'm leaving this evening. I think that's why he wants us to go for lunch.

When I come back from doing my nails at midday, there's a pink box on the kitchen counter. I know by the Sweet Tooth branding what's in it. He must have had it delivered during the day. It's full of mini pastries,

everything from little milk tarts sprinkled with cinnamon, something with cream and strawberry on top, chocolate balls, mini scones with cream and, and, and... There's a note under the white ribbon.

Hlomu

I hope these make you feel better.

I know Mqhele probably said, "Deliver a box of cakes to my wife with a nice message." And that was it. Whoever wrote the message is definitely a stupid man who doesn't know Mqhele at all. And besides, I was fine when he left in the morning. Anyway, they know me, and for that, I will forgive them.

I sit up on the kitchen counter and open the box. Two milk tarts are missing, I'm going to kill MaMnguni! I start with the mini scone that has cream and a strawberry on top. Two bites and I'm done with it. The three milk tarts left aren't even worth my time; I gobble them in minutes. The jam tarts are tasty too and the chocolate balls are even better. I put the pink box away when my tummy starts feeling uncomfortable. I know I need a glass of Coke so I can burp and feel light again. It works. I grab a packet of Cheese Curls and curl myself on the couch to watch TV. I close the box and grab a bottle of water from the fridge. I'm hoping it will help with this headache I have.

"You used to drink like umuntu oney'nkinga, now you eat like uney'nkinga." Lethu complained about my eating the last time she was here. As if she doesn't know that vele nginey'nkinga.

... • ...

We dropped the kids off at Xolie's house. They are going to be staying with her because I do care enough about my children to want them to go to school with the correct uniform and all their sports equipment. I also don't

want the boys to end up at Bree taxi rank shaking hands with hitmen or at Sbopho Logistics being asked how many times they masturbate by truck drivers after school – when they should be at home doing homework. Mqhele is a good father, but if I were to be honest, his strength is in providing for his family. The rest, he’s just winging it.

“Do you really think staying in Ghana for two weeks is a good idea? I mean Hlomu, what about me?” Not this; he can’t start this now.

“I’ll video call you. Please go see the kids every day; you’ll eat at Xolie’s house while I’m gone.” I don’t have time for his whining. I gave MaMnguni a long leave.

This is the longest kiss we have had in a while. “Thank you for the cakes; they were delicious as always.” He looks confused; I don’t know why.

My flight is already checking in.

I’ll see him when I come back.

4

Langa! He's gained weight! It's impossible. I last saw him a few months ago and this has happened? What's he been eating?

"I know that smirk on your face has to do with my weight; do not mention it!" he says as I throw my arms around him.

"What is it? Oestrogen is high?" I say and immediately regret it. The gay jokes don't feel so innocent anymore. They don't feel like *our thing* anymore. It's crazy that the realisation of what a different person our father was to both of us has taken something away from us. But we will get through it because more than anything, that's why I'm here.

"Is this all you brought? We're going to have to do some serious shopping," he says putting my suitcase in the boot. Andy is sitting in the driver's seat. He still looks the same, skinny with no hair and black thick frame glasses. He's a cheek kisser – a true Italian who doesn't know anyone in Italy because he wasn't born there and has never lived there.

The last time things were this awkward between me and him was the night before they left my house to come back to Ghana. It was two days after my mother's party, and all I did was say a simple thing.

"It would have been nicer if baba was still here. He would have been so happy. I wish you'd have met him, Andy." Langa didn't say anything, but he poured what was left in his wineglass down the sink and attempted to

walk away. Andy grabbed his arm and pushed him back to where he had been standing.

“I’ve met your father on a couch, in therapy,” Andy said. For a moment there I was confused, more so because Langa had never told me he was going to therapy. I knew exactly what Andy meant, though, that he’s part of Langa’s healing from a childhood I was oblivious to.

“Langa, you must stop trying to protect her. Tell her the truth.” But Langa didn’t tell me any truth; he went to bed.

The next morning, I drove them to the airport, mad at Andy for being present because I knew I could have gotten it all out of my brother if he wasn’t there. An hour later, I was sitting at the airport parking with my phone on speaker, listening to my mother spitting fire about a man whom I loved and trusted so much that he took a part of me with him to his grave.

“But I have forgiven him because I’m a woman of God,” she said at the end. I didn’t believe she had forgiven him and I had no right to ask her why she stayed with him, because... why have I stayed with Mqhele all these years?

We follow a sign that reads East Legon. I remember Langa telling me they live there. What I’m battling with right now – among other things about myself – is why this is the first time I’m visiting my brother? I’m looking out the window at the sea as we drive on. It looks different from the Durban beachfront and there are actually people there, unlike Durban where it’s always empty except on December 16. We stop by a market to pick up some fruit; I had forgotten these two are health freaks. I have also noticed that there isn’t any show of affection between them at all, even when they speak there isn’t much eye contact.

“This is it; this is where we are hiding,” Andy says as he directs me with his hand to walk inside. It’s a beautiful house, well decorated and I know it is all Andy’s doing because Langa is a numbers person, not this. And then they kiss. Suddenly, they’re holding hands and can’t get enough of each other. I laugh, shake my head and walk on to tour the house.

This is a beautiful neighbourhood. It reminds me of Waterfall in Midrand for some reason. There is a pool at the back – good because it’s scorching hot. I settle in my designated bedroom, take a shower, put on a bikini and a kimono on top, and walk back downstairs. They’re lying on a couch with their arms around each other, just like Mqhele and I always did whenever I forced him to watch TV with me. I walk to stand over them with my hands on my hips.

“Is there wine in this house? I need it.”

Andy walks to the kitchen and comes back with vodka and juice. Okay... We all move to sit by the pool. I should have come here a long time ago. In fact, I should have come here every six months of every year he has lived here. I should have been more present for him.

“How long are you two going to stay here?” I know it’s a random question, maybe even inappropriate.

“The white guy is obsessed with West Africa so I don’t know. He’s been talking a lot about Cameroon lately but I’m not moving to a dictator country and that’s it. It’s either we move to Europe or I’m going back home,” Langa says.

That “going back home” part excites me a little, but I know Andy would rather go live in Afghanistan than settle in South Africa. He says our country is intense, and that it feels like a ticking time bomb. He always says we hate each other, that everyone hates anyone who isn’t them – black people and white people, citizens and foreigners, Afrikaans people and English people, dark- and light-skinned coloureds, nappy hair and straight hair. I always tell him we are a wounded nation, but it’s been almost three decades, and we haven’t killed each other, so yeah... eventually we will heal. But he’s lived everywhere in this world, and he insists we are his least favourite.

“Stop calling me ‘the white guy’. If anything, I’m exotic,” he says and kisses Langa on the cheek. They are so beautiful, so in love and so affectionate inside their home. I wonder if it’s always been and always will

be like this between them. Their love seems to be enough, but maybe it's because they've had to fight for it, to fight people like my father.

“So? Coming back home? Is it an option?” They both turn to look at me, and they look concerned. It must be the seriousness on my face. I wish Andy wasn't here. He's family, but some things he doesn't need to hear.

“What's wrong?” he asks.

Everything.

“Nothing. Have you guys ever thought about having children?” I ask. They look at each other; I know there's something.

“Lethu has agreed to be our surrogate, my sperm, of course,” Andy says. What!? And nobody told me this?

“I wasn't going to ask you, Hlomu; your husband would never agree.” My husband is an asshole Langa, you just don't know it, just like I didn't know about our mother's husband.

I want to tell Langa everything. I want to tell him why divorce is not an option. I want to explain to him why love is a beautiful thing and an ugly thing too. There are so many things I should have told him a long time ago, things he could have helped me through. And I want him to take my children – him and Andy. I want him to raise them when I'm gone, especially Niya. The boys are grown now. I know he loves them; *they* love them. That's part of why I'm here.

“I'll make us a cheese platter,” Andy says and leaves us. But I feel like he just wants to give us space, which is great because I want some alone time with my brother.

“So why are you really here? *Half*.” He hasn't called me that in a long time.

He's placed his hand over mine, but I need more than that, so I place my head on his shoulder and fold my arms across my chest.

I won't even try to patronise him with: “I missed you, so I decided to visit.” Langa can see through me. He may not know what's happening with me, but he always knows when something is happening.

“I'm not sure where my life is going, Langa.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I’ve been many things, but unsure has never been one of them. Good and bad situations, and I’m telling you I’ve been in many, but I was always sure about what I wanted. I’ve never been the indecisive type. You know that about me, right?” He nods.

“I love Mqhele but I don’t want to be with him anymore. Does that make sense?” He raises his eyebrows. I hope it’s not a judgmental reaction.

“Who do you want to be with?” Langa! He should know better than that.

“Nobody, just myself, is that even a thing?”

“Does he know this? Mqhele, does he know how you feel?” I’m quiet because I’m not sure. Maybe he’s seen the signs, much as I try to hide them.

“Why? Why do you think you feel this way?”

“Because I don’t think he’ll ever forgive me for the Sandile thing. I’ve never admitted to it, but I know a part of him won’t let it go. Mqoqi got in that mess that ended up with him dead because of it. Can you believe that? Can you see how much this whole thing has cost us? And I have to live with it, every day, Langa.”

“So it’s possible that it’s the guilt. You want to end this marriage because of the guilt.”

“I didn’t say anything about ending the marriage. I want a break, time away from everything.” I don’t think he understands. His face says he’s not taking this seriously.

“So this is a break. You came here to get a break from him?” Hardly.

“Mqoqi left me something. I haven’t had the courage to open it. I thought maybe you could help me go through it? Come on, let’s go upstairs.” I’ll tell him about my ailing health tomorrow; one issue a day is enough. “I’d rather we use your laptop.” It’s safer that way. I don’t know if mine is being monitored somewhere.

“For a housewife, you sure can be messy.”

Oh please, it’s just an open suitcase on the floor and swimsuits scattered around it.

“Three memory sticks? It must be a lot.”

Yeah, but I'm interested in this one. It's still in that same envelope, with nothing else but my name on the outside.

"It's just one Word document," he says and clicks on it twice. It's a large one, though. It's titled "Hlomu: The End" and it's a whole 198 000 words.

At the top, it reads: *Finish it, give it an ending. It should end with you alive.*

"He wrote a book?" Langa is shocked. I'm still confused about how this happened. Did he know he was going to die? I know he was always writing stuff, but he never said anything about a book. And what does he mean I must finish it?

Zulu

I still don't trust lezinja.

The problem with Mqhele is that he is getting old and he is dragging all of us to some stupid decisions with him.

The Bhunganes don't deserve this money. It is ours; we worked for it while they were hiding in holes somewhere, watching our every move for years. What pisses me off the most is that they are coming at us sideways. I don't understand why we haven't shot all of them – their snow-monkey children included.

Personally, I don't have time for this. I have two children and a wife pregnant with twins at home. Again, I had to lie to her about where I was going tonight because how would I even explain being at Bree Taxi rank after midnight? Nqoba suggested that we have our people hiding inside the taxis during this meeting, but Mqhele, again, came up with some thoughtless idea that these people just want money, nothing else. I don't know where he gets that idea because he knows them. We've been looking over our shoulders since the day he killed Zwakele, and we always knew they were going to come back for us.

Not money – us.

“This is the last one, bafo,” Mhlaba says as he drops yet another bag on the ground. It's bag number nine, big and black like the others. Bree is fully lit at night with taxis parked in straight lines, some drivers sleeping inside. But Bree also has dark corners, corners we know so well because there was a time when we slept here too.

I was the first one here because for some reason I'm the one that had to get this money here. Mqhele and Mpande had to make sure we were not

being followed, so they've been driving in circles around the rank. We have hitmen and high-ranking police officers on our payroll, and yet here we are, exchanging money in a taxi rank with savages.

This is not my life – I'm Qhawe Zulu.

"I told you to leave your guns in the car," Mqhele says behind me. I assume he's talking to Sambulo and Mpande because he knows I wasn't going to be told by him, not about facing the Bhunganes unarmed.

Mpande reeks of alcohol. A problem, just like his escalating anger over the turmoil that is his life. He lives for two things now, tormenting Mzizi and going in between Thando and Ndoni. His plan is to marry both of them, but not because he loves them that much. The love thing... he is not capable of it anymore, not after Mqoqi chose to die. He wants to marry Ndoni to torment Mzizi, and he wants Thando close by for his children. The problem is, Ndoni will never agree to that, so maybe he might have to do something drastic. But we'll sort that out another time.

These fools are walking towards us; Nqoba is behind them. The bags are lined on the floor, zipped up and heavy. I see a little smile on Siba's face and I know it's not about the money he's seeing, it's about how desperate we all look standing here.

It's the teenage freckle face who crouches down to unzip the bags and checks if the money is really inside. In legal terms, this is called money laundering, but they don't pay SARS investigators enough money to even try to fuck with us.

"You want to count it? Go ahead; we have all night," Nqoba says. I definitely do not have all night.

"It's three *metres* in each bag, that should be enough to get you off our backs," Mpande adds. We didn't agree on an amount; they should be happy with whatever we give them, and this is more money than they have ever seen in their lives.

"Madoda, thathani iy'khwama zenu nivaye," Sambulo speaks. How they clean this cash is up to them now. Mashiya keeps looking behind him as if he's expecting someone. He's made two calls and I've noticed none of them

were picked up. Now I feel like this is a trap. If they are planning an ambush, it's over for us.

“Uphi uMahlubi?” It's Nkosana, walking slowly behind them. He said he wasn't coming and tried to talk us out of this.

“Bafo.” He ignores Mqhele.

“Uphi uMahlubi,” he asks again, looking at Mashiya. No answer. My feeling is that they too do not know. Mthunzi is also not here, but they brought with them enough of their little roaches to carry these bags out of here. “I asked you a question.”

“Eyi Nkosana, wacina kudala ndoda, akusahambi kanjalo manje,” Mashiya says and points a finger at him.

We all know exactly what he means. Nkosana was always the leader, always the one barking orders. The Bhunganes respected him and feared him even because he was always easy on the fist and trigger. His perfectionist nature was a big problem too. Messing up a job was not an option, and Mashiya was always messing shit up, clumsy to the core.

“Does Mahlubi know about this?” Nkosana asks, still talking to Mashiya.

“Don't worry about Mahlubi, but yes, he knows. It's been great doing business with you again after so many years. Bafana, take the bags,” he says. I see he is the main man now. The boys do as he says. Each with a bag they turn and walk back to where they came from.

“Bhungane,” Mqhele says to Siba and Mashiya. “Iphelile.”

“Iphelile, Mageba,” Mashiya says, and they both walk away. In our world, a man's word is worth more than his life. Maybe Mqhele was right after all.

“Asihlangane enkanjini madoda. Sonke,” Nkosana says. The Muldersdrift house is exactly that – enkanjini – because that's where most of our wars have been decided and planned. We regroup in that house, sometimes to fight and most times to kill.

Mqoqi was the delivery man. He had this rare skill of delivering a person to the spot of their last breath without even a wince of sympathy or

regret. I wish I'd been a better brother to him – we all do. But we don't talk about that because we all know his death is on us. We got angry when he ran off with that woman, cut him off even, but we all thought he'd come back to his senses eventually and come back to what he was. He always came back, even at times when we had to go and drag him back. Personally, I was glad he left no explanation for killing himself because sometimes wondering is better than knowing. It gives you space to doubt, especially if you could be the one to blame.

We left Gauteng as soon as the call from Sbani came that “Mahlubi is here”, but we were too late to arrive. Had we made it on time, they would not have ravaged that woman the way they did. We would have killed them on the spot. It took some serious convincing to get all of it out of that woman, in a dingy Hillbrow flat with some white girl occasionally threatening to call the police on us. Drugs and dirt were all over the place. I felt sorry for both of them, but they are women – and women can endure the most despicable things in life – once they give up, you know that the only thing that can save them is death.

I only went with Mpande because the rest of my brothers didn't want to know. The plan was to tell Lale that Mqoqi left half of his wealth to her daughter so that maybe she'd clean herself up and go live a comfortable life somewhere. The problem, though, is that Hlomu is in charge of executing all that wealth. We didn't say anything; we left Lale there to snort her life away and hoped the child is better off wherever she is now.

“Macingwane.”

“Eyi, Zulu, I'm glad you are here,” he says and shakes his head. Naledi is going to kill me for this. Every time I disappear all night, she starts thinking I'm lying dead somewhere. I should have sent her to the North West.

I'm the last to arrive, and Nkangala's reaction tells me something more is waiting for me inside this house, something I won't like. Nkangala is already getting in the car to leave. He does that when he doesn't want to get involved, or when he sees Nqoba because there is unfinished business

between them. Nqoba thinks he went too far, but Nkangala insists he was tasked with a job and that he's never even touched Gugu's hand. It's interesting because Nqoba's issue is with Nkangala, never with his wife. He's at a point where no matter what Gugu does, he believes it can never amount to what he has done to her. So in his eyes, she is perfect through and through and nothing she could ever do would make him love her less.

I watch Nkangala drive off and wonder why there is a taxi here. A taxi that is supposed to be in the warehouse with the rest. It's after 2 am and the driver should be preparing to get on the road right now.

"Baba." It's Lwandle. Why was the door locked? And who told him he could come here?

"What are you doing here, ntwana?" He doesn't answer me.

Over there in the sitting room are all my brothers on one side and these boys on the other. Mqhele is on his feet, smoking, inside the house. I know he is livid. Mpande has a gun in his hand. I won't even look at Nkosana because I can feel him.

"Tell me how. How, in your right minds, did you think this was a clever thing to do? Ningenaphi? Asiqale lapho," Sambulo asks the boys.

I'm standing here confused. Nqoba points me up the stairs with his eyes, and I know exactly where I'm supposed to go, the door that is supposed to stay closed. Whatever is in there, it better not—

Not Mthunzi! Noooooo! I hope he's not dead. *Yerrrrr*, they roughed him up, but he's still breathing.

"Qhawe," he mumbles, blood oozing out of his head and all. He's almost unrecognisable. He rattles the chains when I turn to walk away. "Get me out of here," he mumbles again.

I know he won't last long, not with that gaping wound on his forehead. They probably *helicoptered* him. I'm not getting him out of this chair until I know how this happened. He's still calling out my name when I close the door behind me. Asking what is happening will take us back. I need to know what we are doing going forward.

“If we had stayed instead of listening to Bab’Mqoqi, none of this would have happened. He’d still be alive,” Sbani says.

“If you’d stayed, you would have done what? Have you lost your minds?” Mqhele asks.

“They would not have done what they did, and baba would not have killed himself,” Lwandle adds.

“Who told you that?”

“We are not kids anymore, baba; this thing of lying to us should stop. Bab’Mqoqi killed himself because of what they did.”

“And you thought you needed to avenge his death? Who the hell do you think you are? We sent you to private schools, gave you everything you wanted and still, you choose to be savages!”

“No Bab’Nqoba, you sent us to private schools, but private schools don’t teach you what to do when someone comes after your family. I watched baba bleed on his bed, with scars and stitches on his thighs. That man right there made the call. He paid those prisoners to rough him up. Everything, all of that shit about molesting a child and getting him arrested, it was all his doing. He framed him. We were not going to sit and act like he isn’t the reason baba is dead.”

I see, so all this time, these kids have been doing their own investigations and making stupid decisions while at it.

“And you three thought torturing Mthunzi was a good idea?” I ask. I’m trying to remain as calm as I can.

“He killed my brother,” Ntsika says. He was better when he was a white boy somewhere across the ocean. He should have stayed there.

“So you kidnapped him, brought him here and did what exactly?” Sambulo asks.

“We beat the truth out of him. And what I want you all to know is if they touch Niya, I don’t care how much money you gave them to disappear. If they even try... I’ll kill them all.”

These boys don’t know shit about how we got here, and they’ve taken us 100 steps back from where we were just an hour ago. I’m going to get

Mthunzi out of that chair and hope his brothers will understand that this was a case of young Model C boys trying to be tough guys.

“This ends here. We’ve made peace with these people. You three must stop with this stupid shit. I’m letting him go. If we have to pay them more money to make this disappear too, so be it.”

I know by the look on Mpande’s face that he doesn’t believe in this peace I speak of. But I climb the stairs determined to negotiate with Mthunzi, to tell him that this instruction didn’t come from us, that Ntsika and the boys decided to go rogue and that we are still on that peace trail. A few stitches on his head won’t kill him. The other injuries can be sorted. We have Masetla to take care of it.

He doesn’t raise his eyes when I walk back in.

“Bhungane, this was all a misunderstanding,” I say as I unlock the shackles around his ankles. “You know how young boys can be. They are quick to believe they are men. We’ll take you to our doctor, he’ll fix you up...”

He hasn’t said a word. I unshackle his wrists and his arms dangle on the sides of the chair.

“I hope this doesn’t change anything. Mashiya gave us his word...” I look in his eyes and slap his cheeks a few times.

I’m talking to a dead body.

5

This is the first time in a long time that I've slept so deeply and so peacefully.

I feel lighter and happier.

For the first time in a long time, I feel like I'm at a place where nobody expects me to fix anything, to worry about anything. I'm Mahlomu Dladla here. I'm with my brother and his husband. They want nothing from me. Hell, I don't even feel like I need a drink to get through the day.

I'd sleep in and wander around in leggings and a bra, but Langa said I cannot be in this country and not go to the market. He said I'll love it, just like Andy does because it's full of "hippie things" from the entrance to the exit. But I know it's probably overcrowded, loud and cheap if not dirty, but nobody knows me there, and that's a big thing for me.

"Get ready so we can go. Andy has left already, work stuff," he says.

He always wakes up early and the first thing he always does is wake me. I hated this about him when we were kids, that strange thing about being able to function early in the morning. He's always been just like our mother; they want to witness the sun come out, but they can't stand night time. By 9 pm, they are already in bed.

"It's 6:30 am, Langa! What time do stores open in this country?"

He's already dressed: man pants, a T-shirt and sneakers. I hate that he doesn't do crazy things with his hair anymore, that he tries too hard to be

masculine and that he can't even touch the love of his life in public. I know West Africa is not a place for him, but I didn't realise it was this bad. I want him to come home with Andy.

I'm dressed and ready to go within an hour and he looks at me funny when I drape myself in sunscreen.

"Go easy on the sunscreen! We're not in Sudan," he says. Between whatever might be killing me and the hot sun, one makes my nose bleed, and I don't want to be dealing with that here.

By the time we park at what is definitely not a legal parking space, the city is already buzzing with people. It doesn't look like people going to work; they're working for themselves. Everything is for sale and everybody is in a rush. This is nothing like Durban, where people are just chilled and walking like they own the world.

Tetteh Quarshie Art Market.

It is so alive, so noisy and so African, colourful and beautiful, rich with life. I think I'll have a headache by the time I leave here. There are all kinds of stuff; some I already know exactly where I will put in my house, like that gigantic red vase that blings when facing the sun.

"I want that!" I say pulling Langa by the hand to the small stall. I haven't done this in a long time.

"Errr... how are you going to carry it?" he asks. Really, he's worried about that? He clearly doesn't understand the art of shopping!

"How much is that?" I say to this very dark man who looks like someone I could easily find on Eloff Street back home.

"1000 cedis my sister," he says with that accent I'm very familiar with because I live in Joburg, and the whole world is squashed in that city. I pull out a pile of cash from my sash bag. I don't even know which notes I should give him; I just hope he's not overcharging me because I'm a foreigner. I pay and promise to pick it up when I come back.

"That was R3 400 for a vase," Langa says.

Yeah, I've spent far more than that on one pair of sunglasses. I don't care, and that's because maybe I've come to resent money. Because at this

point, it's the only thing I have... no certainty, no conscience, no promise of tomorrow.

I pile on Ankara materials and a mirror; we even stop for a bite at some corner with a woman frying meat with a baby on her back. And why do people here have such beautiful skin when all I see is frying and dunking of food? It is crazy! You literally have to walk sideways to avoid bumping people. Some women are balancing things over their heads but walking comfortably. The rush! Crazy!

I left my vase. Langa said the guy will still be there when we go back. He apparently knows him because Andy buys stuff for his textile design job from him sometimes. I don't know how many jobs that Italian man has!

“What are you going to do with all those things?”

“Shut up! You brought me here, remember? I'm going to own them, just,” I say.

I think Lethu would love that... and my mom that... By the time I get tired, it's midday and there is not even space to breathe in this place. I understand why Langa wanted us to come here early in the morning. The last stop is back at that first stall to get my vase and then... a proper mall!

“I'm going to get that carpet I saw earlier. Just see how this guy gets the vase into the car,” Langa says leaving me at the stall.

“If it breaks my sister, it's not my fault. This is outside my job; I'm just doing you a favour.” This guy! He wants to charge me more money for taking the vase to the car. What ever happened to Ubuntu which, from what I know, is practised all over Africa? Huh! The level of slyness! They pick it up with two other guys and already I feel nervous. They'll have to manoeuvre through hundreds of rushing people to even get to the exit and into the street where the car is parked.

“No, leave it. I can have it delivered where you're staying,” a voice says from behind me.

What the fucking hell!?

6

I first met him two weeks ago when I was still undecided about coming here.

I didn't tell Mqhele about it.

He had a bagel in his hand, already bitten once or twice. He took the third bite as he was looking at me sitting down with a laptop in front of me. I was scanning through invoices at Fruitcake Crumbs when I looked up and saw him. My hand moved to pick up the phone to call Mqhele, but then I remembered he was in some meeting. I would have called Mqoqi if I could.

"Tell them to go easy on the mayonnaise; it doesn't look good on my red beard," he said.

He had this smile on his face. A smile I didn't think fit who I had been told he was. Until I remembered he is cut from the same cloth as the Zulu brothers and their likes. I started packing my stuff, getting ready to go. I wasn't exactly sure which one he was, but Mqhele had told me about them once, before all the shit that brought me here.

I remember the night he told me everything. We were sitting on the bathroom floor, my back on his chest, his arms wrapped around me. I can't even remember why we were in the bathroom, cuddling on the floor, but he must have found me there and I must have noticed that something was wrong and made him talk.

“When we started out, a few years after we arrived in Joburg and realised that for us to be able to have anything, we were going to have to live on the dark side officially. It wasn’t just us; we had partners, you know, people we worked with. They were brothers and cousins. They had been on the job for a while, so they kind of showed us the ropes. We knew them from back home, eShowe. We went to school with some of them. When we came here, Ngcobo reunited us; he’d been working with them. We did all our first jobs together,” he said.

I wanted to ask what those “jobs” were, but I didn’t want him to deviate. And that Ngcobo, I’ve always known there was more to him than just a father figure they found in Joburg. I let him continue.

“Mahlubi and I, we were the same age, so kind of like friends if I can call it that. See, Nkosana has always been the first in and the last out in everything we do. He leads us and he never leaves anyone behind.”

I felt that the relevance of what he had just said would become clear soon enough.

“The Bhunganes also had an older brother who was just like Nkosana. So this one night, we had gotten a tip about this old Greek man, in the mansion where Nqobile worked,” he said. I’ll tell you now that Nqobile has been tormenting this family from the grave.

“The Greek man was into some jewellery business, but it was something illegal because he kept big cash in the house – millions. We planned everything, but the agreement was that only me and Zwakele – that was their older brother – would go in. Me, because I can walk in and out of anywhere without being detected and him because he was good at cracking safes.

“The problem was there were cameras we didn’t know about. We managed to avoid the ones we knew, but one got him, his face. We walked out with all the money, but two days later he started getting calls. The old Greek guy, the owner of the house, didn’t go to the police. Instead, he got his people to hunt him down. The guy knew there were two of us and he already had all the information he needed to find him. He was going to

make sure he gives him my name. We knew he was going to kill us both if he found us.” He paused.

“And then what happened?”

“We got to him first,” he said.

I felt my chest pounding. He felt it too and held me tighter. It wasn't that I was shocked by him killing someone. Nope, that doesn't make me flinch anymore, it was the way he said it.

“The thing was all over the news. This guy was apparently well known but Interpol also wanted him, and it was a big thing. They put top investigators on it because they thought there was an international crime ring and all that stuff that wasn't even there. I mean... we were just stealing from some old guy; we didn't know it was going to get that big. We didn't even know who he was.”

He made it sound like it was justifiable to rob the old guy. Let alone kill him.

“What happened next? What caused the fallout?” I asked. He tightened his arms around me again and kissed the back of my head.

“Things got complicated. We didn't trust them anymore, and they didn't trust us. Police were closing in, especially on Zwakele, so the Bhunganes tried to run off with all the money. But first, they tried to pin everything on us, on me by giving the police some information.” He paused again. I think he wanted me to comment, but I didn't. “All I can tell you is, I pumped four bullets into Zwakele's head. We dropped his body along the highway. The investigating officer was paid and it ended there,” he said.

There was something about the way he said this too. Something different – like it was something that still haunted him, a bit of regret too. There really was no particular reason for him to give me all that information, but it was at a time when they were all being dodgy, disappearing for days to attend fake meetings, which turned out to be trips to that man from Margate. They were so committed to that process and it was interesting to watch them. They were convinced it was going to change them.

But Mqhele is Mqhele.

He always will be who he is.

And now, here stands Mahlubi, orange hair and all.

“You have got to stop following me,” he says. I know he didn’t come here in peace, so he must stop with this nonsense.

“You followed me all the way to Ghana?” I ask. I think the look on my face is of disgust more than anything.

“Don’t flatter yourself, Mahlomu; I do have a life you know.” He laughs. He followed me here.

The guys have put the vase down; they don’t know if they should continue carrying it to the car or listen to this man standing in front of them.

“Wanna sit here for a drink?” he asks, pointing at a stall that has a small table and two chairs.

“No, I don’t want to sit anywhere with you.” The vase guys leave; there are other customers at their stall. I need to get out of here. Where is Langa?

“You look thirsty,” he says, signalling to the woman selling coconut water to bring two.

I know men like him. You have to tread carefully around them, make them think you aren’t as scared as you really are. I look around; he can’t touch me here. And it’s time I asked him what this is all about. I need to know what his intentions are. I sit. We are going to have a conversation, and it will be the last we ever have.

He looks different today with a t-shirt, Capri shorts, flops and sunglasses. How is it that he can look so weird and yet so beautiful?

“You’ve gained a bit of weight,” he says as he sits. Totally inappropriate to say that to a woman, a stranger. But yeah, I’ve been eating.

“I’ll have water,” I say to the woman when she comes to us with that coconut thing that I’m sure I’ll hate. He takes one and takes one sip with a straw.

“Your loss; you should travel more often,” he says. Who told him I don’t travel? But he’s right, I have enough money to go anywhere, anytime, but all I’ve ever done is be in the kitchen.

“Why are you here, Bhungane?”

He raises one eyebrow.

“I never told you my name.” He should know better. And he must stop this charade of coconut water drinking because I know he isn’t the bourgeoisie type. Mqhele said he was either in jail or living as a church mouse somewhere. “You know my name? Nice, we’re making progress, aren’t we?”

Whatever he means by that. He stretches his arms, leans back on the chair and knots his hands behind his head.

“Okay, if you insist, I’m here on business. And I love art, African crafts in particular. But I’m glad I bumped into you while at it,” he says. Why does he remind me so much of Mqhele? Well, Mqhele isn’t into art markets and drinking coconut water, but I feel like they carry the same charm... and darkness. “And you? Why are you really here?”

His face has changed to serious. I have a feeling he knows why I’m here.

I drop my eyes. Suddenly I feel like I’m going to get emotional. Not now, Hlomu. Not with him!

“I’m visiting my brother.”

He stares at me; I look away.

“I see,” he says and takes another sip. “There’s an old bookstore uptown; I could take you there. I think you need to unwind.”

Yoh hhayi this idiot! Who does he think he is?

“It might help you connect with Mqoqi. You haven’t dealt with his death, have you? He loved you, and it scared you because deep down you knew. But Mqhele—”

Nope! Never! He must not even try.

“I don’t appreciate you talking about my husband; I don’t know you. It’s not your place and I’d appreciate it if you stopped following me,” I say. I’m ready to go.

“No, sit. Let me tell you about Mqhele Zulu. To him, you are an asset. Yes, he loves you – nobody can deny that. You are everything and more to

him, but you are still an asset; you belong to him, and he will do with you whatever he wants. He will keep hurting you and you will keep taking him back and that's where he finds his power, in knowing that he is in control of you," he says. I wish he'd fucking shut up!

"Is that why you're coming after me? To get to him because you know he'll do anything to protect his *asset*?" He keeps quiet and looks at me with an expression I can't explain. There's a little smile on his face, but his eyes are not smiling.

"Maybe I'm just obsessed with you," he says putting his hands behind his neck. Stupid moron!

"No. Maybe you're just hungry for revenge. You want to avenge your brother's death but you're scared of Mqhele so you go after a defenceless woman." I'm angry now. He looks shocked. Now he looks really scary.

"If I was scared of him, I'd go for him directly. Trust me, he's more dangerous when your life is threatened than when he is. But you know by now that if I wanted to hurt you, I would have done it a long time ago." He takes another sip of his drink.

"But I'm not like him; I don't hurt women," he says.

Where is Langa?

"That twin of yours and his boyfriend, they are risk-takers, aren't they? Living here knowing the laws and all that. I wonder what the authorities would do if they found out."

Wow! He really is a low-life disgusting human. He wants something. I know that for sure.

"What do you want?" I ask. I've realised I'm being blackmailed. He stares at me for seconds, his eyes narrow. It's like he's trying to read my mind.

"Divorce him," he says, not taking his eyes off mine. What!?

"I'm not going to be told by you, Mahlubi—" What the fucking hell? I'm leaving! Now!

"Sit down," he says.

He doesn't know me.

“You’re shrewd, aren’t you? You’re not the innocent sweet little Hlomu everyone thinks you are. You control everything around you without anyone realising it and you make the rules,” he says.

I’m out.

“Mqoqi shot himself in the head, one bullet and that was it...” I stop, put my handbag back on the table and sit.

“He had a bike accident.” He laughs briefly.

“Mqoqi threw people off bikes; bikes didn’t throw him off. But I always knew he was going to die first. That kid had always been reckless, too emotional and too weak. He never could take life head-on. One little stint in jail, a few stabs and a crazy woman...” He raises his arms in the air.

What is he talking about? Mqoqi wouldn’t kill himself. Yes, I know something doesn’t add up about his death, but he would never have done that. I’m not sitting here for this nonsense; I’m leaving for real this time.

“I could make your life hell, you know,” he says.

Yeah right! I don’t even care anymore. He looks at my left hand.

“Ring missing? That’s a great start,” he says.

Jizas! I forgot my ring back at home, but it’s not a big deal. The whole of South Africa knows I’m married.

“What exactly do you think you’re going to gain from this? It won’t bring your brother back, you know.”

I see his jaw tightening.

Maybe I’m pushing him on purpose. I don’t know anymore. He keeps his eyes on mine. I stare right back; I will not let him push me over.

He clears his throat, takes another sip and leans back on his chair again.

“Divorce him, Hlomu, and make it ugly. That’s all I ask.”

He’s crazy.

“It was you; you know. Mqoqi ended up dead because of you. He never would have ended up with that woman if it wasn’t for your mess.”

I can’t hold it in anymore.

He grabs my wrist before my hand reaches his face. He pulls me until my face is close to his.

“I’m not Mqhele; my life doesn’t revolve around you. Touch me and I will chop you into pieces,” he whispers, lets my arm go and sits back again.

Langa appears suddenly, “I thought you got lost.”

He is trying to catch his breath. I’m still standing. Mahlubi is still sitting and he smiles. Why does he keep doing that?

“How’s your boyfriend? You two are risk-takers, aren’t you?” He’s talking to Langa. It sounds like a threat to me more than it does to Langa. He must never try me like that, not by threatening my brother. Langa follows as I storm back to the vase stall.

“Follow me to the car with that,” I say to the three guys still standing there as I walk on. This guy has made me really mad now!

“What was that all about? Do you know that guy?” Langa huffs next to me. I don’t even want to talk about it. “I think you should call Mqhele. I hate him too but that guy seemed a bit dodgy. Is he one of the taxi people?”

Urgh!

“No, he’s someone they double-crossed.” I don’t even know why I’m telling him this because—

“So, what’s he doing here?”

He’s doing a lot. And I’m not calling that bug-eyed asshole I married. I’m not bait; Mahlubi thinks he can use me to get to him, but I’ll prove him wrong. He clearly doesn’t know what I am. I slam the car door in anger. Langa raises his eyebrows at me. I’d apologise for that, but there’s no time for petty things so...

“Do you guys own a gun?”

“What the hell, Hlomu?” He’s being unnecessarily dramatic now. Half the population of this world owns guns. I used to hate them too but I need one now.

“Don’t worry about it, he won’t try anything,” I lie.

Now I wish the Zulus had their skivvies following me around, with guns and all that because honestly, I’m fired up. This guy seems to know too much, including the fact that he knows what uttering the divorce word to Mqhele will do. That’s why it is the one thing he wants because he knows.

I head straight to the bedroom and ignore Langa when he says we should hang out. We didn't even go to the mall as planned.

"We're going to a business dinner this evening," he shouts as I close the door. I don't want to go anywhere. Maybe I should go back home. But no, I'm not running. This Mahlubi guy must know that I won't let him or any man for that matter control me.

It's afternoon already. I pull out my laptop and lie on the bed on my stomach. I've decided to be in denial about that part where he claimed Mqoqi killed himself. Not because I don't fully believe it, but because Mqoqi is gone and if he really killed himself... he's at peace wherever he is, which is definitely not heaven because none of us is going there. Not us people of the Zulu family. The angels would stage a protest if they saw us approaching the gate.

Now I remember I have two more memory sticks to go through, and I'm scared they might prove Mahlubi right. I won't open them because right now it's that threat to Langa I'm more worried about.

I google "homosexuality in Ghana". Of course, I know about it, but I want to know how far the hate goes. It says same-sex relationships are illegal and that they could go to jail for three years. Marriage is not even spoken about. There's an organisation called Advocates for Christ; they sound like a vigilante group. I need some wine to be able to stomach this.

I race back to the kitchen, but I see Langa through the sliding door, standing outside by the pool. He looks like he's in deep thought. I suddenly have this uneasy feeling. I know him when he is like this; I get like this sometimes too and when I do, I don't want to talk to anyone.

"Wanna talk about it?" I know he's not okay. He's quiet. "You have to get out of this place, Langa. Why are you still here?" He does that thing that our father used to do, pressing his thumb on his chin.

"We were supposed to be here for two years, Hlomu. Only two years. That's how long we were supposed to hide who we are and after that, we were going to move on to where we can live freely. But you know what?"

It's better here, bad but better than a lot of places on this continent. Yet Andy still wants us to explore."

I don't care, he must come home.

"Did Mah raise us like this? To give all of ourselves to the first men we fall in love with?" I ask. He thinks I'm funny.

"Mah raised us both differently. Sometimes I felt like she was mad at you for something," he says.

No, my mother wasn't mad at me for anything. She was projecting because if anything, her biggest fear was me turning out like her. She wanted me to have a heart of steel and the emotions of a man – the audacity of a man. She meant well and to some extent succeeded. I have never really sat down and measured the amount of failure in my life, but if there's one thing I know for sure I failed in, it's the Langa thing.

"Why didn't you tell me, Langa? About baba." I know he doesn't want to talk about it; not to me.

"You had him; I had Mah. I wasn't going to take him away from you."

That's not how it's supposed to be; we were each supposed to have both of them.

"I would have chosen you over him, you know that."

"I know." I can't say the guilt will leave me now, but at least he knows. "We have a conference dinner thing tonight; did you bring elegant clothes?" he asks. That's a quick change of subject.

I have a couple of black dresses with me, but I don't want to go anywhere tonight, definitely not a dinner thing.

7

I'm used to these types of functions.

Speeches, air kisses and blah... blah... blah... food, drinks and then go home.

At least the programme is not too long. The MC's accent though will be the death of me; I can't hear a word he is saying.

"Are you here to network?" I ask Andy. He nods.

"Some of my clients are here; I'm trying to get new ones too. Everyone is moving to Ghana for business, especially Americans and Europeans. It's the most stable country in West Africa," he says.

It's interesting how he always talks about Africa like it's something from an Indiana Jones movie. Something to explore and be fascinated with. Something to bid on and make money from. If I didn't love Andy so much, I'd call him out on a lot of things, including this thing of manipulating my brother's love for him.

I know he didn't have the same problems Langa had growing up. I could be wrong, but maybe he is using the fact that he is the most secure and truest place for him. He loves him to a point where Langa feels nobody can love him more. He is a safe place, a place none of us – except maybe for my mother – have ever been able to give him. It's not my place to say, but I doubt this country cares about a white man being gay as much as it cares

about a black man being gay. But I'm here now, so let me brave the night for him so that he closes his deals and we get out of here.

This is a Real Estate conference, and the interesting part is that it is full of Africans, unlike that place I come from where I know the picture would have been different. Andy says he is here because someone wants to build an office park here in Accra. He says the person is South African and that he came straight to him through a friend's referral. He says his job is to be the middleman, to introduce him to his contacts. I'm standing here listening to him and wondering if he knows at all about how Langa feels. He says he'll introduce me to the person, but that the person probably already knows me because I'm famous.

And yes, it's him and his freckles. He is the Zwakele Incorporated CEO, Mahlubi Bhungane. He wants to shake hands; I don't. His business is named after his brother – the one Mqhele killed. Mqhele said the Bhunganes are anywhere between prison and squatter camps. How is this one a CEO of anything?

"I'm sure you know Hlomu and the Zulu family," Andy says. I guess then I'm one of Andy's connections. If only he knew.

Mahlubi nods and says, "Yes, good business people, those. They started from nothing and look at them now." It's me he's looking at as he speaks. I have a feeling that this guy is here for me. Whatever his plans are, I'm pretty sure they aren't what they seem. The best thing right now is to try to avoid him as much as I can. So far, he seems more obsessed with having my attention than he is with hurting me.

"Nice to meet you, Bhungane. I don't know anything about real estate so I'm going to leave you two to chat," I say, with a smile. I want to get out of here. Now. I don't want Andy to think something is going on here.

"But I hear you have properties all over Gauteng. You do this real estate thing for fun, I like that."

Sigh. He's really going for the kill.

"Money lying around, so what does a girl who doesn't care much about shoes do? Buy houses and stuff," I say and laugh. He too laughs and I know

what that look on his face means. He came here to hurt me, but now he thinks I'm fascinating. I have that effect. He's never going to have the guts to hurt me. I know that for sure, but he'll come for those around me.

... • ...

I'm sitting on the front seat again and I'm just wondering how they do this when I'm not here. Do they travel in different cars? Or does one of them sit at the back and the one sitting in the front pretends to be the driver? I don't know, but I hate that with all this, they still aren't talking about moving. Andy has been talking non-stop about how confident he is about the upcoming business deal. He says the guy is definitely going to work with him.

Langa is sitting there in the back seat and being supportive. He throws in a "That's great news baby" here and there. I can't even get myself to comment. Mahlubi is coming for Mqhele from all angles. To hurt him, he's coming for me. To push me into a corner, he's going after Langa because he knows I would die first.

Again, they kiss and hug as soon as we enter the house.

"Let's pop Champagne and celebrate!" Andy says.

I don't want to celebrate but I agree just to be polite.

"It's late and I want to go to bed now." Langa is frank. I'm left with Andy downstairs and I'm definitely not going to tell him about who his new potential business partner is. He knows I'm in distress because he knows when Langa is in distress; our energy is always the same.

"He doesn't blame you, Hlomu, so don't start blaming yourself. Therapy has done a lot for him. He talks, pours his heart out."

I hear Andy, but still, I wish Langa would have talked to me instead.

"I always thought our childhood was great, not perfect but you know... better than most people's."

He pours himself a flute and looks at me.

“Well, at least you two turned out great. You, a rich woman and Langa here with me. It’s hard, but we love each other. I know we believe in different things and come from different places. Your people can be dirt poor but still be happy because that’s what y’all are made of – family and all the sentimental things, humility and all that. Most of the time I envy you people. Your ability to just be. Life and love, that’s the one thing black people have never lost. It’s one thing nobody has ever been able to take away from you all.”

I grind my teeth... grind... and grind... because the audacity is it for me. The lack of understanding is it for me. His belief is that what he’s just said is a compliment. There is not a single thing that their people have never tried to take from us black people. And I hate how he says it like what we still have we did not fight to preserve, like it was left for us, untouched. Nobody wants to talk about how much we have fought for our existence in this universe, about how much it was our humility and respect for life and nature that turned us into victims in the first place.

“We will move, I swear. But for now, I just want to make sure that when we do, we will both be happy. I’ve never been short of anything, Hlomu; I’ve always had anything and everything I wanted in life. My parents made sure of that. But now I’m accumulating my own things so that my child will live the same life. It’s not that we don’t have enough, it’s that I want us to have more than enough. I want our child to be raised in both our worlds – Langa’s world of humility and contentment without too much, and my world of comfort and privilege.”

Comfort is good; money is great, but it can’t buy you a kidney and it can’t save you from a car accident. You die like the guy pulling a recycling trolley full of expensive empty alcohol bottles, and the same “deceased” stamp is used on your ID to erase your name from the census list. Even me, I have so much money, but I can’t stick R200 notes up my nose to stop it from bleeding.

I don’t think he understands how black and African his child will be, curly hair and light skin and all... and that even if he makes sure that he or

she has everything this world has to offer, sometime in his or her life, someone will try to dehumanise him or her. We aren't there now though so...

“Andy.” He gulps what’s left in his glass. “I haven’t told Langa this, but if something happens to me, if I die, I want you guys to raise my children, especially Niya because she is a girl and she’s still young. It won’t be easy to get them, but I want you to do everything you can. Grab them and run if you have to.”

I can’t imagine anyone physically grabbing Msebe and Langa, even I have to look up when talking to them now. Andy knows this; he thinks I’m acting crazy right now.

“I need you to promise me. Can you do that?”

“Nothing is going to happen to you, Hlomu.”

Sigh.

“Would you go back to South Africa for that? For my kids?” I know I’m reaching but he must know.

“If Langa wants that, then I will. Are you okay, Hlomu? Is everything okay?” That’s a useless question for me, Hlomu Zulu.

“Alessandro!” Langa screams from upstairs. Andy drops the flute on the coffee table. It lands on its side. I watch him as he runs up the stairs and I know something is going on. The first time I heard Alessandro was his full name was at their wedding.

I came here for some peace; whatever is happening between them, I’m sure it’s not as hectic as most of the things I’ve seen in my life so far.

I’m going to sleep.

8

Strange.

It's 8 am and Langa didn't wake me in the wee hours of the morning?

We didn't make any plans for today, but I want my brother all to myself, so I'm gonna have to come up with something, even if it's going to a dentist somewhere in this city.

The best way to make dodgy trips happen is to walk into the room already dressed and your handbag hanging over your shoulder. That way, you don't give them a chance to negotiate. That's exactly what I'm doing today. And I've decided I'm going to shop for weaves, firstly because Ghana apparently has the best weaves and secondly because I want to change my look. I can't be a plain Jane all my life. I know Andy would rather stay in this house and wash pots than go on a weave hunting trip. He's typical that way – a white man who doesn't understand why black people, particularly black women, would want to look anything other than natural. As if we haven't lived through centuries of how we look being described as the epitome of ugly.

Besides all that, I'm happy here. I feel free. Even the Mahlubi thing pissed me off, but it didn't send me into an extreme state of panic where I actually start believing he's here to kill me. My nose hasn't bled too, which means my body is also happy; it hasn't reminded me that my death is looming.

I want to tell him about who I became after I got married and why I hid so many things from him. He will be mad at me, but I'll make him understand. And then we will talk about my kids. He was willing to help me with the Niya thing. Well, he didn't know my entire plan, but he knows what I did. I'm not saying he must grab my kids and run to Mars. I'm saying he must kiss them goodnight for me when I'm dead – every night. Yes, that's what we are going to discuss while shopping for weaves, all the flaws we thought were above us.

I'm wearing high-waist denim shorts and a tight T-shirt. I kind of feel too old for this outfit but I mean... I'm in a foreign country and nobody is going to be taking pictures of me and splashing them on newspapers for my many children and husband's business partners to see. So basically, I can walk around with shorts that cover just my bums.

And you know, Mqhele has never said to me, "You can't wear this Hlomu. You can't go back to work, Hlomu. Stay at home and cook and take care of us, Hlomu. Don't go on long vacations with your friends, Hlomu..."

I really need to sit down and thoroughly look at all the things I have given without being asked to.

I expect to smell breakfast as I walk down the stairs, but no, nothing. We must be having fruit and yoghurt or Andy's favourite, asparagus and mushrooms; sometimes there's spinach too, boiled. I roll my eyes at the plate each time. There are dirty dishes in the sink and eggshells in the open bin. There definitely was food. But clearly, if you wake up at almost midday in this house, you aren't entitled to breakfast.

Jizas!

"Langa?"

When I went to bed after that weird conversation with Andy last night, the last thing I expected was to wake up this morning and find these people all over this house. They're just sitting there on the couch looking at me.

"There's a guy following us all over Accra! What was I supposed to do?" he says. So he's the one that called them? That he is so candid about it

makes me even more startled. And it had to be freaking Qhawe and Sambulo, the psychos of the family!

“Hlomu, I did what I thought was right,” he says. Without even telling me? Is he serious? “You would have said no.” Is he reading my mind now?

I haven’t seen Sambulo in a while, but Qhawe pops up at my house any time he wants and takes my kids. And now he’s here. So what are they going to do? Kidnap me? And how did they get here so fast? You need a visa to get into Ghana; how were they able to travel here so fast? I can’t even look at them! It’s Langa I’m looking at because I can’t believe he did this to me.

“He threatened me, Hlomu,” Langa says. No, Mahlubi didn’t threaten him; he threatened me. As long as I do what he wants, he won’t touch him.

I look at Andy. He should have talked Langa out of this.

“He was here, inside our house. That you just stood there and let me introduce him to you and said nothing when you knew he was here for you!”

Ayi ayi ayi! He must never! Raising his voice at me? Nope! He must not come at me like that! I’ll slap his bald head so hard—

“Hlomu, we’re going home,” Qhawe says. He looks so much like that stupid brother of his, I want to slap him too!

Langa is standing next to Andy, his arm hooked on his. He looks scared like maybe there’s something I don’t know that happened between the time they left me in the lounge last night and now.

“They cracked our safe and took our personal stuff,” Langa explains. I have never seen him this freaked out in our entire life.

“I can get your stuff back—”

“He took our sex tapes, Hlomu,” Andy adds. I hear Sambulo gasp.

Mahlubi is really coming for Mqhele. Strong.

He won’t leave me alone until he gets what he wants. He knows exactly who I’d choose, and it’s funny because I didn’t know who I’d choose until now, right at this moment.

... ● ...

I didn't even hug my brother goodbye.

I'm not mad at him; I'm mad at the world.

I'm mad at myself.

I'm mad at my life.

I'm just so mad and soon it's going to drive me into a mental institution; I can't control myself anymore.

No word is spoken throughout the trip to the airport. I dread going back home to my children with all this baggage. I think about Mahlubi's threat. Would he really do that to my brother if I don't file for divorce? I have a feeling he wants to destroy Mqhele completely and he knows that the best way is to take me away from him. But I also have a feeling that he won't stop there. He'll push him further down after I'm gone. I hope he won't go for my kids because then I will find him and kill him with my bare hands.

I look out the window until we reach the airport. It's a private jet, but it's not ours; it must belong to someone who knows someone in Ghana because I still can't figure out how they were able to get here so quickly. We walk in but they change direction to I don't know where. And how can a private jet be this big? The only flight attendant here directs me to the left side of the passenger area. It's business class.

And there he is. Sitting on one seat. I think about walking back but where am I going to go? He's wearing sneakers, a cap and a tracksuit. I guess then he's back to his taxi rank persona. He's sitting with his elbows on his thighs and has something in his hand that he keeps squeezing and releasing. He doesn't raise his eyes, not even once until I sit to face him on a seat across.

"Did he touch you?" That's the first thing he asks, still looking at the thing in his hand. I keep quiet. "Did he touch you Mahlomu?" he asks again, his tone firmer. I thought he was out there trying to change, so why does he still sound like himself and make me feel like I should run?

“Nobody touched me,” I say at last.

And why does he think he can come to me and demand answers? The charade we kept for six months with me trying to get him through Mqoqi’s death is nothing now. He and I know exactly where we are at this moment. There are things we have needed to address in the past six months, and those things are here between us now. It’s no longer about me helping him heal, and him not understanding that I need to heal too.

We have never talked about that day he left our home, and what happened before that.

Before he left to live wherever he was for a month, he made me sit on the couch. He pulled the coffee table and sat on it, his knees locking me in, just like he did the first night I spent in Naturena. He smelled of nicotine; his aura was masculinity and danger.

“Hlomu, do you remember the night we sat in the cinema at our old house?” he asked. I remembered that night very well. It was the night he confessed about his cheating, about Nqobile’s death and about Zandile.

“You asked me what I’d do if you did the same things I had done, particularly about other women. Do you remember that?”

I nodded.

“I said I’d kill you, and I meant it.” I didn’t understand why he needed to repeat that because I know him. He doesn’t say things he doesn’t mean. Never.

“Now tell me, did you sleep with Sandile?” I didn’t hesitate. I said NO with my chest, eyes on his.

“That’s not what he said to me,” he said. Honestly, that made me angry, that it was my word against a dead man’s word.

“The problem with you, Mqhele is that you are weak. You are a weak man. You think you have power just because you have money, but Sandile had education and intelligence and he knew how to deal with men like you. You thought you were above him; he thought he was above you. And from where I’m sitting now, he has outsmarted you. You took something from him and now, from his death bed, he made sure to take something from you,

your dignity and sanity. He was dying, he had nothing to lose, and you fell for his tricks. You are letting him destroy you from the grave—”

The next thing I knew his knee was pressed on my neck. He raised his hand but stopped himself before it reached my cheek. He looked at me, looking up at him. And then he slowly removed his knee. I slept on the couch, and in the morning, I bumped into him in the passage, pulling his suitcase – leaving. I let him go because he almost did something he promised he’d never do again. We never spoke about it after I let him back home. But it lingered, always.

And now here we are...

He raises his eyes for the first time. Our eyes meet and stare, and then it all comes back. I cry, I can’t help it. He knows; he’s known for the past six months. He moves forward. I raise my hand to stop him. He sits back in his spot immediately.

We sit in silence.

It’s like he is a stranger now because we are finally addressing what has been a thing between us for months. He’s still sitting with his elbows on his knees, looking at me. I’m looking at everything around us. I think he slept on this plane, that when they went to Langa’s house they left him here because they thought I’d refuse to come back if they arrived with him. Or maybe he was going to go crazy and try to carry me out of that house. It’s not that I’m being difficult, it’s just that I can’t do this anymore. I’m just fed up. It happens to everybody, right? Everybody gets to that point with life and with people. I think even God would forgive me for giving up; I tried my best.

Those women, the ones who gave me “marriage advice” on the night before my wedding, if I told them I was giving up, they’d say nonsense like “Well, it could be worse you know, at least he’s not taking a second wife, this is nothing.” Or say stuff like “Men make mistakes, you have to forgive him to show him you are a loyal wife.”

Where on earth do they get all these things? I made one small mistake, which by the way was never proven, and this man left our house like I

haven't been giving him a home and second chances since the day I met him. He lost his mind for something he isn't even sure I did. And look how it ended; Mqoqi ran off with that woman and ended up dead. I remember the time I kicked him in the stomach and swore at him after he lied to me again. I had to get on my knees for him to accept my apology. It must be nice being him.

"How are the kids?" I ask out of the blue; we might as well talk while we're stuck together here.

"They're fine; they miss you. Us. Home," he says. Okay, we can stop talking again, the "us" part I won't entertain. "It's been months Mahlomu. Are you ever going to be ready to talk to me about that night?" The audacity!

"All you're going to do is apologise, Mqhele; it's not enough."

"What do you want me to do, then? I'll do anything, just say it," he says. I look out the window again. I know what I want.

"I want a divorce," I say. He looks at me for a while.

"Anything but that," he says and stands up. "Put your ring back on." He places it next to me and walks away. The last thing I expected him to care about is the ring because I mean really, it's not like I took it off to make a point; I just forgot it in the bathroom.

Also, did he just say no when I asked him for a divorce? Does he really think it's his choice? He must be joking. He doesn't understand how far this has gone. Maybe Mahlubi was right, maybe I am an asset.

I don't see him again until we land. There must be another sitting area on this jet because I didn't see his brothers as well, just the flight attendant who kept annoying me about food and coffee and everything I didn't want. The four of us get in one car. Qhawe is driving and I'm sitting at the back with Mqhele. I'm just going to look out the window throughout this drive. He keeps looking at me and looking away and looking at me again. There is silence and tension in this car. I left my vase in Ghana. I've just remembered that because clearly, we are not driving to my house, which is

where I want to go. We drive straight to some house I don't know in Muldersdrift.

Great! The men are here, and now I have to face these people and actually speak to them. It would be easier if people in this family believed in privacy. If the men didn't think I'm married to all of them.

Niya is the first to jump on me when I walk in. She starts with her questions immediately. I think this is the first time I've laughed since yesterday afternoon. The gun people are here. I hope we're not back to being kept prisoner again because I'm tired of this shit! Tired to the bone! We are too old to still be living like this. So much money, yet so little joy? Sometimes I wonder if it is all worth it.

I have a bedroom here. The strangest thing, though, is that I know those curtains and couches I saw when passing the lounge. They are Xolie's old furniture and I remember Sambulo leaving in a van to donate them to the Salvation Army. There is no dining room suite, but the TV stand randomly placed there is definitely from my old house. Mqhele said he gave it to one of the taxi drivers, and actually, I do remember that driver coming to fetch it when we were moving.

"Mami."

Sigh.

"Whatever happened to knock before you enter?"

I hear a low sorry and I'm assuming it's from Ntsika but I'm not sure because all three of them are already making themselves comfortable on the floor, knees up. I sit on the bed and fold my arms because I know they aren't here to ask if they can have ice cream. Those days are long gone; they are grown men now. I feel like they are expecting a lecture from me. This is exactly how they look at me when they've fucked up. Only this time, I don't know what they did.

The door opens slightly and Phakeme is pushed in. I don't see who pushes him but it looks like one of his fathers. I'd expect him to be at res studying because he's in the middle of his semester exams, but no, he looks equally guilty and he joins the delinquents on the floor, knees up.

I guess I have to ask.

“What did you do this time?” They don’t speak. And come to think of it, where are the other women of this family? Why am I the only one here?

And where are all the other kids because Niya is the only one here?

“We did what needed to be done,” Lwandle says. I see Phakeme nudging him with his elbow.

“And that was what exactly?” I’m looking at Ntsika now; he is the eldest here and I expect him to not waste my time. “What did you do Ntsika!”

Same silence.

This is starting to feel serious; it’s definitely not stealing their fathers’ cars to go partying or even getting a girl pregnant, which I’d definitely lose my mind over. If they don’t want to talk, I’m going straight to their fathers to find out.

“Mami, what is in those memory sticks Bab’Mqoqi left?” Sbani asks just as I get up to leave the room. Imihlola!

“Why are you asking?”

“We want to know who else was in that house. Who else raped Lale?” What!?! “Everyone who was in that house is responsible for baba killing himself. I want the memory sticks. One by one they will—”

Whoah! No! No! No!

“What are you talking about, Lwandle? These things have nothing to do with you. Your fathers will handle whatever—”

“Memory sticks, Mami,” he says, his hand out, eyes firm. Never in my life did I ever think...

“Lwandle, I didn’t raise you like this.”

“Yes, you didn’t. But I’m Lwandle Zulu. Who else was in that house, Mami?”

I scream Mqhele’s name. I don’t know how, but my own children have just driven me to a state I’ve never been in before. They’re all up on their feet when he runs in.

“What’s going on, Mqhele? What is happening here?” My hands are shaking; I need to sit down so I can breathe.

“Get out, all of you,” he orders.

They leave, and I’m left trying to count myself down because I can feel a panic attack coming. I don’t know what it was exactly. Me looking at Lwandle and seeing Mqhele or the way he looked at me when he said his name and surname. It was more than just that; he was telling me – to my face – that I didn’t save him from anything.

“Calm down, Hlomu. What did they say to you?”

Where do I even begin?

“They asked questions. Mqoqi really killed himself? Lale was raped?” I see him clench his jaw.

“Calm down,” he repeats. He sounds defeated. I’m calm enough now to sit down on the bed and raise my head because I can feel the nosebleed coming.

“What did the boys do, Mqhele?”

“They’ve started a war and it will be worse than anything we’ve ever seen before.”

I run to the bathroom; I can feel the blood coming out of my nostrils.

“We have to go now, Hlomu,” he shouts after me.

“Go where?” I shout back while watching my blood dripping into the sink.

“Spinach,” he says.

9

It was five years and two months ago.

We were driving from that same house – Gugu and Nqoba’s house – when Mqhele put his hand on my thigh and said, “The word is *spinach*.”

I was lost. We had just laughed about how much we both hated that spinach with cream or whatever they put in it. And how Gugu just pulled it out of the freezer in a foil container, defrosted it and put it in front of us in that same container. There was a cold garlic roll to go with it. Mqhele and Nqoba just looked at each other and went outside. I sat across from Gugu at the dining room table, a bottle of Champagne between us and flutes in front of both of us.

She had just had another miscarriage. I, we, were there for that. But I didn’t really know what I had come to say. When things like that happen, sometimes all you have to do is go and *see* the person. You don’t necessarily have to have a solution to their problems; you just have to be present through them.

“You know what, Hlomu? I’m not even sure if I really do want another child. I just know that I need to have something. I need to gain something; I feel so empty.” I nodded and hoped she’d keep talking.

I wanted her to talk more about her mother, which I knew was the source of everything – more than losing yet another baby. The first

miscarriage was bad; we didn't even know she was pregnant. But this one, the second, was a catastrophe. She was already showing and we all knew.

"I think it's my fault that I keep losing them. I mean, Sihlangu was easy; he even survived prison. That was bad, Hlomu, but this? This? I'm trying to be okay; to be happy with what I have. I have a lot, but I don't even know my surname or my real name or—" She stopped and looked up, blinking rapidly.

I had known her for years but that had been the first time I learnt her eyebrows joined in the middle. Or that she could chew and swallow anything that didn't come from the ground. The Gugu that counted calories and frowned upon us for eating things that once walked the earth or drinking things that had sugar in them was gone. It showed on her face. She had not trimmed her eyebrows, filed her nails and not thought before she spoke.

"It's not your fault," I said. That was all I could come up with.

I carried two children through a hijacking that almost killed me. I carried another child through uncertainty and the knowledge that there was a possibility that I'd have to end her life the moment it started. None of it was my fault. It was "everything's fault". I just didn't understand why Gugu couldn't think like me. In this place, this place that we are in, everything is a build-up. We wouldn't be how we are if we had loved men who aren't Sbopho's sons.

"So how do I explain it to Nqoba? They were his children too. He's hurting. I know that."

I wanted to tell her she didn't owe Nqoba another child, that her body wasn't a factory. But I wasn't going to go there because I, myself, knew that Nqoba was hurting. It wasn't just about the miscarriages; it was about Gugu and how she thought having another child would fill the void in her. I wished I could do something for her, find her real mother even if she was a deranged vagabond, eating from rubbish bins in a small town somewhere. Even if she was the one who gave her away. Because sometimes knowing the worst is better than knowing nothing.

We drank the Champagne; I drank most of it. I told her that things would be fine, that she didn't have to worry about Nqoba. She didn't look convinced, but I hugged her heavy aura and looked into her dead eyes anyway before I left her house with my husband's arm around my waist.

I didn't tell Mqhele about most of the things Gugu said. He just said he was hungry and we laughed about the spinach. His laugh was real; mine wasn't because as I sat in our car, I figured I should have brought food instead of expecting Gugu to make lunch. Mqhele's hand was warm. He slipped it under my beige dress and caressed my thigh. I've always loved that, but I've always known it isn't about sex. See, Mqhele loves touching me when he tells me something I don't want to know. It's not an old thing. Like I said, his habits have changed.

"What are you talking about?" I asked. I noticed he wasn't laughing anymore.

"It's not that serious, Hlomu. But if I ever SMS you anything with the word 'spinach', I'll need you to follow these instructions." He listed the instructions. I put my hand over his. He looked at me and said, "I promise I'll never put you in that position."

I didn't believe him; I nodded and changed the subject, anyway. I, at that moment, had the responsibility to take the weight off his shoulders, to make him believe he would never, ever put me and our children in the "spinach" position. We talked about something else for the rest of the trip. It must have been something petty because I don't even remember it. But I remember the instructions very clearly, and it is the instructions we are following now.

I'm sitting at the back with Niya, just like he told me to. I'm holding her close to my chest, hoping she'd fall asleep instead of blasting those cartoons on her iPad.

"Mami, I'm tired of watching this downloaded stuff. I've already watched all of it many times. Please make YouTube work now."

I should have brought Allergex with me because at this point drugging her to sleep would be the best idea.

“We’re on the road Niya, there’s no Wi-Fi here.” She pulls her face and I know she’s not about to let this go.

“But there’s always Wi-Fi in the cars,” she whines.

Well, not this one. It’s a black Jeep with tinted windows. I’ve seen it a few times and I think it belongs to Qhawe but I’ve never seen it parked at his house.

I don’t know where we are going, but Mqhele assured me that he’ll meet us there tomorrow before he tapped Ntuthuko’s shoulder and told him to get in the car and drive. He had already said goodbye to his daughter, but all I got was a long, tight hug and a kiss on the forehead before he pushed me inside the car. What I know for sure is that he is not taking the divorce thing seriously. He chooses to be in denial about it.

We’ve been on the road for over three hours, and Ntuthuko hasn’t said a single word to me since we left Muldersdrift. He’s been listening to Radio 2000 throughout this drive. The last I heard, he was the guy that manages the family Uber business, but strange enough, he pops up anywhere and everywhere.

“Where are you from, Ntuthuko?” I ask him. He decreases the radio volume. We are about to have a chat. We never really bother to know much about the staff, especially the type of staff he is because we know they are either hitmen or spies.

“I’m from Clermont, Fennen to be specific. But I just bought a house in Centurion so I might as well start calling myself a Pretoria citizen.” There’s something soft and familiar with him, unlike the robots we usually find ourselves with. They never speak or call us by our names.

“Do you have kids? A wife?” He giggles briefly.

“My life has just started. I’m building, but yeah maybe one day I’ll have a daughter.”

“Why a daughter? Most men want a son as their first child.” He laughs at that too.

“It’s tough being a man; I wouldn’t want to bring one into this world,” he says. It’s even tougher being a woman, but he wouldn’t understand. He

sees this – me being driven to wherever we are going and his life depending on getting me there safely – as maybe pampering of some sort. He doesn't know that the last time I felt free, I was 22.

“Are you sure you are cut out for this job? Sometimes it's guns blazing. You could die any day.”

I'm trying to rattle him because really, I have nothing else to do with my time and on top of that, I'm trying to make light of the situation I'm in. He turns back and looks at me, smiles and stuff. He's so young, he reminds me of Mpande.

“There is not a single thing I have not seen in this life, sisi. I used to drive a meter taxi, and all I can tell you is that humans are something else.”

I laugh. I'm interested to know about the things he's seen. But we are now turning onto a dark gravel road and I'm beginning to be scared. He increases the radio volume; he must have noticed that I've withdrawn.

“...And by the time people realised what was happening, police sirens were ringing all over Spruitview. He was gone. Dead. His face pressed to the ground.” That's what a journalist says on the 9 pm news bulletin. *“His wife, the fourth and youngest one, was still kneeling next to him, wailing. Sgodi Ngcobo, the 69-year-old infamous Johannesburg taxi mogul, was shot 14 times as he entered his driveway...”*

For a moment, I forget and grab my phone to call Mqhele. It doesn't even ring.

“Stop the car.” He doesn't. “Stop the car, Ntuthuko!”

“I can't,” he says and presses harder on the accelerator. We are driving at maximum speed on a dark gravel road and all I can think about is how they'll never find our bodies.

Zulu

He held my hand through my first kill.

He patted my back and said, “You did well my son, you’re a man now.”

I believed him. I was 20 years old and I had never had someone say that to me; someone call me a man. Of all my brothers, he picked me and said my bravery shocked him. But he said it in a bragging kind of tone like I was what he’d been looking for. I could already handle a gun at 16, but I wasn’t planning to live by it.

When I had just turned 19, he said, “It’s time to leave the toys to young boys now, Ndabezitha.” We were standing over his old Cressida boot, an R-5 rifle staring up at us. He grabbed my wrist when I tried to touch it.

“Asithintwa isilwane silele, Mageba. You will touch it only the day you use it,” he said and laughed.

I’m a man now – a grown man who has killed many and brought children to the world. Now that Phakeme is almost at the age I was when I started taking lives, I know I would never let him touch a gun. I was just a boy like he is now. Now I’m standing here looking at Ngcobo’s body, ravaged with bullets from head to toe and I know that whoever did this, had the same training I had.

“It all depends on why, Ndabezitha. How a man dies in this world of ours is determined by why. You can kill a man with one bullet in the head; that’s if it’s business. But if it’s personal, you empty the cartridge, do you hear me? Udedel’umlilo kuze kuqhothe is’thupha. And you kill him outside his home; the people inside must hear it because if they don’t, then what’s the point? Death does nothing to the dead, Mageba; death is for the ones

that remain to suffer. His wife and children must be left to feel the pain because that's how you punish a man."

But I can't say it was personal with the men I shot in driveways, not to me. Those were personal to the men who paid me. I have shot men in their driveways; I've also killed men with one bullet in the head anywhere and everywhere.

The one time it was personal to me, I took that man on a drive. I wasn't going to spill blood in Naledi's house, so we drove through the night across the Kgalagadi desert. I talked to him; he was shaking and sweating and now and again I'd feel sorry for him because he was just a young man. But to be fair, I was clear from the beginning. I told him when we left the house that I was going to kill him. He begged; said he was just trying to get himself some money. He said he was going to destroy everything he had on Montsho and never bother Naledi again. He still couldn't understand when I tried to explain that he had gone too far, and there was no turning back now.

"You see, April." That was his surname; a strange thing. "You've touched what cannot be touched; a woman carrying my brother's child. And the problem is that you are an amateur, so you cannot be trusted to think like an intelligent man. Tell me, if I let you go now, what will be your next step?" He didn't have an answer. "See? you are not an intelligent man, that's why you did what you did."

"I'm a police officer; I can make your life easy. I can be your inside man," he said, in tears.

No man who can shed tears – just because he's afraid to die – could be any use to me. A man must fight. He should have been throwing fists at me, trying to escape since I was on the steering wheel. Better yet, knowing I was definitely going to kill him, he should have grabbed the steering wheel and made sure I also die with him. But no, he was weeping like umnqolo that he was.

I didn't shoot him; I pulled him out of the car. He ran, I chased him with the car and ran him over 10 times. And when he was in pieces, I collected him, put him in the boot and drove back to Muldersdrift. I spent that whole

early morning burning each piece. Nkangala helped me dig a hole where I buried what was left.

“Eyi Zulu, we must always make sure the gate is locked. Imagine if a dog was to wander into this yard, that’d be the end of it all,” Nkangala said to me. Dogs are witches on four legs; I hate them.

The one thing about Nkangala is that he always understands the assignment. He was given to us by his father, young yet wise beyond his years. His father had been our man for years; the one man we trusted without reservation. And when he started getting sugar diseases and blood pressure things, his wife summoned him back home to the rurals.

That ‘breaking the cycle’ thing that Hlomu is so committed to, we didn’t even think about it. She says the children of our staff must never come here to replace their fathers in the same job; they should come here as graduates, and we should be the ones to open the doors for them. She has some scholarship thing going on for children of taxi drivers and truck drivers, with our money.

I would have stuck around and helped Nkangala clean the braai-stand, but I had to go home to the love of my life. I don’t even remember what lie I told her about where I was that night, but I had to go, in case she started to think I was out to get another woman pregnant again.

Xolie knows exactly who I am, thanks to Mandisa. Xolie loves me; she loves me in a way that I don’t deserve to be loved. But she won’t let me go near the kids, especially the little ones when she can smell the blood on me. I don’t know how she does that, but she always seems to know when I’ve been out doing unbiblical things. And yet, she’s always the one to bring me back to being Sambulo the husband, the father, the human being.

I told her everything last night before I put her in a car and forced her to leave our home. I was honest, really. I said to her that things were about to get really bad. That the boys had done the despicable. I didn’t tell her, though, that it was our own Phakeme who – while claiming to be studying in his room – was tracking Mthunzi’s movements on the computer I bought him after his mother refused.

You don't wanna tell Xolie about how much her children are as Zulu brothers as they come, because truth be told, she's a madhouse. A madhouse I love more than the meaning of the word love itself.

The mortuary car is here, and so are journalists and police. This will probably be called a taxi violence thing, but I know it wasn't that; this was personal. The Bhunganes are coming at us sideways and they are a step ahead. The difference between us and them is that they have not been tamed by women and children; they are still who we were when we had nothing to lose.

"I need to get Hlomu's brother out of Ghana, now!" Mqhele says.

Someone has to go to the mortuary with the car because Ngcobo's youngest wife, yes, the 26-year-old he married a year ago, is still crying as if her world has just ended. But it's MaMtshali that we need to move.

"Send the jet. Mahlubi has left Accra; he's on his way here."

"Yes, but not before their sex tapes made it to the internet. If we don't get them out of there now, they'll be in jail by the morning." Hlomu will never forgive us if that happens to her brother. Mqhele's phone is ringing. He says it's Hlomu's mother. And he ignores it.

So now we have to take Ngcobo's body to Ngudwini, kill the Bhunganes and save the gays.

10

Except that Ngcobo is dead and that they drove through two provinces to end up here, MaMtshali and MaMbizana know nothing more.

They don't know where Lwandle went after he came to their house in Ngudwini and told them to pack what they could in 10 minutes.

They say they were driven here by three men in the Quantum parked outside.

I've been here three hours, the sun is coming out and I still don't understand why MaMtshali is here. She should be sitting on a mattress back in Ngudwini preparing to bury her husband instead of drinking tea and nibbling on biscuits. MaMbizana is sitting next to her, weeping. They were already here when they found out about their husband dying, through Ntuthuko, who could still miraculously make calls.

Deep down we all knew Ngcobo wasn't going to die of a heart attack on his bed with one of his wives sleeping next to him. But the issue here is why he died and who killed him.

I think I spoke too soon. MaMtshali knows something because she's been making eye contact with me and quickly looking away. She has not shed a single tear. Xolie has cooked, so I assume she's been in this house for a while.

"Makoti, I brought blankets. The children can sleep here in the sitting room," MaMtshali says.

That was thoughtful of her, but she asks me to go to the car outside with her to get the blankets. I follow her out, but I feel like this has nothing to do with blankets. There's only one car in the yard, the Quantum. Ntuthuko dropped me off and left. He didn't even sit down when he came inside the house to announce the news. The gate is about three kilometres from the actual house and when the sun comes out, I'll try to figure out where we are. The boot is packed with blankets, still in their plastic packaging, but it's the rolled grass mat that she pulls out first, stuffs it under her arm and leans on the car.

"Kuyavutha ke manje makoti, kuvutha umlilo," she says and tightens the apron over her dress. "Can you shoot? Uyakwazi uk'hlohli isbhamu?"

Can I what?

She pulls out one blanket from the boot and unzips the plastic package. Oh! A gun... three... stashed between the big blanket. I know things are hectic but MaMtshali?

"Mqhele never taught you how to use a gun? You don't have a gun?"

Jizas! Me? A gun?

"Mqhele didn't want me to get involved in these things, Mah. And who are we going to shoot? We are safe here."

"Heeeeeee," she says and claps once. "Safe how? Do you see anyone here? Who do you think killed Ngcobo? Iy'nkabi zonke bezingasekho. They kept leaving one by one and he knew we were about to become sitting ducks. I knew this was coming; you should have known too."

She's scaring me.

"We still had men guarding us in Joburg—"

"Do you see them now? Are they here?" No, but...

Lights are appearing from far and I get that feeling in my stomach. She shoves the blanket onto me and runs inside. I follow.

"Switch off the lights! Children! Under the beds, all of you!" There's immediate chaos with children running all over the house to get to the bedrooms. I hear a *gluck* before a cold thing is placed on my hand. I have never touched a gun in my life.

“It’s ready, when I say, ‘shoot!’ don’t think twice.” She hands the third one to Gugu and she cocks it herself.

The car is closer, we can hear it. It’s only a matter of seconds before a hail of bullets rains down on us, just like that day in Mbuba. We’re going to die here today.

I’m just waiting for MaMtshali to say “shoot” with shaking hands. She’s leaning on the wall, peeping through the curtain as the car parks next to the Quantum. I can’t see anything, but I hear a car door opening, and another. I feel MaMtshali relaxing a bit. She moves to switch the dining room light on before the door opens.

It’s Gaba. He looks stunned to see the gun in my hand. I toss it on the sofa quickly and he jumps to grab it, uncocks it and stashes it under the cushion.

“Mah,” he says to MaMtshali. But now we are all looking at the woman behind her; I have no clue who she is. She has a backpack and a small suitcase with her. Niya comes running down the passage. She must have heard her uncle’s voice.

... • ...

“I won’t even ask how you got involved in this Gaba, but I want to know who this Sthembile woman is and why she is here.” He waves his hand to dismiss me.

“Some girl Mqoqi used to deal with, apparently, she has some skills. But listen, I didn’t come here for that. Langa is missing and Mah is raising hell.” Oh, Lord!

“He called her, frantic, said something about Mqhele’s people and then that was it; the call was cut. We’ve been trying to reach him since yesterday morning.”

This is all on me, all of it!

“Mah got in her car to drive to Gauteng and went straight to your house. There was no Mqhele there, just Nonjiko.”

Who is Nonjiko now? I ask with my eyes.

“Long story,” he says and gets up.

I realise I haven't slept in two days. I woke up in Accra yesterday morning and spent six hours on a flight. I was then in a house I didn't know existed. Next thing I was on the road through the night not knowing where I was going. During all that madness, Ngcobo died, my brother went missing and I held a gun, ready to pull the trigger with my Tammy Taylor acrylic gel. Now I'm standing outside of some farmhouse in the middle of nowhere with Gaba smoking next to me. I figure we are in the Free State somewhere. Chickens are roaming the yard and a horse – a whole horse busy eating grass not far from us.

“Mami look... it's scared of the chickens!” It's Bayede running from behind the house, dragging a one-legged black cat on the ground with its other leg. How has it not scratched him?

“Who let you out of the house?” Is this child mad?

“Langa, we went to the river.”

There's a river? Where? It's only 7 am; what are these kids doing?

“Go inside and let that stray cat go.”

He puts it down and it limps back behind the house.

“Okay, Mami,” he says and runs back inside. Mpande's children are the best behaved in this family; Thando must have raised them well. It makes sense though because it was just the two of them. Had they been here with the rest of the brood, they'd be menaces, like this one of mine who wakes up to go to a river at 5 am. Speaking of Thando, where the hell is she? And Zandile, Naledi and Ndoni?

“Mqhele went to find Langa nomlungu wakhe,” Gaba says.

“Went to find them where?”

“We've figured out that they are not in jail, which is good, but we still don't know if they've left that country.” I'm confused. When I left, there

was that issue about sex tapes being stolen, but I was sure Mahlubi would use them to blackmail me. He hasn't said anything yet, so...

"Manje they are all over the internet, bebbhehana," Gaba says and throws his finished cigarette at the horse. Trust Gaba to be that crass. I'm quiet because if I start crying now, it will be downhill from here. The composure I have been trying so hard to maintain is quickly leaving me.

"I can't stay here, Gaba, I can't. What if something bad has happened to him?"

"Something worse than him being on the internet? Mah saw all that stuff. They are in every newspaper in Ghana. Their business associates are being rounded up and questioned by police. There's a video of their house being searched, luckily they aren't there."

I should never have gone to Ghana.

"Ankel." It's Langa, followed by Mabutho.

What on earth is that?

"We got breakfast, since we are now on Survivor Ladybrand," Langa says waving a bucket at us. I don't even know what to say right now. They went fishing? In some river? With what? This doesn't make sense at all. Gaba thinks it's funny.

Now comes Sisekelo. He looks clean and proper with no mud on his feet. I know he didn't go anywhere near the water because he never does – not even to the swimming pool. Gaba goes to his car and comes back with a small box.

"These are all your passports. You are 20 minutes away from the Lesotho border; if shit starts happening here, get in that taxi and go."

Nooooo man, this is not it!

"I have to go."

"You're leaving us here, Gaba?"

"I have to find my brother, Hlomu. I can't sit here when Langa could be dead somewhere."

I want to go with him, but I know that's impossible.

“Zandile and Naledi are on the way. You might as well start getting used to the river fish, and these chickens running around here are your food now.”

He doesn't go inside to say goodbye to the kids.

Never have I ever wished so much for the men with guns to be here.

11

“Hlomu, we have to start moving money now because I have a feeling this won’t end well.”

I’ve been hoping for this opportunity since I got here. To be alone with her because, if anything, she and I know how bad things can get. Are we accustomed to the soft life so much that our biggest fear is ending up broke?

“Money, Xolie? What we need is to learn to defend ourselves. We have no use for money if we’re dead.”

“They won’t let anyone touch us.”

Is she that naïve?

“I don’t think they have that much power anymore, otherwise we wouldn’t be here. They haven’t checked on us since we got here; for all I know, they could be dead.”

“Hlomu!”

I’m just being realistic here. If Ngcobo can be killed just like that – *thee* Ngcobo – then anything can happen to them and us.

“I was taken to a house in Muldersdrift yesterday. Did you know about it?”

“Phakeme told me about it.”

Great! I’m the only one who didn’t know, and I’m the one that’s perceived to know the most.

“I think this is a safe house; when everything dies down, we will go back home.”

She has too much trust in these men, I see.

A safe house would have food and all essentials. It would be a mansion – not this little four-bedroom farmhouse that smells like nobody has lived in it in years. This definitely is a favour from someone. They had no plan, and whoever helped them must be someone really loyal, otherwise, we’re dead.

“I thought we were done with this life, Xolie.”

“We can never be done with this life; you of all people should know that.”

She seems angry about something, and I know I should be angry too that this is happening, but this is no time for emotions and blame games. This is a time to come up with plans and act like wives of thugs. I know I allowed Mqhele to keep me away from these things, even though he failed dismally most times, but now I wish he’d at least taught me how to use a gun. The pretty princess days are over now; it’s mafia wife time.

The one thing I hope for is that it doesn’t get to a point where we have to get in that Quantum and flee to Lesotho. Lesotho, of all places? Oh! Save me Jizas! Can I even drive a Quantum? My first car was a BMW, and it was an automatic. The hard labour of pressing a clutch I have never known in my pampered life.

“So far, they’ve killed Ngcobo, got Langa in a deadly situation and from what Gaba has told me, they are many steps ahead of our husbands. Now tell me what money can do for us in this situation. They’re going to kill them, Xolie.”

“Who are they?”

She doesn’t know?

“The Bhunganes.”

She puts the feeding bottle down on the table and turns to look at me. The bottle is for Mathongo. He’s three and he still drinks Nan instead of eating uphuthu and inhloko like all the children of this family. It doesn’t help that Naledi’s hobby is getting pregnant at every chance she gets.

“Who are the Bhunganes? What do they look like?” she asks. Doesn’t Sambulo tell his wife things?

“Red hair and freckles. They’re from the past. They are the reason Mqoqi killed himself.”

“Mqoqi killed himself? Hhaybo Hlomu!” Clearly, we need to sit down and have a talk.

“Yes, that’s why the boys did what they did.”

I’m looking at her and she looks like she’s trying to put two and two together.

“Sambulo came home livid. He took away Phakeme’s laptop, but he didn’t say what the boys did. Next thing I knew we were being forced into a car and we ended up here.”

Well, I might as well tell her everything because we are in more shit than the word shit itself.

“Phakeme. I’m not even sure what his criminal talent in this family is, but he led his brothers to where one of the Bhungane brothers was. They found him, kidnapped him and tortured him to death. That’s why we are here now.”

She sits down on the closest chair she can find, looking rather defeated.

“Why does it always have to be *my* children?”

Well, everyone has a role here. Nomafu is sitting on my shoulders. Sbopho is sitting on her children’s shoulders. We were the first to be smeared with gall, and the Zulu ghosts made their choices. Nomafu let me have the twins. I wonder why, but clearly, she makes one wake up at 5 am every morning. It must be a message she’s trying to send. But the one thing she must never do is take my child from me because I’ll take her children too if she ever tries me.

“Hlomu, wait! Are you trying to tell me that our kids – the ones we have fought so hard to keep away from this family’s nonsense – killed someone?”

Well...

“Yes, and the wrong person at that. We are at war now, Xolie!”

I stopped trying to count how much she blinks each second a long time ago. But I'm fascinated by how she still can blink the same number of times through turmoil – she never freezes.

“What are we going to do now?” she asks. I'd tell her if I knew and if there wasn't yet another car parking outside. MaMtshali finally decided she needed a nap, so we are not aiming and ready to shoot anyone this time.

“What's he doing here?”

Do I know? Do I even want to know? He barges in, cheeks red, eyes blue. He rushes past us, down the passage and to the bookshelf at the end of the passage. He pushes it aside. Behind it is a door that none of us knew was there.

“Uncle Peter!” Hlangu screams, excited to see him. But he brushes his head once and continues trying to unlock the door. No high-fives and ear-pulling that usually happen. Not even the family tokoloshe is calm. He is sweating – armpits and forehead. He struggles with the door until he snaps.

“Shit!” He starts kicking it and that draws everyone's attention. We all end up gathering behind him in the passage.

“Let me try,” Msebe says, pushing him aside. He turns the key a few times and it opens.

“Go get the bags from the car, all of them,” Peter says, speaking to nobody in particular. The boys go.

Now, what in the name of “swart-gevaar-escape-dungeon” is this? Stairs lead down to an even darker room. He pulls a rope hanging from the ceiling and the light comes on. Yah no, we have reached the lowest level of shady!

“What is this now?” Gugu asks. But Peter is not here to be questioned. He opens the only cupboard in the room and pulls out a box covered with dust. A few pictures drop on the floor. He picks two up and shoves them in his pocket, picks up the rest and throws them back into the cupboard. The boys walk back in with bags. They drop them and go back.

In the end, there are 25 bags on the floor. Peter stands with his hands on his hips counting them with his eyes. He's wearing a black suit with a white

shirt. Yes, his court uniform. I don't think he has been home in days. He looks satisfied but starts softly kicking the bags until he stops at one.

"There's cash in all these bags, but the one you really need is this one," he says pushing it to one corner.

Msebe kicks it too, looks at Peter, crouches down and grabs the zipper.

"Don't open it, not now," Peter says grabbing his arm.

"Is it guns?" Msebe asks.

There is no yes or no from Peter's mouth, but we all know the answer is yes.

"You'd better start practising. There are no people here, nobody will hear."

And with that, he tells us all to go upstairs, with the one bag.

The boys help him lock the door and push the bookshelf back over it. I know he is leaving soon because he's looking around this house like it's the last time he'll ever see it. I follow him outside, hoping for some explanation. But all he does is give me the key to the dungeon and tell me his flight leaves tonight.

"You have no taxis now. The warehouse went up in flames early this morning. The firefighters are still at work."

I have no words. I've always wanted us to get out of the taxi business, but not like this. In the whole taxi industry, Sbopho Logistics is the only one where all drivers leave the taxis in the warehouse when they knock off.

"Peter, where is Mqhele?"

He takes both my hands and looks me in the eye.

"If none of your husbands shows up here in four days, leave. Don't go to Lesotho, that won't work anymore. You must separate; go to different places. Each of you must take one of the older boys with because they're coming for them next," he says, in almost a whisper.

The one-legged black cat appears again, it looks excited to see him.

"When are you going to die Mamba? When?" he asks, looking at the cat.

I know white people are strange and all but why is he talking to a cat when he should be explaining things to me? And with that, he rushes back

to his car, leaving the cat and not even looking at the horse.

I watch him drive off and wonder if I'll ever see him again. He's been our Peter for years, our problem solver. We have trusted him with our lives and money for years. He's gone. And he's leaving without telling me where Mqhele is. They are close; Mqhele was even his groomsman at his last wedding.

I walk back inside the house confused and worried.

“Gugu, Xolie. Let's go to the bedroom.”

We need to decide who will go where and with who. Zandile and Naledi should be here soon. If we are being honest, we should have held this meeting last night, but maybe then it hadn't dawned on us that we are on our own. I close the door and hope nobody is going to come barging in because there's not even a key to lock it.

“Three things: They've burned all our taxis; they've done something to Langa and we have four days here. If our husbands don't show up – not even one – we have to leave.”

“Leave to where, Hlomu?” Xolie asks blinking as she always does.

“Leave to anywhere. There was a plan that we'd go to Lesotho; Gaba gave me all our passports this morning, but Peter has just told me that won't work anymore. We have to separate. If the Bhunganes come here, it will be for the older boys, Msebe, Langa and Sisekelo. They won't kill us women, but they are rapists. What they will do is the same thing they did to Lale, and they will make our boys watch.”

The thought of that picture sends shivers down my spine, but I know that's what's going to happen if they find us here.

“We have no choice but to defend ourselves then,” Gugu says. I could roll my eyes because yes, we have guns now, rifles even, but what are we going to do, wear camouflage and hide in the bushes, like snipers?

“I know how to use a gun; Nqoba taught me the whole of last month.”

That's rather shocking. But also suspicious because it means these men knew something was coming. It might also explain why Mqhele didn't give

me any grief about going to Ghana. Too bad Mahlubi was waiting for me there. I didn't even want to see a gun, let alone touch it.

"We are going to have a gunfight with cash-in-transit heist men from KwaZulu-Natal? Are you serious, Gugu?" Xolie asks.

We might have to if they get here before we leave. Or we could just put on our red bottoms, cross our legs and let them pick us one-by-one to do whatever they want to do with us.

The door is pushed open. She looks hesitant to come in but when none of us says anything, she rushes in and sits on the bed.

"I have good news and bad news," she says.

It would help if we knew exactly who she is and why she is here.

"The good news is that access to Ladybrand has been shut completely. The highway is closed, two trucks crashed and they were both transporting oil, so there's an oil spill for about 7 kilometres. Weird, I know, but you all know your husbands. For these guys to get here, it will take days. There are also men stationed along the gravel road," she says.

That's a bit of a relief.

"But then again, you can't trust anyone now. Your husbands gave the Bhunganes a lot of money trying to make peace; they could use that money to pay off anyone, that's another part of bad news."

Sigh.

"Now for the good news, you haven't lost any of your husbands and sons yet. They plan to make them bankrupt and take all the power they have, including police protection. What they will do after that is going to be worse." How does she know so much?

"Who are you again? And how do you know all this?" Gugu speaks.

"I'm Sthembile. They took Mqoqi away from me," she says, sounding a bit broken-hearted, which is strange because Mqoqi never told us about no Sthembile. "I loved him, with all my heart. But he loved you and I hated you for it," she says, looking at me.

Hhaybo!

“He went and did whatever he was trying to do with Lale, but he was going to come back to me, that I knew. And those filthy fuckers decided to destroy him, used his weaknesses to push him to the edge. I will not rest until...”

Great! We have another psycho on our turf, in true Zulu family style. But since she seems to know more than we do, we are clearly going to need her.

“Your husbands stole R93 million and never got caught, so trust me, they are smart enough to get out of this. I can’t say the same about your sons though, Lwandle, Sbani and Ntsika; they’ve gone rogue. They are truly their fathers’ children and they are fucking everything up. They are making things worse wherever they are now.” Zandile must get here fast.

Zulu

Our fathers don't harm women; we do.

“Fetch her, Sbani.”

We've been here two hours and this man has been wasting our time since. I asked him one simple question, “Where did you meet with them the first time?”

We wouldn't be here if we didn't have proof that he was the one who made the call. All this, all this turmoil because of his daughter.

My brother and I had to dig up bones in the middle of the night because of him and his fucking demands. I watched Sbani weep as he put each bone in a sack, and the whole time we had to look over our shoulders for Thabitha's family. Yes, we poisoned their dogs with steak before we jumped over their fence to look for the grave in their backyard. Anyone could have heard us; we were just lucky nobody did. Sbani insisted we leave the grave open, just so they know he fetched his children and there was nothing they could do about it.

“I used to give you boys sweets at the rank when you were kids. I treated you like family, and you're here, in my house, with guns? Do you know who you are dealing with?” Nx!

“Mzizi, uyikhehla lenkabi. Nobody gives a shit about you anymore. My family fed you for years, and then you started thinking you were somebody just because... Nx... Sbani, bring her here.” We didn't come here to play; he must know that.

The instruction from Mpande was to drive Ndoni to Ladybrand. He was going to come here and deal with Mzizi himself. But no, fuck that! It didn't make sense to me because... how are you going to get the truth out of a

man without torturing it out of him? How? Take the most important thing to him to some safe place and then come here to ask questions? Were we supposed to drive five hours with her while everything our fathers have worked hard for was going up in flames? The problem with this old man is that he thinks we are our fathers.

“On second thought, don’t tie her up,” Ntsika says as he pushes her to sit on a chair next to her father. She’s a smart girl; I’m sure she’s figured out what’s going on by now.

We found her singing in the shower in Bab’Mpande’s house, not even aware of the war going on outside. Had she even called to check where the rest of the family was? No! She was living her best life in a house she doesn’t even know how much it cost to build. We’d have waited for her to finish and put on pyjamas or something, but she didn’t deserve that much respect. I went inside that bathroom and told her to get moving. I didn’t care that she was naked. We had to transport her in a taxi because being in any of our cars is dangerous now. We told her we were going to Mbuba, and that was it. Her questions about where Mpande was were dismissed. She was still relaxed though because I was still calling her Mah as if she’s not a few years older than me.

She was happy to see her father, but that was short-lived because the first thing Ntsika did was grab him by the throat. We took Ndoni to another room because we thought knowing she was here now would scare Mzizi into talking. But no...

“Mzizi, you called the Bhunganes two years ago, all because Mpande pissed you off. You’ve been telling them our every move...” It was when he acted confused that forced me to break his nose. It’s been two hours of him denying everything and I’m ready to break more than just a nose.

“Mzizi, I’m not going to ask you again; we don’t have time.”

He looks at Ndoni. Great, some inspiration was needed.

“I had to protect my daughter; you’ll understand when you’re a grown man who knows how to think properly and—” He’s mad!

“Protect your daughter from what? My brothers? The same men you have been killing people for. You have a house today, Mzizi because you were paid to kill. You raised this daughter with that money and took her to school with it. Now, all of a sudden, she’s not good enough for my family? You were willing to have us all killed, Mzizi?” Ntsika is livid.

This woman must stop the crying!

“You mean this daughter, Mzizi? This daughter?” Sbani asks before he slaps Ndoni across the face. I must admit, screams of agony from a woman go straight to one’s heart. But do we have a choice here? No! He stands, and I’m confused because it’s not like there’s something he can do.

“Sit the fuck down, mate! Tell us what we want or we cut her into pieces,” Ntsika says.

The British accent annoys the crap out of me because... why is he speaking to Mzizi in English? Sisempini la!

“You’ve had numerous meetings with the Bhunganes. Give us the addresses – all of them.”

He’s trying to comfort his crying daughter. But, I mean, this guy is a hitman by profession, so why is it so hard for him to understand that we will not kill him until he tells us what we want to know? We will make his daughter bleed to the last drop instead. He, of all people, knows this. He knows the life of a hitman is worthless because the reason a man chooses that life in the first place is to provide for his family. If you choose to be a taker of lives, it should be worth it.

“Let Ndoni go, I’ll take you to them.”

We are past the bargaining stage. He knows that’s not going to happen, so he sits back in the chair and folds his arms. I know what this is, a man trying to make it easy and quick. He’s made peace with his imminent fate, but because he thinks we came here on our fathers’ instruction, he’s sure his daughter will come out of this alive.

“You are dogs, that’s what you are! We burned Sbopho and Nomafu for that; they were dogs like you. You should have heard them scream. Dying

the death they deserved. We should have killed your fathers too, low life maggots—”

I grab Ntsika and pull him back when he charges at him. I understand those were his parents, but I never met them; they were never spoken about. All I have are pictures I found in some dead white woman’s house. Right now, I’m worried about my own mother, who is stuck somewhere between Gauteng and Free State because Mam’Naledi went into labour while they were travelling to Ladybrand. I don’t even know if they are in a hospital or a bush. All I know is that I need to get to the Bhunganes before they get to them. And this man and his daughter are wasting my time.

I can see what Mzizi is doing; he’s rattling us so we can focus on him and not his daughter. Clearly, he hasn’t figured out that we are past mind games. It’s time for things to escalate. I don’t need a bucket; a pot and bathroom towel will do. I place both on the table. Judging by how rattled Mzizi is right now, he knows what’s about to go down.

Although nobody in my family seemed sure about Ndoni, Mpande loves her, so we all accepted her and called her Mah. But now, if doing this to her is the only way to save my family, then a sacrificial lamb she is. And we are racing against time here, so I pull her by that afro and cover her face with the towel. Mzizi tries to get up again, but Ntsika’s arm around his neck keeps him where he should be. He will watch this, just like Bab’Mqoqi watched.

I pour water over the towel; she gaggles and he bangs the table. Sometimes you just gotta tube people to get the truth out of them. That’s what the police do and Mzizi knows that, especially that they might or might not die during the process. His son died during the process, but the police said he hung himself as if there was anything to hang himself on in a prison cell. His wife couldn’t handle it, so she stressed herself to death. My father went to her funeral, and my father made sure that those police officers got what they deserved, on that chair, in my home.

I remember Mzizi coming to our house and going straight to that room; I was just a kid then. I didn’t really know what happened in that room but I

understand now. Baba would take us to Mami's house when there'd be someone in the room, but that night, Mami was not around and baba couldn't take us anywhere. Aunt Mandisa was never an option. He ordered us to stay in our rooms and do our homework. But I went to the kitchen to get water later at night and I heard Mzizi thanking baba. I remember going to Mami's house the next morning and seeing a tow truck taking her Porsche away. It looked like it had been in an accident.

Now all Mzizi has is this Ndoni woman. It's funny because he legit believed we'd protect her with everything we have. How? She's not Mami, or my mother or Mamiza or Mam'Gugu or Mam'Naledi. Also, she's struggling to accept my brothers, Bayede and Madlozi; I've seen how she looks at them like they are here to disturb her soft life.

I'm ready to tube her again, for more than 10 seconds this time. I grab her afro but she grabs my arm.

"Mpande would never allow you to do this to me, he will—"

"Mpande doesn't give a shit about you, sisi! He has children to protect from your father's doing."

I'm about to pour a jug of water over her face when Mzizi speaks.

"Siba's house is in Umkomaas. He lives with his wife and two children. I met up with Mashiya in Ngudwini; the whole family still lives there including their mother. They have nothing, but Mahlubi is a conman. He claims to have a construction company called Zwakele Incorporated. I borrowed him money to go to Ghana, but I didn't know he was going to—"

That doesn't matter now. It's this singing like a bird that we came here for.

"Where is he, Mzizi?"

"He went home after burning the taxis. He knows the Zulu brothers are going to go to Ngudwini to bury Ngcobo, so that's where the massacre will happen. They will kill all of you," he says.

Well, not anymore. I'd thank him and call my father, but he made me work for this, so no. Fuck him and his daughter! We've got what we came

here for. I'm taking the pot and towel back to the kitchen when I hear two gunshots and run back to the lounge. Ntsika is still holding the gun.

"He's the reason my brother is dead," he justifies shooting Mzizi in the head. "And we couldn't keep her," he says of Ndoni and shrugs. Ndoni is lying head down on the table and her father is lying head up on the chair.

We're going to be in shit for this.

But baba always says, "Your mothers and Niya should be protected at all costs. You take a bullet without blinking; for them."

Our next stop is Ngundwini. I've never been there but I heard that's where my grandmother came from. It's where my fathers ran to and it's where they met Ngcobo. The Bhungane house should be easy to find and easy to end.

When I was 14 years old, some people shot my brother dead. He was just a kid. I don't care that my fathers dealt with them. I made a decision that day that nobody will ever mess with my family again.

"They are all in Ngudwini; we don't have to go to Umkomaas," Sbani says. He's the one that's been communicating with Phakeme. Bab'Sambulo took Phakeme's laptop away, but a laptop and a phone are pretty much the same things.

No date has been set for Mkhulu Ngcobo's funeral yet, and we can't go home, but I know Gog'Mzimela will give us a place to sleep for at least three hours.

By 5 am tomorrow, we will be in Ngudwini.

Mpande will hear about his girlfriend's death when he hears about it.

... ● ...

The last time we were here was for Mkhulu Mzimela's msebenzi. It had been a year since he died and Gogo was officially taking off the black clothes. Ndoni was here too, talking about how if she ever married Bab'Mpande and he died, the one thing she wasn't going to do was to wear

black clothes for a whole year. Although her talking about Bab'Mpande dying someday made me uncomfortable, I liked how Ndoni was always against the norm. That she was one foot in and one foot out in my family was a bit fascinating too. I felt like she liked the benefits but didn't want to put anything in – that she was here to just take. We had some conversations, her and me, and I liked that she could talk to me like an adult, although I had to call her Mah.

I once bumped into her at a club in Durban soon after she started dating baba. One of my friends said she was hot and tried to ask her out; I had to act crazy to defend my father's honour. And then the next morning I get a call from her, asking why I told Bab'Mpande that she was at the club, threatening to tell him that I was smoking weed and that I went home with some girl. I would have explained to her that Bab'Mpande knows where she is every minute of each day. But I was hungover and I had an exam in four hours. So I just denied everything and told her it must have been social media. We laughed about many things she and I, especially at family functions. She was always the one catching me doing immoral things and she'd not tell on me. Pity I had to tube her tonight.

We parked the taxi behind the house and Gogo didn't even ask. She told us to go to one rondavel and brought us food. We thought she was going to leave us alone so we could plan our next move and sleep for at least two hours. But no, she came to sit with us, a cup of tea in her hand.

“You know, my husband got your fathers out of this place. He found them running in the bushes at night, you—” she says pointing at Ntsika, “—you could have gotten them caught and killed. You were crying, but you were just a baby, so that's understandable. He got them to Pietermaritzburg safely and spoke to his connections to take them north.” She sips her tea.

“And then years later, he comes home to tell me he found the Zulu boys, again, that they all survived and they had kids now. I was beyond shocked. The next thing I knew, we became family, and our lives became easier from that day on. I'm not surprised your fathers sent you here. This will always be a safe place for you; all of your family. I will never close the door to you.

My husband insisted on it, even on his deathbed. With everything that is happening, I'm here for you. You are like my grandchildren." I see she thinks we are here to hide. We are here to sleep, that's all.

"I'll cook porridge in the morning," she says and gets up to leave. But she turns around just before she reaches the door. "I have never said this but... when I heard Mpande was planning to marry Mzizi's daughter, I was happy, very happy because that meant everything that happened here in Mbuba was done and forgiven. Mzizi was at the forefront of your grandparents' attack, but those are things we don't talk about in this village. Everybody moved on, and nobody judged Mzizi for going to work for your fathers after the reconciliation. This is how you end wars, my children, you sacrifice for the sake of moving forward. But never think someone who was once an enemy cannot become your enemy again just because you have helped them."

We don't know what to say because what she has said about Mzizi is nothing but the truth. He's dead now and we must leave this house before she finds out. She promises that early morning porridge again before she leaves.

It's 2 am and we are literally left with two hours. There's no time to sleep. We wait for 15 minutes before jumping the fence to go home. We have no choice but to leave the taxi here because if we even try to drive out, she will hear us. Home is not close by – a 45-minute walk to be precise. It's dark but we know this village.

The one thing we have not spoken about is how we stink; we have not bathed nor slept on a bed in four days. Nobody thought to take keys for the gate and house before we left Joburg and that's because we had no plans of stopping at home. We knew we were coming to Mbuba, yes. But we were never going to go home, in case the Bhunganes were camping there waiting to end us. So, we jump the fence then break into the garage and the house.

Bab'Mqoqi taught me how to break into a house when I was 12. The spare keys are on the third shelf in the kitchen. We take baba's old Mercedes, the one he doesn't use anymore because what we know for sure

is that it is bullet-proofed. We only have three guns, and we know we can't do shit with them if we are to face the whole Bhungane house full of people. There is a high possibility that they have people guarding their homestead. And Sbani reminds us they have money now, and hitmen move for people with money. So what we need is petrol and matches, sand and loads of hope that we won't be shot to death. We fill up a bucket with sand left from plastering the graves where the bones were buried.

On our way, we stop at the Engen garage in Greytown CBD for petrol. Our sneaker laces will have to come off.

... • ...

We reached Ngudwini at 4:30 am. When we drove past Mkhulu Ngcobo's house, it was dark and empty outside.

"I say we just stand here and shoot; it doesn't look like anyone is expecting anything," Sbani says. He's partly right. We expected to find a large compound with houses everywhere, but it's just one house and a few dilapidating mud rondavels. But then again... if they are here, we are definitely outnumbered.

"How many did you make?"

"Seven?" Sbani says. He sat in the backseat throughout this trip making petrol bombs with the many bottles we bought from the garage. We had to empty them along the road. On top of smelling armpits, we now smell of petrol too. The shoelaces were not enough; we had to rip our T-shirts to make more.

We leave the car a few metres away and move behind the fence where the main house is closer. I light mine first, then look at Sbani and Ntsika. We throw all three at the same time, straight through the windows of the main house.

Boom!!!

The next three huts follow but I doubt there's anyone there. The smell of fumes reaches us. We see the flames, but instead of running, we freeze and watch. We hear the screams of a woman first. It's time to run, but Ntsika stands frozen. I grab his arm, but it's stiff. He closes his eyes and puts his hands over his ears. This is strange, but we have to go now. We both grab him by his arms and run with him to the car. The screams are loud.

By the time we reach the car, Ntsika has become something we do not understand. He throws himself on the backseat and lies on his side, cowered in a foetal position. He is crying, like a baby, not the grown man he is. I'm not sure where we are driving to, but I know we must get out of Ngudwini before the sun comes out.

... • ...

Malum'Gaba is not here.

It took a while of us buzzing at the gate before Luyanda peeped through the window and opened it. We didn't expect to find him here; he lives at res. We expected to find Malume. The one person we know will protect us from anything.

"Y'all smell like amaphara dudes," he says, like a skrr skrr that he is. We'll clean up later. What we need right now is food and this house is home enough for us to know we don't have to ask. We raid the fridge and cupboards for whatever we can find.

"Where is malume?" Sbani asks.

"I don't know. What I know is that bab'omncane is now a porn star. He must have gone to fix that. Gogo is gone too; I think also because of that. Do you want hubbly?"

I know for sure that malume would never allow hubbly in his house. So basically, Luyanda is living his best life here; he is the man of the house. Ntsika and Sbani have gone to shower, but I'm more interested in knowing

what we left behind in Ngudwini. It's 10 am now; all should be out in the open.

Luyanda is watching Channel O. I don't want to argue so I grab the remote and change the channel to 404. He raises his arms at me, but he must know that I'm not one of his buddies. There's some story about kids drowning in a manhole and some angry people blaming the Joburg Mayor. The next thing is about a strike by mortuary workers. And then... footage and all – a fire that engulfed a whole homestead in Ngudwini, Eshowe.

“Police have confirmed there was foul play, that this was an attack on the family, with numerous petrol bombs thrown at the houses. This comes only days after a well-known taxi owner – whose family house is barely two kilometres away – was gunned down in Spruitview. According to community members, the two families were once well acquainted,” says a reporter called Ayanda Mhlongo. *“Only two children, aged eight and four, survived,”* she says just before pictures are lined on the TV screen. Two elderly women, one woman who could be my age and five men, freckles and all.

“You okay, dude?” Luyanda asks.

Kind of. I'm just not sure how much longer I can ignore baba's calls – all of their calls. My WhatsApp notifications have been buzzing for three days now; I'm not opening shit.

Oh. Khwezi. This one is from two nights ago.

I miss you Ndabezitha wami. You guys made me late for work but ngiyakuxolela. Also, next time your brothers sleep here, anowasha izitsha ke at least. Love you, can't wait to see you tonight... (x3 hearts, peach emoji, eggplant emoji)

Hhayi! The lies I'm gonna have to come up with after this! Four missed video calls later:

Engabe uyokhula nini Lwandle?

Yep, the tide was starting to rise here.

Whichever hoe you are with this time, I hope she's worth it.

The waves were roaring.

You know what? I cannot keep subjecting myself to such a toxic environment. Instead of communicating with me, you are being passive-aggressive by ignoring me. And this is not the first time Lwandle. What you are doing is violent and I cannot take it anymore. We are done! We've been together for a year and you have shown no sign of seriousness. Thank you for wasting my time! I can't do this anymore...

And that was the tsunami.

I think she blocked me after that because the next message came seven hours later.

Baby, are you okay? Is your family okay? Your family taxis have been burnt! It's on the news! Call me please, I'm worried about you. I love you.

I take it we were back together now.

Another message pops in from her, just as I'm about to put my phone down.

Lwandle, there are people here.

Oh shit!

They're with your dad.

Whew!!! That means she'll be safe.

I block her. I know I'm officially in the "men are thrash" basket, but ngiyolithetha ngibuya. The long essays about my toxicity and passive aggression – whatever that means – will have to wait. We have to lie low for a while.

"Mkhulu was from Nquthu, right? Do you know how we can get there?" I ask. He grabs the remote and changes the channel back to Channel O.

"You don't wanna go there. They don't even have Wi-Fi man, just goats and cows and virgins who go to that mhlangezi thing; you can't even get laid in that place."

This kid must go back to res. And we need to get out of here.

... • ...

"Uright bafo?" Sbani asks.

Sbani and I have never called him baba; somehow it always felt like he was our older brother. When our fathers went out to do stuff together, he was always with us and Mami. Besides, he is nothing like them and they bully him all the time about his English and that he likes dating white girls. He doesn't answer, but we know the elephant in the room – or in the car in this case – will not go away unless we address it.

"What happened there? What was that all about?" I ask because sometimes you just have to be straightforward. He knows we won't stop asking until he tells us.

"Trigger. I was triggered."

"Triggered?"

"Yes, for the first time I remembered hearing my mother's screams, and people shouting 'abashiswe!' as we were running to the car. To me, it felt exactly like that night we were running in the bushes trying to get away. I was a baby when it happened but, I don't know, what I felt this morning felt so real like it was déjà vu."

We are quiet. Although we know the whole story, we cannot connect to it, not emotionally. When our family went back to Mbuba, it was exciting for us; we loved the place and couldn't wait to spend Christmas there every year. Until of course, they killed Mvelo and we found out the old man who sneaked us sweets behind the houses was our grandfather.

“Sometimes I have this dream, same dream over and over about a woman lying dead in a room. And something tells me I had something to do with it. But nobody is willing to tell me anything,” he says. That's Sisekelo type of stuff. When he was little, he'd talk about weird things, things about our mother whom we had concluded was dead. It all made sense when she came back and things were put out in the open.

“It's just dreams, bafo. If anything like that had happened, you'd remember it,” Sbani says.

Well, he blew up Ndoni's brains without thinking twice last night. I'm not saying there could be something there since I, myself, had no problem blowing up a whole family just this morning.

My suggestion was that we run to Nquthu. We aren't exactly blood-related to those people but they are Mami's family; they know us, so they wouldn't turn us away. But when I came back from showering, there was a new plan. We were leaving baba's car and taking malume's GTI. Also, we'd run out of cash and using our bank cards is not an option. So Luyanda went to malume's shisanyama down the road and emptied the cash register. He claimed it was an instruction from his father and when the manager couldn't reach his father on the phone, he made him record a video saying it. Of course, he's going to be in more shit than he has ever been in his life. And so giving us keys for the GTI was nothing. We dropped him off at Res, with his hubbly and a demanded promise that we'll pay his school fees and give him a place to stay when his father disowns him.

“It's tough ukuba yingane yegintsa,” he said. We all laughed and wished him luck because he'll need it.

Now we have to find our way to Inanda Seminary because that's where Phakeme says Mahlubi's two daughters are – a boarding school with nuns

and stuff. It's no more than 30 minutes from KwaMashu but Sbani made us stop at an overcrowded Shoprite. I wasn't going to go in there so I went to this place next door called Under The Moon and got myself a 12 of Corona beer. When I came back there were two boxes in the boot and we were good to go.

But now we've been stuck in traffic eMtshebheni for almost 20 minutes. We don't have a plan yet but if their fathers are anything like ours, those girls don't know anything about the beef between our families. For them to be sent to a school this far, means they are being hidden from something.

We reach the gate at 4:30 pm. As the security guard approaches our car, I'm completely clueless about what our explanation for being here is. From here, we can see the playgrounds full of girls practising different sports.

"Ankel, sithunyiwe la. Silethe izinto zamantombazane," Sbani says.

"Amantombazane akuphi?" the security guard asks.

"Hhhayi Mntimade, kuthiwe asilethe lezinto sizishiye la. Asazi kodwa ukuthi kubani." Great, he's read his name tag. Nothing beats addressing a man with his clan name. He produces a business card with Mamiza's NGO logo. It has something about women's health. He checks the boot and comes back to the passenger window.

"Ohhhhh ningalabantu bama pads amahhala. Matron Mkhize is the one that deals with those things. But she's not here today so please park there; I'll get one of the nuns to come and talk to you."

"Siyabonga Mntimande, asihleli, it's just to drop these off and go."

These two left those boxes open on purpose. And with that, we drive in, smoothly. I'd forgotten that Sbani went from being an academic to being an alcoholic, and that made him streetwise.

The guard goes into one of the buildings and I haven't even switched off the car when Sbani gets out. I'm not sure about this but I follow him. Ntsika stays in the car in case the guard returns. We are heading straight to the playgrounds. He pushes me to the front and says I should lead because these girls will be more fascinated by me but mfethu, these are high school girls. I'm a grown man with a job which I've probably lost now. It's not

long before they start screaming and blushing. Yeah, we are, by the way, the Zulu family boys that girls go gaga over. But we are here for just two, and they are easy to find in the crowd, freckle faces and all. The older one is standing a bit far, obviously judging all her schoolmates for all this. The younger one is here, in my face, trying to get a selfie with me.

“The delivery is in the car; mind taking it out?” It’s a stupid plan, I know, but the security guard left the gate open so it’s now or never. I shove her in the boot and throw Sbani the keys to drive.

We are out of here! She must be about 13. We drive past Mtshebheni police station like we haven’t just kidnapped a child. We know a high-speed chase is something we might have to deal with soon, but we are already far too deep so...

“Nquthu is our only choice now; nobody will think of looking for us there.”

“They will track the car, Lwandle. I’ve made peace with going to jail after all this,” Sbani says.

“This car doesn’t have a tracker. Luyanda told me that.”

“Good, take the Ballito offramp; I have a place we can go to,” Ntsika speaks.

Ballito is not a place to conduct criminal activities. White people will snitch on you for skipping a stop sign; how much more three grown men pulling a young girl out of the boot? He directs us until we are parked at the gate of Simbithi Eco Estate. And of course, we need not be black men in a GTI, but at least Ntsika sounds white. That is not enough. We need to get a code from whoever we are “visiting” and for Sbani’s driver’s license to be scanned. If they check the boot, we’re dead. The radio volume stays high because that girl in the boot might be screaming as we speak.

Ntsika makes one phone call and the code is sent. We are let in but we know according to this security guard, who obviously doesn’t recognise us, we don’t belong here. My father’s house is bigger than all these houses here but we’re still black, aren’t we? There’s a girl at the gate.

“Not Chloe! Please, not her, Ntsika.” I haven’t even gotten out of the car but I’m already tired. I know Chloe too well. We went on one three-day vacation with her – just one, and we begged Ntsika all the way home to dump her.

“What do you want, Ntsika?” She didn’t take the break-up very well. It went all the way to Twitter. The thing about her is that her parents are never home, and she’s an only child, which explains a lot about her.

“Hey baby, you look great. You still a vegan?” Ntsika tries to kiss her on the lips. She pushes him away and looks at Sbani and me.

“You brought your brothers? I know they don’t like me.” No lies there, but at this point, I’m willing to tolerate her.

“Can you open the garage, please; I’ll explain later,” Ntsika adds. Knowing Chloe, she will. She walks back to the house to get the garage remote. And when she comes back, there’s a girl among us, screaming at the top of her voice for help. We have no choice but to drag her into the house kicking and screaming.

“I’m calling the police!” Chloe says.

Ayi!

“There’s no need for that, baby; we just need to lie low for a couple of days. We are trying to help her, but she doesn’t know that yet. Are your parents coming home anytime soon?” She shakes her head. They broke up a year ago, how is Ntsika still able to soften her up like this?

“They’ll be back in two weeks. What’s going on, Ntsika? This is a child!” Well, there are no children in war, just a lot of unplanned casualties.

“Can we go somewhere and talk?” He has his arm around her waist, and his British accent is more... I don’t know how to put it. You’d swear he was born there. They disappear to another place and I’m left with this kid here, looking at me with teary eyes like I’m about to traffic her to the Middle East or something.

“Nobody is going to hurt you, relax.” She cries even more. Sbani is outside, looking at the beach, smoking. “What’s your name?” I ask.

“Nobuntu.”

“Yah, Nobuntu. I’m not going to harm you. We’re just going to hang around here until things die down. Some people have issues with your father, so he sent us to get you and keep you safe.”

“And my sister?”

“Your sister is safe because you have different mothers. Your mother started the whole thing. She’s the reason this is happening.”

“My mother died when I was two.” I’m not winning here.

“Your mother died because of what she did to piss off those men, which is why we are here now.”

“She had cancer,” she says and widens her eyes.

“No, she was poisoned.” My ability to lie shocks me sometimes.

“And you? How do you come in? In all of this? I want to call my dad, give me a phone!”

Yerrrrr, Sbani must come back here and help me.

“You can’t call your dad; that’s the whole point of you being here. They are tracking his phone.” Ntsika comes back with Chloe, her blonde hair bouncing on her shoulders and green eyes looking less mean.

“Come with me sweetie, let’s go make smoothies.”

I wonder what lies Ntsika told her.

Now, it’s time to make a call.

If Mahlubi’s daughter isn’t enough leverage to get them off my family’s back, then we have no plan going forward.

12

We have two days left, and Zandile and Naledi are still not here. In fact, the last person we saw was Peter.

I'm worried about many things but Langa is there at the top of my list. Mqhele will not let anything happen to himself, not when he knows he has a wife and three children. That's my stance and as long as I believe that, I can get through today and tomorrow. And if none of them shows up after that, I will start believing the worst.

MaMtshali is our resident chicken slaughterer, much to the dismay of Niya who still can't believe we are killing animals here. She's vowed to tell her father about this.

"The food is ready. It's time."

I've been dreading this moment all day because yesterday was a disaster for me. Msebe and Sisekelo are already dragging the bag down the narrow path. We have to walk a fair distance to the bank of the river just so at least the little kids will hear the sounds from far. MaMtshali, Sthembile and Gugu are pros at this. It took them a day to teach the three boys but with Xolie and me, it's going to be a long road. The sight of a gun is still a trigger for me. It reminds me of the day I walked in on Mqhele ready to blow his brains out. Xolie lives with a professional killer but she doesn't know the difference between a pistol and a rifle. The two of us can only practice with pistols because well... they are less complicated.

The “Hhawu gogo!!!” that Msebe uttered when MaMtshali cocked an R-5 Rifle yesterday was confirmation enough that we are in a completely different world now; one where our children will never look at us the same if we come out alive.

“Xolie, this is a gun; you don’t hold it like you’re holding a coffee mug. Your arm has to be straight and firm. Your eyes have to be alert and your head can’t be above it; it has to be levelled with it. We will not be shooting at still objects, it will be people moving around, shooting back at us. But we’ll have to shoot first. They won’t be expecting fire from us, so if we shoot first, it will disrupt whatever plan they have. Remember, arms firm,” MaMtshali coaches. I’m tempted to ask her if she’s shot anyone before but I’m afraid to hear the answer.

We left MaMbizana in the house with the kids. Apparently, she doesn’t need lessons. There’s also been no talk about when Ngcobo’s funeral is but who has time to worry about that, anyway?

“Hlomu, those nails must go; they’re making you slow,” Sthembile says. Turns out she owns a private investigation firm and before that she was in the army. How she met Mqoqi, we still don’t know.

The only thing I hit, after firing at least nine times, is a tree stem that wasn’t even the target. It’s concluded that I will be shooting at the cars. The ones that can shoot properly will aim at the people. The plan is to lock the kids in than dungeon, starting tonight. The rest of us will stay in the living room, checking for car lights. If it’s a car or cars we don’t recognise, we open fire. My ears are buzzing by the time we walk back to the house.

“What happened to the horse?” Gugu asks. Yes, what happened to the horse?

“It was gone when we came back from shooting yesterday afternoon,” Langa says.

He was always going to be the one to notice. My biggest worry though is Sisekelo’s silence since we got here; he doesn’t speak unless spoken to. He is in matric. He should be at school. Xolie doesn’t seem worried. She understands him better.

There has been no decision as to what happens if nobody shows up; not our husbands and not the Bhunganes. I still insist we leave as Gaba and Peter told us to, but I'm not getting any support from these women. The problem is, none of us has ever been in a position where we are not protected. If we stay here, at least our husbands know where we are, but if we leave and scatter all over, where will they begin to look for us? We are stronger together – our thing since the beginning. So maybe they have decided that if we die here, we die here, together.

“Mami, you can all go to sleep. We'll stay here and keep guard.” It's one of my twins. The guns are lined on the table. If nothing happens tonight, we will have to put them back in the bag before the kids come up to the house.

“That is not going to happen, mfana; you're just children.” MaMtshali calls both of them mfana; I suspect it's because she can't tell them apart.

“Sthembile, where is Lale? We met her only once,” Xolie asks. She doesn't look happy at the mention of Lale's name.

“I'm not sure where she is now. The last time I saw her, which was a week ago, she was leaving Hillbrow to go back to eMazolweni; that's where she met Mqoqi. She said from there she's going to get her daughter back. And she knows Mqoqi left some assets to Zothile, so she'll be seeing you soon.”

I'll gladly hand over everything to her. I don't know what Mqoqi was thinking, really. I'm not raising another woman's child while she gallivants all over South Africa. Besides, Mqhele will never allow it. We don't even bring up that subject. If there's one person he should be angry at, it's Mqoqi, not the whole world.

“Down! Down!”

The light goes off.

Silence.

“No. It's the horse; it's back,” Msebe says. It takes some seconds before we all get up from the floor. We've definitely failed the first test; our first move should have been grabbing the guns on the table.

Zulu

“Nqamlela!”

He shouts, again.

The echo, again.

He keeps doing this again and again; I’m starting to wonder if he hasn’t lost his marbles. Since we arrived this morning, we’ve been sitting like this, facing the forest, waiting to hear whatever comes at us next from the rondavel behind us. We can smell the fumes but the screaming and the groans have stopped. It’s after midnight now, and still no babies. The moon is full, so we can see everything.

I can go for three days straight without sleeping. Early days in prison taught me that skill, but I don’t know what Nkangala’s explanation for staying up this long is. Our only meal since we got here has been boiled cabbage and potatoes, given to us in one large bowl by his grandmother. Nkangala told me she doesn’t eat animals.

Our journey wasn’t supposed to end up here, but by the time we reached Winburg, we knew we couldn’t continue. We got word that Siba and a taxi full of men were driving ahead of us, behind that lawyer mlungu. The highway was already closed but mlungu knew how we could get to his grandfather’s house by driving through three farms. He said they know him, so they’ll let him pass and that he’d tell them to let us through when we catch up. But I doubt he reached the house because he hasn’t made contact since.

I didn’t fight Nkangala when he said we had to derail. That going to Ladybrand with a pregnant woman knowing very well that danger was on its way there was not an option. So we changed our route to Bethlehem,

then Harrismith and drove through the night past Dundee, Greytown, Kranskop and ended up here – under the mountains, between forests – eHlimbithwa, KwaMaphumulo. By the time we parked the car, Sdudla was already moaning and groaning. I didn't know what was happening; Nkangala did.

We had to leave the car on a dirt road at the riverbank, and cross on our feet. I'm a strong man but carrying Qhawe's wife would be impossible, especially with two babies inside her. She had to cross the river with Nkangala and me dragging her with each arm. MaNgcobo was behind us with a bag of baby clothes, praying, if that's what it was. Nkangala told us only when we reached the yard that we were at his grandmother's house. She didn't ask questions, just pulled the screaming woman into a hut with a burning fire in the middle. She stopped us when we tried to enter – only the women went in. She lives alone, except for the many dogs running around the yard. Nkangala and I have not entered any of the houses since we got here.

“Nqamlela!!!” he shouts again.

The echo.

“Ndoda?” I'm tired of this now.

“I was named by my grandfather. He would sit here and shout at the forest, and it would shout back at him. So he named me Nkangala because that's where the echo comes from, the soul of the forest.” Ngiyezwa, but we are facing death here. How is all this going to help us?

“Nkangala, lethamahlamvu kagqobogqobo,” his grandmother comes out and speaks. They aren't far because he stands up, walks behind one house and comes back with a pile of leaves. He drops them at the entrance of the hut and comes back to sit next to me again.

We are running out of cigarettes because smoking is the only thing we can do while we sit here. I've become a chain smoker since I came out of prison, but with me, it is because I now have access to something men would kill for in prison. With my brothers, it is a coping mechanism. Niya – I don't know any child who talks as much as that one – once looked at us all

and told us we were going to die of lung cancer. The one time I lit a cigarette in her presence, she threatened to call the police on me. I had not been briefed about the rules then, that we don't smoke near the children.

"They say khulu is a witch here," Nkangala says, and laughs. She does look like she should have died a long time ago, but what's going to kill her when she lives alone on a mountain eats cabbages and leaves?

We have not heard from my brothers since we passed that white church and drove through sugar cane fields to get here. Our phone networks died as soon as the forests appeared.

"Nqamlela!" he shouts again. The forest shouts back.

I'm tired and hungry. What needs to happen is for Sdudla to give birth and for us to get out of here. A red figure appears and I grab my gun. Nkangala grabs my arm and I put it back down. There are six emerging out of the forest, the red one leading. As they get closer, I see that it's women – six very old women – three of them with backs bent.

"Yini manje le?"

Nkangala looks at me but doesn't answer. Instead, he gets up and goes to meet them on the path. They go inside the rondavel behind us without even a word uttered to me. Is it witches or ghosts? I don't know.

"They had to walk through the forest so that nobody sees them coming here," he says.

"Abathakathi?"

He laughs at me for asking.

"No, abafazi."

The screams start again; they are very loud this time. One woman comes out and walks right past, without even looking at us. She comes back with a large branch, speaking something.

We wait.

Before I went to jail, I had seen many things. I even once spent three days in a witchdoctor's house with men who picked me up on the road and thought my physique and big eyes made me look fearless. I was 19, homeless and hungry. When we got there, I got to have a place to sleep, and

food. But in one of those seven days, we ate a crocodile and endured mutilations on our backs with a razor blade. There was also early morning steaming and gagging with bitter muthi. What those men went there for was to be made strong, in case someone tried to kill them. But the main thing was for them to make money, easy money through unexplainable ways.

Look, I wanted to make money. I was destitute, but that shit came with a lot of things that I knew I couldn't handle so on our way back to Durban – they had already arranged accommodation for me at some men's hostel – we stopped at a garage and I ran. I ended up at a squatter camp in Springfield, fucking and cuddling a woman old enough to be my grandmother for shelter and food.

I had no clue I had rich brothers then, or that I'd be here today because – and I know this now – Thulula did what he did. Until we find out what that was, we will always be these people. I felt a bit of lightness on my shoulders after we washed ourselves of iqunga that we all knew we had but didn't want to admit to. It worked though because the old me would never have let those Bhungane things walk away with R22 million in bags. I would have shot them point-blank. That stupid decision by Mqhele has put us here because now they have money to turn our own men against us.

I'm just glad Nandi is over there on some island with some man. I told her not to come back until I tell her to. Not that she listens to me, but at least in the end she accepted that I'm her brother. She didn't remember me at all when Nkosana broke the news to her. She cried and disappeared for two days. Of course, we knew exactly where she was but Mqoqi convinced us to give her space. And when she was done being a typical woman, she decided we go to some doctor who did nothing but make us talk to her about our childhood. I told the doctor more about our mother than Nandi could remember. She was shocked, but in the end – after that doctor made her fall into a deep sleep – she woke up and asked me about the cardboard box I used to put her in. She still finds the whole story of us, of this family and who our fathers were a bit disturbing.

She was mad at Nkosana for a few days – at all of them. If I'm to be honest, at me too. She said we lied to her. Everything. From Nkosana coming to the hotel where she worked, complimenting her food and making it seem like he was drawn to her because they share a surname. She counted those as our lies. That they were ready to get her out of Swaziland when shit hit the fan, gave her a job immediately and that they have treated her like family all these years. She counted that too as our lies. But she's been with my brothers for years, and they love her, and she loves them. We are all she has, and she can never go back to Swaziland. We never told her why I ended up in jail, though, just that I had committed a crime and I served time for it.

Mqoqi lied about how they found me – a story he probably read in some book. I think about him a lot. I should have dragged him back home that night instead of telling him he was a sitting duck and expecting him to have some sense. I should have dragged him out of that nightclub ngamasende and taken him back home.

That night was the last time I saw him; the next time I was standing over his dead body at the mortuary in Greytown, telling him we were going to bury him the next day. Except for the already stitched closed hole on the left side of his head, he still looked like himself, eyes half-closed. We, and the mortuary people, had tried again and again to push the eyelids full-down, but they kept pulling themselves back up, opening half of his eyes. I concluded that that's what will happen to all of us when we're dead. Our eyelids are not big enough to cover our whole eyes.

I cried for him, something I had never done in my adult life. His stupidity put me in jail. It made him choose the wrong women and killed him in the end. Everything about Mqoqi was human. He had lived life on the dark side like all of us but strange enough, he could still feel, and break. He was not beyond the point of brokenness, although he should have, long before he became a man. I believe he was tougher than all of us. How does a person be who we are and still be able to cry? And give and love a child that isn't his blood? To try to save a woman he should have killed? Not

because she was that man's wife, but because she knew things she wasn't supposed to know.

I miss him.

I should have been a better brother to him. I should have listened instead of turning everything into a joke. He visited me in prison more times than all of them. At first, I thought it was guilt, but I realised soon enough that it was because he thought I was different, that maybe he and I were cut from the same cloth seeing as Nyanda was a priest. He asked me once, as we shared a cigarette in the courtyard of Sun City on a Tuesday morning. And Tuesdays are not days where prisoners could be visited but one thing about Mqoqi was that he could make things happen when he wanted them to happen.

"What was your father like?" he asked.

"I never met him," I said. I knew he knew that, but I figured he was hoping my mother, or someone, had maybe explained him to me.

"I think maybe I'm like him, that I probably took after him. Not that I could ever be a priest or anything like that but I'm not like my brothers," he said.

I'm not one for such conversations. Besides, I was in jail at that time, and soft conversations with men were not things I wanted to have. He lit another cigarette and gave me one to light too. Cigarettes are prison economy, so he knew to bring me at least 20 packs when he visited. But by that time, I was past the level of bargaining for anything in jail, I was at the top of the power list and I was untouchable. The warders knew who my brothers were, and they gladly accepted their money in exchange for my comfortable stay.

I'm not gonna lie. Life in prison was tough for me the first few days, but there never was a time where being someone's bitch was an option. I was ready to kill anyone who dared to touch me the moment I walked into Sun City. Just like when I was 14 and thought of nothing more than slitting my stepfather's throat. The urge was always there; it confused me when I was younger and as I grew older it consumed me. That's why I decided to keep

myself in jail because at least it made me feel like innocent people were safe from me.

Iqunga is a thing I was born with. I think about this whole thing a lot, and the only conclusion I come to is that Thulula did what he did for us to exist. He knew there'd be things, but he also knew we'd all be men, so he died expecting us to figure it out one day and fix it. Thulula's sacrifice was for a woman, his wife, and that's why we exist today... And the disturbing part is that my brothers are the same; they'd do anything for these women, including death.

There's a loud cry; a baby's cry.

It's exactly 5 am. I almost jump to my feet because it's been hours since the old witches arrived. But... there should be two cries.

Nkangala gets up on his feet, but he doesn't try to go inside the hut, he disappears behind the other houses. I will not move until I hear another cry. Qhawe is expecting two children, and I must take his wife back home with two children. I do not hear another cry, so I sit. Minutes pass; the silence persists. No voices are coming from the hut, not even from those old witches, but there's still smoke coming from the hut.

I wait for a miracle.

I wait because more than anything, I'm not sure how long we are going to have to stay here, and if one baby is born dead, where are we going to bury it? Experience has taught us that there is only one place where ours should end up, and that's Mbuba.

I wait 20 minutes straight, hoping Nkangala will come back and tell me something but he doesn't. Instead, MaNgcobo comes out of the hut, a white cloth half-drenched in blood under her arm, something wrapped in it. She looks pale and exhausted. I have never seen her looking like this, even in her worst moments. I'm still sitting as she stands in front of me; no words are said. She pulls the cloth from under her arm and hands it to me.

"What is this?" I will not take it. Blood is dripping to the ground, from it.

"You have to take it." Even her words are tired.

“I asked you what this is, MaNgcobo.” She doesn’t speak, just throws the cloth on my lap and looks at me. The cloth unwraps and I’m now sitting here looking at something I have never seen in my life.

“It’s a placenta. There was just one. They all shared it, just one. It’s either you bury it, or you take it home. It’s your duty. You are the only one here,” she says, and leaves. What does she mean I’m the only one here? I’m left holding something that came out of a woman’s vagina, and it’s drenched in blood. I know these things are supposed to be buried at home, but we are far from home here, so what am I supposed to do now?

“You can come in,” she says. It’s Nkangala’s grandmother. She looks tired too.

“Come in where?”

She looks at me like I’m not taking her seriously.

“We don’t have time. Come inside,” she says. I sense the annoyance in her tone. I follow her because what if she strikes me with lightning or something?

The smoke is still filling the hut. Strange because five steps inside and it’s clear, all clear. Naledi is lying on a mat, awake and alive. She has two babies on her chest, suckling her breasts. Another woman at the far corner is cradling something, another baby. There are three babies?

“You must name them,” Nkangala’s grandmother says. I don’t think it’s my place to name Qhawe’s children. “Name the children Zulu, they are your children!”

I look at them, eyes big, skin black. They look like me, like all of us. I have never named children in my life. I had never even thought about having children of my own until the first time I saw Nokthula. Of course, she was chasing Sbani with a sjambok which means she’s not a peaceful woman but she’s still my type and I will never stop pursuing her. She doesn’t want me though; she looks at me like I’m way below what she deserves.

“Mhlaba, you have to name them. We can’t leave this hut until you do,” Naledi says, her voice as tired as MaNgcobo’s. I look at the two boys on her

breasts and the one the old woman is holding.

“Lo, uNyezi.” I point at the one on the right breast. The full moon, it guarded us all night, so that’s his name. “Lo, uMfula.” I point at the one on the left breast.

“Lona ke—” I point at the one the old woman is holding, but she turns him away from me, and she looks horrified.

“You can’t name that one!” one of the old women with bent backs shouts at me. I don’t understand.

“Why?” I ask. She looks at Nkangala’s grandmother.

“Uya emlilweni,” the grandmother says, softly, like this is something that shouldn’t be said out loud. I look at Sdudla and she doesn’t seem concerned at all. She looks content with the two on her breasts.

“Emlilweni?” I ask because now I feel like I’m the only one lost here.

One woman with a bent back approaches until she is standing right in front of me, hands knotted behind her back, eyes looking up at me.

“That one. He came here for a reason.” She points at the baby I haven’t named yet. “He came here to end it; to end the fires. He isn’t meant to live. Your grandfather brought him, but he wants him back, now, through the fire that brought him here,” she says, in almost a whisper. She’s talking about a grandfather none of us knows. So what does he have to do with Qhawe’s son?

“We must throw him in the fire. He is the reason she struggled so much with labour. He is here to put an end to all of this; there will be no burning after this.”

Is she mad? Put my brother’s son in the fire? Burn him to death? What the fuck is this?

“You, Mhlaba, you must put him in the fire. The two cried at the same time; he didn’t. So he is the one,” the old woman says and hands the baby to me.

I look at its face and I see me; I see us. His eyes are open. Do babies open their eyes right after birth? I look at the fire raging on the floor, and then at the baby in my arms. My brother’s son – my son.

“Your grandfather wants to free you, and this is how it will be done,” another woman with a bent back says. I did say they were witches. “Throw this baby in the fire and all will be over,” she hisses at me.

I will not murder my own blood. Nandi told me that our mother died in a fire at the factory where she worked; she was the only one that didn't survive it. I'm not about to throw my brother's son in flames.

“Naledi, we are leaving, now!”

“She's too weak to go anywhere,” another old woman says.

I don't care, I will carry her. Where is MaNgcobo? Oh yah, she's standing at the corner there, looking like she's on these women's side about this madness.

“But she said—” Eyi! Eyi! Zandile!

“Nobody is throwing my son into the fire! Zandile! Let's go! Help Naledi up!” I'm almost at the door with the baby when one of the old women sinks her nails into my arm.

“The women will keep burning to death. If you walk out that door with that baby, your children will never fear blood, and the chosen women will keep burning to death. The curse will live on.” I don't have time for this.

“Let's go!”

These women! We still have to walk down the mountain and cross a river with three babies; I need them to walk faster than this. I don't know where Nkangala is, but we don't have time to look for him. He can stay here with these witches if that's his plan. I hear them wailing at the top of their voices as we walk down the narrow path.

My duty is to bring Qhawe's wife, Nkosana's wife and all three of Qhawe's children home: Nyezi, Mfula and this one in my arms.

I'm naming him Nyanda and he will live.

13

“Gugu, are you asleep?”

She’s been tossing and turning all night while MaMtshali snores away on the bed above us.

Sigh.

We – me, Gugu and Xolie – are sleeping on the floor; we have been for the past two days. One room is for the older boys and the other is for Sthembile and MaMbizana.

“No,” she says, in almost a whisper. It’s 4:30 am and if our husbands aren’t here by the end of today, we need to start packing.

“I can’t sleep.”

“Me too,” Xolie says.

We have not spoken about Zandile and Naledi at all, but all three of us know they were on their way here two days ago. The fact is, they didn’t make it, so they are probably in a dark room somewhere, blindfolded and tied up – the Bhunganes got them. But we are not going to talk about that, we cannot; not now.

“We have to leave,” I say.

“No! We have to stick together; we have to fight.”

Jizas!

Have these women forgotten who we are? We are pampered wives of wealthy criminals. We don’t fire guns; we dine out in expensive clothes and

glittering diamonds on our ring fingers. We wake up every morning and choose which sports car we are going to drive to buy bread today. Sometimes we are on TV, on red carpets looking nothing short of perfect. We have maids, gardeners, personal hairstylists and designers. We don't wash our own clothes and the only reason we cook is that we are married to uneducated patriarchal Zulu men from Greytown.

This is us.

The ones who fly on a private jet and can have anything sorted with one phone call. We are glass; we are handled with care. We are loved by men whose world revolves around us. We are the Zulu wives, the untouchable ones. We can buy anything and anyone. We are beautiful; every woman alive wants to be us.

And this... all of this is why our husbands never taught us how to fight the way they fight. They thought they'd always be there to protect us. But now... *sigh*... here we are.

"I agree with Gugu. If we separate, they will find us, one by one," Xolie says.

We are going to die here. I need to make peace with that because if we shoot at them, they will shoot back and kill us all. And if we don't, they will come in here and take our children. That's if they are sane enough not to rape us first, and that's another form of death. The fact of the matter is, if we stay in this house, we are doomed either way.

"Gugu! Yes, you can fire a gun, but do you really think you can defend yourself from raging men who are here for revenge?" I know my voice is raised but she—

"I'm not a princess like you, Hlomu. While you were cooking uphuthu and making a green salad with bruises all over your body because you are your husband's punching bag, Tony was—"

Oh, hell no!

"His name is Nkangala, Gugu! NKANGALA! He is not Tony and no, he does not have a soft spot for you or whatever it is that you think you have with him. He is your husband's skivvy – a spy who was sent to go with you

so you don't stray and forget who you are married to. Everything he did for you and with you, he was paid for it. Stop being in denial!"

"Hlomu!"

No! Xolie must not try to handle me! I can tell when I'm being handled. Gugu started it! If she's going to bring my marriage issues up, she must be able to take hers with her chest.

"The problem with you, Hlomu is that you have lost yourself so much that you are nothing without this family. Who are you? Do you even know who you are without Mqhele?"

That's it! She's gone too far.

"At least I've always known Mqhele loves me. Wena? You had to crawl like a cockroach to get to where you are now. So don't fucking come at me with that bullshit!"

"Hhayi! Mahlomu?"

Wasn't she snoring just now?

"What is this nonsense? Your children are in the next room. Seniyahlanya?"

She should be at Ngudwini burying her husband; not here telling us we are crazy. Gugu must never ever! If this is where we are now, I'm taking MY children and I'm leaving all of them here. If they want to engage in a gunfight with some fire-crotch savages they can do that; I won't be part of it.

"Stop this! We have until midnight; they could still show up during the day," MaMtshali says.

This old woman! She knows, so she must stop lying. And she's making me even angrier.

My pillow is wet and I didn't even feel it coming. I'm going to the bathroom to clean myself up. It's been a while since the last nosebleed. I'm starting to wonder if I'm really sick physically or if this is all in my head. I'm sure Charity has been trying to reach me all week with whatever bad news she has to give me. I haven't felt lightheaded in a while too, so I'm

beginning to have hope that whatever it is that I thought was killing me is gentle enough to give me space to deal with my other problems.

“Hlomu, are you okay? There’s blood on your pillow! What is going on?”

Urgh!

“Nosebleed – it happens when someone pisses me off.”

I hear her take a deep breath. It’s a good thing I locked the bathroom door because I don’t want her coming in here and seeing this. If this was a year ago, she would have been the first person I told, but our relationship is not what it used to be. Too much has happened.

“Please open the door—”

“I’m fine, Xolie. Do you have extra pyjamas? Or a nightie?” I didn’t really have enough time to pack, never even set foot in my house before I came here.

“I’ll get you a T-shirt and leggings.”

When I’m done washing the last set of clean pyjamas I had, I find the leggings and T-shirt folded on the floor just as I open the door. They are too tight on me but I don’t have a choice now, do I? There’s no point in trying to go back to sleep, next to Gugu for that matter, so I might as well go to the kitchen and cook porridge.

Nsingizi complained yesterday that we’ve been eating porridge every morning and uphuthu and chicken every night.

“It doesn’t even taste like real chicken,” Hlangu added. We ignored them.

We are down to six live chickens because we slaughter two every day, seeing as we have teenage boys and all. The mielie meal and a few cans of fish and baked beans which we have been eating for lunch came with MaMtshali. It seems she was the only one who still had the ability to think straight on the way here. We are almost out of sugar; milk is not even on our minds anymore, and we’ve only been here for five days.

“Sisekelo?”

“Mami.”

How long has he been sitting here?

“You’re making porridge again?” he asks.

Sigh.

“You know it’s all we have, but it’s just temporary. We’ll be back home soon.” He has that smirk – the Mqhele smirk on his face.

“You know I’m not a child anymore, right?”

I don’t know why that hurts, but it does.

“Your fathers won’t let anything happen to us; you know that right?”

“Mami, this—” he says and looks around the kitchen, “—this... it is happening to us, now. A lot is happening to us.”

What on earth does he mean by that?

It’s almost 6 am and the person who should be here is actually Langa. Sisekelo is a sleeper. MaSbisi once claimed that he sleeps so much because dreams keep him awake at night, good and bad dreams.

“Where is Langa? Did he go to the river again?” I ask. I forbade him from going to that river because really, that fish thing was creepy. And Peter said there were no fish in that small river.

“Still sleeping; fast asleep actually.”

Impossible!

“Are you sure he’s okay? He never sleeps past 5 am.”

This is worrying me.

“He’s fine. And you are not dying Mami so stop worrying. In this family, women like you don’t have graves, they get swallowed by flames,” he says and gets up to leave.

“Sisekelo!”

He’s gone, down the passage and straight to the dungeon door. He’s going to check on the small kids. They do that about four times every night. But also, what does this child mean? Women like me?

Zulu

“They’re good. The only thing they could run out of is food, but they’re all good.”

“And Siba?”

“He’s dead.”

“Good.”

Nkosana should be here, not asking me questions over the phone. I lost Mhlaba for a couple of hours, but I found him again, on the N2 highway. I’m not sure where he is headed yet, but I know he isn’t coming to Gauteng or going to Mbuba because he knows better than to go there.

“Phakeme?”

“They haven’t moved, but Uncle Peter’s car is still in the bushes.”

This boy missed an exam this morning, but sometimes there are sacrifices to be made; that’s why he is here with us. I know his mother will blame me when all of this is over, but I didn’t teach him any of this; I’m also surprised, like everyone else.

“Is Peter with them?”

“Yeah, his phone is almost out of battery, though. Oliver and Uncle Peter’s wife landed safely in Australia, so ngiyaphuma kubona.”

I still don’t understand why they would take Peter, of all people. They can’t possibly think they can use him as leverage, and he knows not to cave and give them our money. He knew what he was getting himself into when he agreed to be more than just our lawyer on call in case we get arrested. So whatever they are doing to him right now, he must take it like a man. Isosha lifela empini.

Of course, Peter is like family, and he's been loyal to us. He's so loyal that he didn't hesitate when we told him we needed a place to hide the wives and kids.

Oliver is his redhead son; he's been a friend of our kids since the day he was born. It's interesting how Peter has been married to four women and only managed to get one pregnant. We laugh at him about that. We laughed about it even at his last wedding with a long-legged model who turned out to be the greatest wife he's ever had and the best stepmother to his son. She loves Oliver, and when it was time to flee, she didn't ask questions. She got on that plane with the boy and went to a country she knows nobody in.

Peter gave us the address very quickly but said he hadn't been there in years. The house belonged to his dead grandparents and I cringe at the thought of what it used to be. He told me that the house should be in history books, that it should be Vlakplaas that never made it to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. His mother married a Jewish man and they raised their children in Joburg, Parktown – that's how she broke ties with her parents. He told me he went to that house in Ladybrand only three times in his entire life. But when his grandparents died, they left it to him.

“I decided to sell it there and then because what was I supposed to do with a farmhouse? My mother shrieks at the mention of that place. She left to go to university and never went back, never even called her parents until I was born. I've given up on trying to sell it; nobody wants to buy it. The other farmers in the area claim they had no idea what was happening there, for years.”

“What was happening?” I asked.

He was sitting there on that thatch chair on the balcony as he spoke while trying to suppress his anxiety with a joint of weed. He was still wearing the same clothes he wore to court the previous day to represent some psycho teenager. He still does other work, and he says he'd drop everything and work only for us, but he can't because he is just a criminal lawyer and has to justify his earnings to SARS and the board of advocates.

“There are torture rooms in that house, Mpande, under the house actually, but I’ll let your wives in on only one of them. They can’t know what else is there because that shit fucked me up too. I don’t want them seeing all that. I know your wives are badass and all, but you know, you’re all still black. And you know... it’s *white people*. Not the apartheid architects whom we all know by name, who are almost all dead. No... it’s *white people* to you. You know, apartheid fucked up white people too, man. Brainwashing starts very early in our lives. Most of our families didn’t need domestic workers because our mothers were housewives, but the black domestic workers had to be there, gardeners too because as kids we had to be made to believe and understand that black people are inferior, that they are below us and they were our servants.”

I had never heard Peter speak like that before because technically, he is our servant.

“I’m saying this to you because we are friends, Mpande; we are family, man. I’m not trying to offend you, because I know how it affected your own life. I’m just saying that South Africa is more fucked up than we all think. We walk on top of the fuckery under our feet every day and we don’t even know it. We are just people, man. Just people. Co-existing and moving forward like a herd of cows, trying to run away from the past. We are trying not to take it with us, but it is stuck on us. It is who we are, Mpande, almost three decades later.”

He was already high, and I believe that’s how he got the audacity to preach to me about how we possibly suffered the same, just that his suffering didn’t include systematic poverty, mental slavery and dehumanisation. Peter and Nqoba are the same age. Nqoba is a genius who ended up being a criminal; Peter is an average white man who went all the way to law school because he had that choice and more other choices.

“I’m leaving man; I’m moving to Australia with my kid and wife because I don’t want them to die here,” he said.

That he has the option to pack and move to Australia is proof enough.

“Those men will come after me too; they know I take care of your dirty money. When all of this is over, and I’m gonna be honest with you, man, these men have been at it for the past two years. They know where all your money is, they know how you move.”

That was something he should have told us two years ago...

“They managed to get past me too and I’m sorry for that. I’m leaving, Mpande. This is Africa; the white guy dies first. I’ll do what I can,” he said.

I could have gotten mad and shot him there and then, but it’s Peter, and it didn’t sound like a betrayal; it sounded like a man putting his family first, just like I’m doing now.

“When all of this is over, if you survive, call the NPA and ask for a woman called Madaleine Fullard. Give her the address to that house, she’ll know how to find what’s hidden in it,” he said.

And with that, our conversation ended.

I haven’t had the time to research who Madaleine is and what she does, but I know Mqoqi would have known about her. He knew everything. He read everything and I mocked him about it most times. I should have brought him home. I should never have left that nightclub without him alive. That was the last time I saw him.

I remember this one time, when Niya was about three and both of us had to babysit her because Mqhele had to go somewhere in Mpumalanga, and he couldn’t tell Hlomu about it, so he pretended to be out somewhere spending a day with his daughter.

Mqoqi looked at Niya, and then turned to me and said, “This shit scares me.” I was confused, so I raised my eyebrows. “Do you also feel like... you’d lose all sense if anybody ever tried to hurt her?” he asked.

“I’d die first. I don’t even want to think about it,” I said, and I meant it. Whoever is responsible for giving people children should never have given us a daughter. We are the wrong people for it.

“Remember when I disappeared, we were still living with MaZulu?”

He had disappeared a few times; I couldn’t really remember that time but I knew it was after my brothers killed MaZulu. I nodded anyway

because I wanted him to talk.

“I lived under a bridge for a while. There was a girl who came one night. She needed a place to sleep and I think she looked at me and thought she could trust me, that I was a safe place for her. At night, I fucked her; it was my first time. She didn’t say no. In fact, she didn’t say anything. She just lay there quietly until I was done, and then in the morning she left and I never saw her again. I forgot about her, but over the years I started remembering her, and feeling like I did something wrong there.”

At that moment, when he was telling me that story, I wished I had something. Something like cigarettes and alcohol to go to, just like most of my brothers. The urge to go to a shooting range and empty a gun flooded my mind, but I didn’t have that choice, not at that moment. I could have looked at my brother in the eye and told him, “That was rape Mqoqi! You raped her!” but I didn’t.

I could have told him I knew that for sure because I was also raped by Carol, and there has never been a day in my life where that ordeal hasn’t been on my mind. Her scent and her touch haunt me all the time. I feel it in every woman I try to love; every woman who has ever tried to love me. It’s anger that I feel more than anything, followed by disgust and the need to wash myself clean of her.

Those were the things I should have been honest with my brother about because maybe he would not have felt so alone in all the things that fucked him up growing up. I really wanted to explain to him that to rape someone, you don’t always have to put a gun or knife to their head and threaten to harm them if they resist. Sometimes, all it takes is their desperation to survive. And if you are the one person they believe is vital to their survival, you can do pretty much anything to them – anything. And they will let you because vulnerability is the pits... the pits of all pits. But that will never change the fact that you raped them; you might not be sure, and they might doubt it too because they let you. But you raped them.

I wasn’t going to say that to Mqoqi though because he was going to try to kill himself again. I never left his side because I was scared of what he’d

do to himself if he was alone, and he never left my side because he never wanted what happened with Carol to happen to me ever again. He blamed himself for all that, for leaving me when he believed he had the duty to protect me.

We never really spoke about that stuff, but we both knew that as long as we lived we were each other's shields and that we were never again going to let anyone harm either of us. Nobody protects boys, and so boys grow into men that people have to be protected from.

I offered to kill Amanda for him, not because she did what she did to Nqoba, but because she did what she did to Mqoqi. But he said no because Mqoqi believed in people – that was his weakness. I loved him. I loved my brother and I never said it out loud. But he knew; he died knowing that.

“Baba.”

“Yes.”

“I've called your name three times. What are you thinking about staring into space like that?”

I know this boy is studying to be a lawyer, but he must not start interrogating me.

“Where is Mam’Ndoni?”

Oh. Ndoni.

“She’s with Mami and all of them.”

He goes back to the laptop, but the look in his eyes is unsettling to me.

I decided Ndoni had to go to Ladybrand and Thando stayed in Fourways. I wasn't going to have them together in one place; I don't want them stabbing each other. I don't know who hates who more, but I know I need both of them. Thando thinks she has the power because she is the mother of my children. Ndoni, on the other hand, just doesn't like losing; it's not her thing. I'm going to change both their surnames to Zulu, for different reasons obviously, and if they give me problems, ngizobathakatha, just like Mhlaba says I should.

“Ntwana, vaya.” It's Sambulo; he has Phakeme by his golf shirt collar. They weren't supposed to be back here until late in the night.

“Wena, ngizokubhonya after this,” he says to me.

I did say they were going to blame me for Phakeme’s criminal behaviour.

“Leave this laptop here, ngizok’donsa ngempama! You think you’re a man now? Nx!” He’s really pissed off, and stressed and busy, so much that he hasn’t been high on weed in days.

Phakeme leaves; I don’t know where he is going and with whom. It’s only after the car he is in is out of the gate that what I have been here waiting for is dragged inside the house. I wonder where they found him. Mqhele instructed me not to clean the room.

“Leave it as it is; blood and all,” he said on the phone this morning.

He is in charge of this part and I know it’s going to take a while. The thing about Mqhele is... well, Sambulo is a quick killer, he is a gunman. Nkosana is a knifeman; he slits your throat and watches you die. Nqoba will literally beat a person to death – fast. Qhawe is a man of theatrics; he flies golf balls in socks and stuff. I have never killed a person. Mqhele, on the other hand, is very creative. He is one of the most good-hearted people I know, and yet the most dangerous. The thing about him is that he never acts unprovoked.

They all stand outside and let him go inside the room, alone with Mahlubi. Mthunzi is dead. Siba is dead. Mashiya died early this morning, on that same chair Mahlubi is about to sit on, and his blood is still on it, dry now. Look, I know we buried bones and cleansed ourselves of whatever, but... these men; they killed Mqoqi, and you don’t do that – not to us.

“Where’s my wife?” Qhawe asks me. Her phone died days ago, but I know Mhlaba and Nkangala wouldn’t let anything happen to her and Zandile.

“They are on the road; I’ll tell you where they end up.”

I know he is not satisfied with that, but as long as I don’t say she’s dead, I know he’ll be fine.

“Where did you find Mahlubi?” Nobody answers me.

I failed dismally to track him. All I knew was that Ntsika and the boys had his daughter somewhere in Ballito after they wiped out his whole family including his mother with petrol bombs. Who the fuck still uses petrol bombs, like it's 1986?

None of us knew Mahlubi had children until Phakeme told us, and that was minutes before Lwandle called to say they had one of them. Mzizi fucked us up for real with that cleansing thing; it made us start thinking we could be good men, so we dropped the ball and thought we had changed.

I grab a beer and look at my brothers pacing around, looking more frustrated than I've ever seen them before. The last time we were all like this was when Mvelo and Oleta were shot dead. On that night we went to avenge their deaths, my brothers made me stay in the car while they cracked heads open. They robbed me of a chance to heal. But that was nothing compared to Mqoqi's death. We were hurt, angry, baying for blood, and Hlomu made sure we went out and spilt it. It's interesting how she can gas us up with just words; she says jump and we ask how high?

All. The. Damn. Time.

Her approval in this family is important, and it's something I understand more than anyone in this family. That's why I fought so hard not to get close to her. I wanted to, I needed her and everything that she came with. But I was afraid that getting close to her would make me vulnerable because I'd end up looking for my mother in her. So much of who she is, is what my mother was. There were so many times I wished she'd hold me tight, press my head on her chest and tell me to cry about anything and everything. But I fought and I resisted until Sis'Zah came back. She is nothing like my mother and unlike Hlomu, she doesn't make a man want to be soft and vulnerable. Sis'Zah is like us; no purity and no innocence in her, just a woman who had to survive just like we had to. But to me, she was like the mother I never had, and I wasn't going to replace her with Hlomu.

I drink now; I tasted alcohol for the first time six months ago. It was a bottle of whiskey I found in Mqoqi's house, one that had been displayed in the glass cupboard behind the bar counter for six years. It was super

expensive. He once told me that the longer it stayed sealed, the higher its value became. I went to his house three days after his funeral, and I went there because I was still in denial; I needed a piece of him. I had hoped that something in there would make me feel him – his spirit, his laughter and his troubled soul. Mqoqi was an aura person, he could be felt, but once he was gone, he was gone. I broke the glass door with my fist to get that bottle of whiskey, and I drank it, skoen. Afterwards, I threw myself on his bed and cried. Did he not trust me enough to call me for help when he was in trouble? I could have easily gotten him out of that shit situation, he knew that.

“Did you teach the boys how to make petrol bombs?” Nkosana asks me.

I’m capable of many things, but no, they probably got that information on the internet, or from Mqoqi because he loved passing down knowledge.

I take my beer up the stairs with me because I’m tired of being accused. The door is not locked, so I walk in and lean on the wall when Mqhele turns slightly to look at who is walking in. For a moment, I think he is going to kick me out, but he doesn’t. He goes back to Mahlubi.

“My wife Mahlubi? You went after my wife?”

Yeah, we all know the one thing Mqhele will definitely kill you for – his wife.

Mahlubi is not shackled to the iron chair – strange. They are sitting on chairs facing each other. None of them is in any position of power; no weapon between them.

“Where is my daughter, Mqhele?” Mahlubi asks. Mqhele unzips his tracksuit jacket, takes it off and throws it to the floor. He is left with just his vest.

“You knew where I was; you could have easily come to face me. You could have killed me, Mahlubi, anytime you wanted. But you went after Hlomu? You decided to go after Hlomu?”

“My daughter, Mqhele—”

“I don’t give a shit about your daughter, Mahlubi! You should never, do you understand me? You should never have gone anywhere near my wife!”

I should have taken a whole six-pack up here with me because this is definitely going to take all night.

“I’ve called off all my men; just give me my daughter and all this will be over. You’ve already killed my mother and my brother’s wife; five of my nephews are gone, Mqhele. Just give me my daughter, Mqhele, and you’ll never hear from me again.”

Technically, this is him begging, but a man like Mahlubi never begs, so it sounds more like bargaining.

“I’ll talk to Mashiya to let things go to—”

“Mashiya? You’re sitting on his blood. See this?” Mqhele points at the bloodstains on the floor. “This is his; he was here this morning. But Qhawe dealt with him; he didn’t go after my wife so I had no business with him.”

“You killed my brother?”

“Yes, all of them,” Mqhele says, dismissively, like it’s no big deal. “Now tell me, Mahlubi. Talk to me like a man. What exactly did you plan to do to Hlomu?”

He must not answer that question if he knows what’s good for him. No, actually, nothing is good for him, not in this room. But then again, this is Mahlubi we are talking about; he isn’t scared of us. If the boys hadn’t kidnapped his daughter, he’d definitely not be here. My brothers found him, and I honestly think he let them find him because of his daughter.

“What exactly do your kids plan to do to my daughter?”

Ayi!

Mqhele pulls up the left leg of his track pants and pulls out a gun. He pulls out a cigarette and lights it.

“Do you want one?” he asks Mahlubi.

No answer.

“Do you remember how we used to buy ama loose for R2 because we couldn’t afford a pack of 20s?” Mqhele asks and laughs.

They were friends then, they got each other. But I know my brother, he has different laughs, and this one is the one that ends on his lips, it doesn’t reach his eyes.

“I don’t smoke anymore,” Mahlubi says.

Mqhele turns and looks at me, the gun in his hand.

“Take it outside,” he says. I’m not going to do that; I’m not leaving him here unarmed. Mahlubi is not just some idiot, he is exactly like Mqhele, we all know that.

“Mahlubi, you have nothing to bargain with here. My wife is safe somewhere, your daughter is not.”

Mahlubi laughs, and I immediately know that it will take time before they kill each other, although I know it will be in this room, tonight. They have so many unresolved issues, and it has taken years for them to come face to face again.

“She’s beautiful; I watched her for two whole years. The truth is, I wanted to kill her. I had so many opportunities, but... I couldn’t. I think I love her.”

Mqhele grabs him by his throat; Mahlubi punches him in the stomach. I’m thinking that a fight is about to break out, but it doesn’t. They both sit back on their chairs. A smile is still on Mahlubi’s face.

“We had drinks in Accra. Well, she didn’t want the coconut cocktail, so she had water instead. I sat across her and we talked. Do you think she would have done that? Sat and had drinks with another man five years ago? When she was sure about you? That she wanted to be with you? That she loved you? Hhe, Mqhele? She went to Ghana to get away from you, you know that, right?”

Mahlubi is playing with fire here.

“There was a time when she loved you more than anything—”

“Hlomu still loves me—”

“Hlomu is scared of you, Mqhele. Hlomu is with you because she’s scared you’ll kill her if she leaves you.”

I don’t like Mqhele’s silence now; Mahlubi is getting in his head.

“I touched her hand; it was soft like a baby’s.”

Mqhele throws a punch, Mahlubi returns it. I’m going to shoot Mahlubi. Today is the day, I will kill a person!

They're back to sitting comfortably on their chairs again.

"She tried to slap me," Mahlubi says, and laughs. "But I grabbed her wrist and told her I'm not you; I'd skin her alive if she ever put her hands on me. She didn't look scared though, just furious. You've done that to her, haven't you? You've turned her into an angry violent woman. That's who she is to you now. But to me Mqhele... and I looked into her eyes, her smile; I watched her smile for two years. She is soft and delicate. She laughs out loud when you are not around, when she's with her friends and with her sister and brother. Does she still laugh like that for you? I don't think so. I got her those cakes that she loves so much, from that place in Centurion. She climbed on your kitchen counter, sat on top of it and ate them. It was beautiful to watch; she's beautiful to watch."

Mqhele takes a deep breath. I don't understand why he doesn't just kill this asshole now.

"She seemed very happy in Ghana, running around that market, buying things and looking excited about everything, and that's obviously because you weren't there."

"Mpande, step back!" Mqhele says.

I want to kill this idiot! Now!

"Please stop talking about my wife," Mqhele says, softly.

Mahlubi laughs out loud.

"I told her to divorce you, gave her an ultimatum. It was either her brother or you, and she chose her brother. She was ready to divorce you in exchange for his safety. Now tell me Mqhele, are you really willing to kill me for her?"

Wrong move Bhungane! When Mqhele cups his face in his hands, you must know he is making a decision, a definite one, after which he'll go and eat ice cream.

"Mpande, get out of here."

No! Not when Mahlubi is free like that.

"You have to cuff him to the chair, Mqhele—"

"Get the fuck out! And take that gun with you!"

I'm not losing another brother. No, I will not allow that! He gets up and comes to stand in front of me.

"I said get out, Mpande. Only one of us – between me and Mahlubi – only one of us will come out of this room alive. Leave or I'll kill you first."

I slowly walk out of the room, only because I looked into his eyes and they told me he is ready for anything. That as long as one of them lives, we will never be free of the Bhunganes.

"The problem with you, zikhova, is that you think we were responsible for Mqoqi's death. But Mqoqi wanted to die; Mqoqi had problems. Yes, we all do, we never had a chance; we were always going to become who we are. And we are all still standing, aren't we? That's what being a man is. But once there's a woman in the picture, that's where being a man goes out the window.

"Mqoqi loved a woman. He loved her from the time he was 22, the first time he saw her at Bree taxi rank. He couldn't get a chance to talk to her; you did and she ended up with you. He watched her loving you for years, watched you beating her, cheating on her... and eventually he told her. So, she knows she was the love of his life. Don't you think that maybe sometimes she wishes he had talked to her first? Because you and I know he would have loved her better. She would never have felt his fist on her skin. He was a better man than you – you know it; she knows it."

Yah no. This is it. I leave the room, close the door behind me and leave the gun on the small table at the bottom of the stairs. Mahlubi is not walking out of that room alive.

I don't say anything to my brothers when I join them downstairs, and they don't ask. I pour myself a glass of whiskey and throw it down my throat – skoen.

It was always Mqoqi's job to call the cleaners; I'll do the honours this time.

14

It's after midnight; we should have left this place when the sun set but no, here we are, guns in our hands, waiting.

Sthembile told us that most of the Bhunganes are dead, but there are too many of them: kids, nephews and cousins. She said nobody knows exactly where they are, but they definitely aren't in KZN.

“This family has lived for nothing else but you. Their kids are told at a very young age that your family is the reason for all their misfortunes. So they grow up with one goal and one goal only: to avenge,” she said.

I'm comforted by the fact that she knows how to use an automatic rifle, and she's positioned closest to the window.

The horse is gone again and we haven't seen the one-legged cat since this morning. They say animals can sense danger and I'm not saying they smelled the Bhunganes all the way from the highway, but I mean... things have been weird. Langa woke up at 9 am and I've learned that I might not be buried in a coffin like normal dead people. On top of that, I'm here holding a gun ready to shoot – a whole me! If I survive tonight, something will have to be done about Sisekelo; we've been in denial about this child for far too long. The small kids are safely locked in the dungeon, the bookshelf blocking the door. I pray that they are only found when the police come here to collect our dead bodies.

“Gogo!” Langa says to MaMtshali. “There are cars coming.”

This is it! This is where it all goes down!

“Bafazi! Awushe umlilo!” She’s just cocked an R-5. MaMbizana is right next to her, armed and ready too.

My hands are shaking with just a pistol in my hand. I’ve forgotten literally everything I’ve been taught about guns in the past four days. I look at Xolie next to me; tears are streaming down her face. Gugu is standing next to Sthembile sweating. Her eyebrows are fully joined in the middle because there’s no waxing here. Our eyes meet and I look away quickly because this could be goodbye and I don’t want to say it with my eyes.

The cars are close now. Langa says it’s four of them, two of them are taxis. Our taxis burned down – all of them, so whoever it is, they aren’t here to save us.

“Don’t shoot until I say go!” Sthembile says.

“We shoot the first car that reaches this yard!” MaMtshali instructs.

I’ll go with what MaMtshali says because this Sthembile girl is still a mystery to me. Also, she’s here because she’s psycho.

The cars are close, it’s a matter of seconds.

I’m done shaking and ready when the first shots are fired.

BANG! BANG! BANG!

That almost drives me to deafness.

But nobody fires back, instead, we are staring at car lights almost blinding us through curtains, hazards flashing. The cars have stopped moving.

“You shot the horse, Gogo,” Msebe whispers.

MaMbizana shot that horse’s brains out. How on earth did she think it was a person?

“No, it was a man,” she insists.

How on earth can one mistake a horse for a man?

“It was a man. I saw a man coming towards the door,” she says with a trembling voice. She is certain it was a man.

The hazards are still flashing.

We aren’t sure what to do because they haven’t shot back at us.

“It’s one of our taxis, Mami,” Msebe says.

I hear him, but I don’t look at him because the one thing I don’t want to see is my son with a big gun in his hands. The one thing I have worked so hard throughout this marriage to make sure never happens.

“That’s baba; put the guns down,” Sisekelo says. Yes, it’s Nqoba. He’s walking towards the house, arms raised. I’m ready to put the gun down, but MaMtshali isn’t, she’s still aiming and ready.

“They could be behind him, using him as bait,” she says.

Urgh! Never! Nqoba would die first; he would give his own life.

He pushes the door open; his eyes go through all of us until they find Gugu. He rushes to her, no word said, just an intense embrace. I still have the gun in my hand when I realise they are all here. Mqhele looks like he’s just survived a World War. His left eye is swollen, almost swollen shut. His lips are cut and he is limping.

“Who gave you a gun? What were you going to do with it? Shoot me? Come here...” He pulls me to his chest and snatches the gun away from me while at it. I know he is smiling; I hear his smile in his words but I can’t see it because his face is disfigured.

I wrap my arms around him, and I cry. I cry in a way I never thought I’d ever be able to cry, ever again. He holds me tightly and kisses the top of my head. He is here, and I can’t believe it. But I know he is in pain; he isn’t showing it, but I know the tighter I wrap myself around him, the more pain he feels. I don’t let go of him though because I can’t; I never will.

“Who hurt you?” I ask.

“Nobody you need to worry yourself about. I love you.” He’s looking down into my eyes now. I love him too.

The guns that we were so prepared to go to battle with are no longer in sight. What I see are tears and embracing.

“The kids are downstairs,” I say. Downstairs sounds better than *dungeon*, I think. Msebe has already opened and woken them up. They are coming out one by one, sleepy but excited to see their fathers.

“Where is Ndoni?” Mpande asks.

Ndoni? Is she supposed to be here?

“She didn’t come here,” Xolie says.

I’m glad my husband is alive and here but is this even over if we are still being asked about Ndoni? And where the hell is Naledi? and Zandile? I’d ask Mpande, but he’s outside, on the phone. How the heck is his phone working when we’ve been here for five days, completely disconnected from the whole outside world?

“Mqhele, Langa?” His face changes and I immediately know something is wrong.

“He’s fine; Andy’s family helped them out.”

Whew! That’s good news, but why did his face change to what I know is not a pleasant reaction?

“Pack up; we’re leaving,” Nqoba says. Whatever that phone call Mpande was on, it wasn’t a happy one. He is pulling both his children by the hand. The boys walk past all of us in the kitchen carrying the black bags.

“What is that?” Sambulo asks.

They don’t know?

“Bags of money—” He’s gone before I finish talking, and quickly there’s a gathering with his brothers.

“We must find him, fast,” Sambulo says. That was not meant for me, but I assume they are talking about our tokoloshe.

I’m just glad we are finally leaving this house. They will fill us in on how we are all still alive when we get home. Right now, I’m just glad to be alive.

Zulu

“Imihlola yakuloyamuzi! Hlomu gave birth here in this same room 10 years ago. There was no need for that; she hid that she was in labour from me until she was sure it was time. I had to deliver Mthaniya on this bed. I knew something was going on there, but I also knew how I raised her, so I didn’t ask.”

I’m not sure who exactly Hlomu’s mother is talking to between Naledi – who is obviously in a lot of pain – and me, who doesn’t want to be in this room. I tried to leave but she gave me the eye and pointed me back to the floor where I had been sitting. I don’t know her much, but I’ve been told messing with her is not a good idea.

“You will sit here and watch. Your brother’s wife would not be here, moaning in pain if it wasn’t for you people’s evil ways. I’ve always known there was something with your family. I stopped praying for your deliverance a long time ago. Pass me the pad,” she says, pointing at one of the plastic bags on the floor.

I don’t know which one is the pad.

“Pass me the pad; she’s bleeding,” she says, pointing at a blue plastic packet. I throw it at her; she gives me a warning eye. I sat here and looked away as she washed Naledi’s lower body, opening her thighs wide and washing her in places I should not be here seeing. I look away again as she unwraps the pad thing and sticks it between her thighs.

I know she is making me witness all this to punish me – to punish all of us for what she says we did to her son. When we left Nkangala at that place, I wasn’t really sure where I was going. I just drove – a woman in pain and crying babies – I just drove. MaNgcobo suggested we come here. She

wasn't sure how safe it would be for us, but she said as long as we were with Gaba, we were safe. Going to the hospital, any hospital, was not an option.

So we went to Gaba's house and found Nkosana's Mercedes parked outside the garage. That was the moment I saw MaNgcobo's face lighting up; it didn't last long though because Nkosana was not in the house. Gaba looked at us once and got in the car. He took us straight to Hlomu's mother's house. The infamous aunt was also fetched from her house. The first time she met me, she told me straight to my face that I was a jailbird. I didn't know how she could tell.

"Sacokama is'boshwa madoda," she said on that day as I took a few steps to the cooler box to get a beer for myself and a *Mam'Ruby* ngudu of Savanna for her. We sat together that whole afternoon, drinking and laughing and sharing prison stories, although hers were about brief visits made when I wasn't even old enough to wipe my own ass, and mine was 15 years of Sun City chronicles. She is not uptight and judgmental like Hlomu's mother, but then again, Hlomu's mother doesn't carry an okapi in her bra – MaDladla does.

It's interesting how they both easily understood when we explained we couldn't go to a hospital, although we should. Sdudla is not doing too well, the babies seem to be doing better than her.

"I have tried to understand the things of this family, but I cannot. I cannot at all. What you all did to Langa..." she says, pulling one baby off Naledi's breast and immediately placing another one. I know about the gays' thing but she shouldn't be punishing me. I spent 15 years in jail for my family.

"I will never forgive Mqhele," she says.

Mqhele has too many people who will never forgive him, for one thing or another, so I'm sure this one isn't such a big deal. We are in this whole shit in the first place because of people who will never forgive him. And they burned the taxis? All the taxis? I don't even know where to from here because rank duty had become my job – I'm not exactly office material.

The rogue aunt returns to the room with a basin of warm water.

“You gave birth to three children? Three? In some hut?”

This is the third time MaDladla is asking this question; she says it is unbelievable. When she walked in here after being called to see “imihlola yakwaZulu”, she put her hands over her head and paced around the dining room. It was before we cleaned up. We were still covered in blood, smelling like blood. I was still carrying a plastic bag with the placenta. She snatched it from me, wrapped it with a dress she pulled out of a wardrobe and put it in the freezer.

I have explained a few things to them – where we were hiding and how these babies were born, but I have not told them that the baby Hlomu’s mother is about to wash was supposed to be thrown in the fire.

“They did everything right, those women, whoever they are. But you still have to go to the hospital; this one is a bit thin,” Hlomu’s mother says, pouring water on Nyanda’s back.

Gaba has been coming and going. They’ve been sending him to ask for things from this person and that person. He even went to Poly Clinic to get some stuff from the matron, who happens to be the neighbour and is on night shift. This room now smells like a hospital ward.

“What on earth did you do to those people? So much violence? They want to end you. All of you. Women giving birth in forests... ci ci ci.”

“Aunty, please...” MaNgcobo says. Like me, she is getting annoyed with her. Sdudla has been quiet, too quiet. These babies are suckling the life out of her. I’m scared that if she falls asleep, she might never wake up.

“We must pray for these children,” Hlomu’s mother says, inspecting Nyanda.

“What we must do is take these people to the hospital, Thembeke. Where have you ever heard of a woman giving birth to three babies, naturally, and immediately driving across the province without being checked? What if there’s something wrong with them and we don’t even know?”

“There’s something wrong with this one for sure,” Hlomu’s mother says.

Nyanda doesn't cry like the other two, and his eyes are always open. He's also smaller and he doesn't feed on his mother's breast as much.

"I'm going to the toilet."

"Mxm!" Hlomu's mother looks at me and says.

I'm starting to feel like she hates every adult male in my family. Where I'm going, actually, is to find a charger so that I can at least turn my phone on and call Qhawe. There's one plugged in the kitchen, but it doesn't fit my phone.

"Bafo." I freeze because...

"Ndabezitha," he says. He's standing at the door.

"Sthuli S'kandaba," I say.

Before I know it, I'm being squeezed into a man's chest. I can hear his heartbeat. This is strange, we don't do this. I push him off me and move to create distance between us. I was in jail for too long; there were no *thank-yous* there, definitely not ones that involved physical contact. In jail, physical contact is someone beating you or stabbing you to death, not pressing your face on his shoulder, like he loves you or something...

Nkosana is standing behind him, and for the first time in five days, no actually, for the first time since I was 14, I want to cry.

"Ayaphila amakhosikazi, ziyaphila nezingane," I mutter. I'm about to point them to the bedroom with my head when I hear someone scream Gaba's name.

Gaba is not here.

Qhawe reaches the bedroom before I do.

"Get the car! Get the car!"

Hlomu's aunt is shaking Naledi and slapping her face.

The babies are crying.

... ● ...

It takes us 12 minutes to drive from H-section to eThekweni Hospital.

To be honest, I think she stopped breathing, but I couldn't tell Qhawe because he was driving. We almost crashed the hospital glass door, and we would have if I hadn't leaned over from the back seat and grabbed the steering wheel. They put her on a stretcher and wheeled her around the corner. They put pipes and tubes on her while we could still see, and then they took her away. We were blocked from going any further, even as Qhawe shouted that it is his wife. The babies were taken too; they were in the car behind us with Nkosana and Zandile.

We are not allowed to see them or go anywhere near where Naledi is. They asked Qhawe some questions, made him fill some forms and ordered him to wait here, on these hard benches with us. I've said that the babies were delivered and we had to leave that place as soon as possible.

Qhawe didn't know that he was already a father when he stood at the door and walked in and embraced me for keeping his wife alive. He expected to find his wife sleeping in one of the bedrooms, her belly still big. I haven't said anything about *how* all this happened because I'm not even sure if Qhawe is hearing me, although I'm sitting here right next to him.

"Three," he asks.

I nod.

"And she was able to do that? Deliver all three of them?"

I nod again.

"Those women knew what they were doing. Hlomu's mother said they did everything right."

"And you put her in a car and drove all the way here with her? Like that?"

It was either that or I braai your son, my brother. Those old ladies were not gogos who squeeze your cheeks and pull out stick sweets from their breasts to give you. But I don't say anything because he is dealing with enough already.

We've been sitting here for two hours and nobody has come to us to say what is going on. Nkosana knows something is not right; I know by the way

he keeps looking at me. He has given up on trying to convince MaNgcobo to sleep. She's just sitting there next to him, starry-eyed, biting her nails.

“Nkawza, bafo.”

He doesn't smoke, but he still follows me out.

Ah, Durban and its air. I have never loved this city; its air is too thick. I light a cigarette and stare at the Builders Warehouse sign across us – bright and yellow. The freeway is down there on our left, busy like it isn't 2 am. Nkosana feels heavy next to me, and the more I focus on this cigarette and things around us instead of talking, he gets heavier and heavier.

“We might have to go back to Margate,” I say. He's quiet. I think because we all thought we were done with Margate and that man.

“Have you spoken to Mqhele? Ayaphila amakhosikazi nezingane?”

He still doesn't answer me, and I know it's because he wants me to get to the point.

“What exactly did our grandfather Thulula do, bafo? I know we wouldn't be alive if he hadn't, but what is this shit he left us in?” I ask. I have to start somewhere.

“We are past that; we did what we were supposed to do—”

“We are not past anything, Nkosana. One of those children in there is supposed to be dead; I was supposed to burn him alive. That is what those women tried to force me to do. They said something about women burning if I don't.”

He needs to say something.

“Did Naledi and Zandile hear that? Were they in the room?” he asks.

How is that important? And how is that the one thing he says about all this?

“They were there.”

The thing with Nkosana is that you never know what's in his head. His face will never show you anything.

“Nandi said your mother died; how did she die?”

“In a fire.”

“So did my mother and our grandmother. Fire is how they communicate, and if we don’t listen, they take.”

I wasn’t going to throw a baby in the fire. I didn’t understand when I was in that rondavel with those old women. I understand now, but still, even if I did then, I would not have done it.

“So now we have to kill our own children? I couldn’t do it. How was I going to explain that to Qhawe?”

I’m on my third cigarette when we see Gaba’s car pull up to the parking lot at high speed. Nkosana clears his throat and wipes his eyes. He’s wiping tears.

“It will be Hlomu this time,” he says, just as Gaba rushes to us.

“What do you mean, bafo?”

“They have always loved her; that’s why they sent that third child. They will take her now,” he says.

No! This can’t mean that—

“Madoda? Qhawe’s wife is dead?” He’s breathing hard like he’s been running up a mountain.

“She’s inside, Mgabadeli with pipes and tubes all over her,” I say.

Nkosana does not say a word as we walk back in. But Qhawe is not where we left him. It’s just MaNgcobo, still sitting at the exact spot we left her, still biting her nails.

“They called him in to see the babies,” she says before we can ask.

“And Naledi?” Nkosana asks.

“Nothing,” she says.

15

I think I was the biggest trigger because when I walked in, she threw the blanket off her shoulders and got on her feet.

The women in the room tried to stop her, to grab her and force her down to her mourning place.

She fought them, and she came at me.

“You! You people killed my husband!” she screamed as I stood there, with women I don’t even know, trying to stop her from getting to me. I had my head covered and umhezo across my chest.

He had died in the morning and so we drove here. A part of me knew what to expect, but another part of me knew I had to drag myself here, with all my troubles sitting on my shoulders. Everything Naledi’s stepmother said is true: Ntate died because his heart couldn’t take what happened. We are to blame; our whole family is.

The whole Bhungane thing got in my head so much that I hardly ever sleep at night. Mqhele says the nightmares will go away, eventually. He says he dealt with it, but he doesn’t understand that you can’t “deal with” the emotional stuff, the fear, the image of your child holding a gun ready to kill someone because all your lives depend on it.

I don’t tell him what the nightmares really are. I don’t tell him about the woman who holds my hand and tells me to come with her in my sleep. I didn’t tell him that in this one dream she was washing my braids and her

fingers massaging my scalp was the best feeling ever. I was so happy I wanted to stay with her forever.

I don't get nosebleeds, lightheaded or any of those things I thought were killing me anymore. When Charity finally got hold of me, she said she found nothing wrong with me, but she said it like it was a shocking thing to her. She still checks on me more often than I can tolerate. I really do want to tell her to leave me alone but listen, life has humbled me in the past two months – it has humbled all of us.

This is our third funeral. Third, since we left that farmhouse in the Free State.

First, there was Ngcobo's funeral, which went on with armed police all over the place. I told MaMtshali that she had no reason to stay in Ngudwini, that she could stay in one of our empty houses in Gauteng, bring her sister wives even. But she just laughed and told me I forget that her man didn't leave behind a damsel in distress. She had goats and maize fields she wasn't willing to leave behind.

We trekked to Mbuba to bury Ndoni and her father. We weren't welcome there though. According to her uncle, our enemies had killed them because of their association with us. I watched Mpande weep, but I couldn't weep with him because the boys had told me they had no choice. That she had been in cahoots with her father, telling the Bhunganes everything about us as if we didn't welcome her into our family and treat her like one of us. Mpande loved her; we all knew that, but she was also responsible for Mqoqi's death so we couldn't cry with him. Ntsika put the bullet in her head, he said so himself. In normal circumstances that would have caused a rift between him and Mpande, but remember we once had an Amanda, and that taught us a lesson we can never forget.

And so now we are here, to bury Naledi's father – without Naledi. His wife blames us, actually, the whole family including Tshedi whom our husbands protected against a deranged husband; he found out his children were not his and went on a rampage because his wife cheated on him with a bus driver for years. The last I checked, Sello was still not chief.

Ntate Montsho had many ailments, diabetes and stuff, but he had a loving wife who took care of him, so he was fine. It was the news of Naledi being in a coma that led to his distress. He kept getting worse and worse over the past two months until four days ago when he went to sleep and didn't wake up. He never even went to see her in hospital, not even after Qhawe had her moved to a hospital in Gauteng.

I have been here for four days, but I have not heard anyone speak about the dead body or his burial. We come here during the day but sleep at the guesthouse nearby every night. Not many words are shared between us and Naledi's sisters. They do what Tswana people do in such situations, which we neither know nor understand, and we linger around this house because our own culture dictates that we be here.

Qhawe hasn't shown face; he just let the kids come with us, including the three babies that we – the four wives – are now responsible for. I spoke to him on the phone this morning, said at least he must leave Naledi's bedside for one day and come here for the burial, whenever it happens.

“That man has already been buried, Hlomu. Go back home, and don't leave my children there,” he said.

I haven't told Zandile, Xolie and Gugu about what he said, but by the look of things, he was right. Mme Menkwe is no longer on the mattress and there are men, many men, coming in and out. They look angry too. Yesterday there was a memorial service and the yard was so packed that it could as well have been a funeral. We were the only ones confused about the absence of the coffin.

Mqhele has already sent me an SMS that we are leaving today. I understand where he is coming from. These people don't want us here; they have side-lined us from the day we arrived but weren't we family just two months ago? Before Naledi went into a deep sleep? Sbopho and Mathongo have been here, running around, speaking Tswana and all, not understanding what the hell is going on.

“Mami, is it true that mogolo died because Mme Ledi is in a coma? Is it true that it is all uncle Qhawe's fault?” Agape, now 12 and ever so vocal,

asks. I look at her and wonder why anyone would tell a child such things.

“Naledi gave birth to three babies at once and that’s a difficult and unusual thing, Agape. Her body couldn’t handle it.”

I wished, at that moment, that someone would come and save me from her.

“There’s a TV show about a woman who gave birth to six children at once. I watch with mama all the time. She’s perfectly fine; the babies are perfectly fine.”

I know that show; those babies were born in a hospital.

“Naledi will be fine, Agape. She will recover.”

“Okay, but mogolo is dead. And when Mme Ledi wakes up, she’ll find him gone. Who will tell her about that?”

I have no words left in me, so I just stand and look at her until she walks away. I’ve reconciled with the fact that Qhawe will have to do that part.

“Tshedi.”

Whenever I try to talk to her, the one thing she never does is turn to look at me. I have gotten used to talking to her back in just four days.

“We are leaving today.”

“Okay.” It’s a cold one. We are way far from where we were when I was her favourite Zulu wife.

“We won’t pack up all the children’s things; they’ll be back in three weeks anyway…”

She turns to look me in the eye, for the first time since I got here.

“Pack up the children’s things to where, Hlomu?”

Sigh.

“We are not leaving Qhawe’s children, Tshedi; you know that will not happen.”

“You are not taking Naledi’s children anywhere! This is where they will stay until she—” she stops talking and I see the tears. They aren’t tears of anger; they are tears of uncertainty because two weeks ago the doctors advised us to switch off the machines.

We said NO.

“He will come here and get them himself; you know he will.”

I know that maybe at this moment I sound like a man, unsympathetic and selfish, but Tshedi needs to understand who her sister married. If Naledi were here, she would explain things to her. Because Naledi knows who she is married to, and she wears that ring with pride and blind faith.

“Who will take care of them?”

“We will, Tshedi.”

“My sister is in hospital, and you are here, Hlomu, well and alive, going on with your life like she doesn’t exist...”

Nobody is going on with their lives; not a single one of us as long as Naledi lies on that hospital bed. But I won’t try to explain that to her, just as I won’t try to explain how thinking she can keep five of the Zulu children – especially at this time where even Sbopho’s grandchildren have become something even I do not recognise – will not end well.

“Tshedi, don’t do this. You know exactly where it will go. We’re leaving. Mqhele and Nqoba are parked outside.”

“Well, they can stay there, because my uncle—”

Nobody cares about her uncle. In fact, that uncle can be dealt with, even by me.

“Sbopho! Mathongo! Baba is waiting for you in the car outside. Go! Help me get the babies in the car, Tshedi.”

There are two things here: it’s either I’ve become exactly like my husband and his brothers, or I really just don’t care anymore.

We leave the Montsho homestead with all five of Naledi’s children in two cars. I can only hold Nyanda, whom Mhlaba named after his father for whatever reason. He cries a lot, but he stops when I hold him. He was a bit smaller than the others when we took them home from the hospital, but now he looks healthy and happy. The story about where they were born is a lot, but we all know old school midwives are the best. It used to be a skill passed from woman to woman until *they* came and introduced nursing school – teaching women the knowledge their mothers and grandmothers could have easily passed on to them.

I love Nyanda; I feel a strong connection to him. He reminds me so much of my own Langa when he was a baby. He lives with me; Mvula lives with Gugu and Nyezi lives with Xolie. Zandile said she can't – she took Sbopho and Mathongo. It's a cruel thing to separate children who shared a womb for nine months, but none of us was in a position to nurse three newborns alone. They are still in their homes, though, that's what makes it easier.

... ● ...

Mqhele is different.

And I understand, I'm different too.

So much has happened in the past two months. We were tested to the core of our existence and as much as we won, to a certain extent, nothing will ever be the same again.

I remember how, a few hours after we arrived home from Ladybrand, Sambulo walked into our house with Peter looking like he'd been in a fight with a sharp-nailed cat. Apparently – and I overheard this while walking past on my way from the dining room to the downstairs bedroom to get my charger – those were tribal marks on his face.

“Bamgcaba umlungu, bafo, bemvalele emotweni,” Sambulo was telling Mqhele.

This, and I found out later when I pressed Mqhele for more details, was done by a 19-year-old. There's torturing someone, and then there is what that Bhungane kid did to Peter – brand a white man like a Zuma or a Zondi. Obviously, he needed to go to the hospital and I didn't understand why Sambulo didn't take him straight there before coming to our house. He's healed now though, but still, ugcabile.

I never got to know what became of the teenage boy, but it was Sambulo he had to face, so I don't want to know. Just like I don't want to know anything more about the Ladybrand house. It was on the news days after we

left. My stomach turned a bit when I saw the footage, but when I realised the story had nothing to do with us, I changed the channel and went back to what I was doing.

We still have money; the insurance paid for the burned taxis, so Mhlaba is back to walking around like he owns the whole of Bree taxi rank. He's here a lot, and I know I had said to Mqhele that I don't want him near here, but if it wasn't for him, I know worse things would have happened to Zandile and Naledi. So now I make him food and let him sleep over when he stays too late. The strange thing, though, is that he never makes eye contact with me, not after that whole Bhungane thing.

My mother asks me about him every time we speak on the phone, but the one thing she never wants to talk about is the Langa and Andy thing. I know it's because she blames me for all of it. The videos disappeared from the internet 36 hours after they were put up, and that's like 30 years in internet time. So, no matter how much the world of homophobes evolves, my brother will always feel invaded and violated.

That is what Mahlubi left behind – a lifetime of wounds and an edgy Mqhele. I know he killed him, and that he did it with his bare hands.

When he cupped my face in his hands and said, "It's over, Hlomu. I swear..." and then pulled me to his chest and kissed the top of my head, I knew what he'd done. And I understood why he'd done it.

The kids had gone to their rooms, and I was more than happy to be in my house, in my own bedroom, although it was already midday. I had, throughout the drive from Ladybrand and all morning, been looking forward to being just with him. Everything I thought I felt before that didn't matter anymore. But he went to the bathroom and locked the door behind him. Yes, he was bruised and in pain, but we had just survived a near-death experience. He came out already dressed in sweatpants and a long-sleeved T-shirt. He must've used the bathroom door that connects to the walk-in closet.

"Mqhele." I knew he needed to sleep. "You have to let me see you," I said.

Something about that whole scene reminded me of that time Lwandle was kidnapped, and the next morning I stood in the kitchen and saw a wide scar on his arm. Someone had hurt him, cut his skin open and made him bleed. I knew he had killed that someone, but I was more infuriated by the fact that before that someone died, he had inflicted pain on my husband. I knew he killed Mahlubi, because over the years I had figured out that Mqhele isn't petty when it comes to who he harms; his wrath is always personal. He could have let all those Bhungane people live and only go for the one who provoked him directly.

"You don't need to see any of this, Hlomu," he said.

I pulled the T-shirt over his head myself, and by the time I pulled down his pants, I was in tears. I couldn't understand how he came out of it alive and still managed to travel five hours to get me, hug me and tell me he loved me, and take me back home. I knew he wasn't going to agree to go to a doctor, so I called Dr Masetla and he asked me to send pictures. Two hours later, a box was delivered to our door. I nursed him... for days. Sometimes I'd see him flinch when Niya threw herself at him. She still does that – 10 years old and quite too tall for a girl; she still has no boundaries when it comes to her father. She owns him.

"Hlomu, are you scared of me?" he asked as he sat on our kitchen counter, drinking a shake I had made him, begrudgingly. He hates anything and everything that comes out of a blender.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, are you scared of me? Is that why you haven't left me? Do you think I'll kill you if you do?"

I was so shocked I stopped doing whatever I was doing. I don't even remember what it was, but I know I froze for a moment. Look, Mqhele is a combination of shit and sugar; from him, you get all of it, sweet, sour and even bloody. But there will never be a time, not in my lifetime, where I do not love him.

"The day I die will be the day I leave you, Mqhele. Just make sure it's not by your hand."

I meant that, because as much as I thought I was done with him when I left for Ghana, and as much as I knew I would never ever leave him when I left Ladybrand, I still knew I was the only thing standing between him and death. Mahlubi almost finished him, but as I said and believed, Mqhele was never going to let himself die, not when he knew what it would do to me.

When his time comes, I know he will not leave without me.

It's a strange place to be, but it's the place I'm at.

Zulu

“You know, baby, I never withdrew that eWallet. First, because I didn’t know how and secondly because I didn’t care about R350; I’m sure you figured that out soon enough. It was just fascinating that you were a broke doctor, and that you actually thought I would go away. I don’t know what it was about you, but you got under my skin and made me so angry the first day I met you. Blocking my car for a whole two hours and going off to do your nails when you knew I was standing in the rain?”

Haha haha...

“I’m laughing because I know now what you did was exactly like you and you know what? If I had known the extent of your craziness on that afternoon, I never would have pursued you; the last thing I needed in my life at that time was a crazy woman.

“But that would have been the biggest mistake of my life, Naledi. If I had driven off and never saw you again, I’d probably be dead by now. I had never known happiness before you. I thought I did because there had been times when I was happy in life and I had everything – all the money in the world and all the power I needed. Honestly, sometimes I thought it was enough. I thought, well... I have women too; I can have sex whenever I wanted, with whoever came to my head first. And that’s all it was for me, just sex, but I’m not sure if the women who came in and out of the glass house thought the same. They’d try to get close, try to stay in my house longer and even leave their stuff on purpose.

“Esther would find their stuff and put it in a box she kept in the storeroom. Do you remember Esther? Did you fire her, Naledi? Because I bumped into her at the door one afternoon, leaving and looking angry. And

then I never saw her again. I only found out a year later when the woman at finance came to my office for my signature to approve her raise that I was still paying her. I paid her for a year, for nothing. I'm sure she already had another job.

“I don't think she liked you at all, in fact, all the women who came to my house. I think it's because she knew Oleta, and she, Esther, was the one who took care of me when I couldn't even get out of bed after her death. She was actually a Sbopho Logistics employee; I don't know where they found her, but they stationed her at my house, to come three times a week.

“On those days, after Oleta, she moved in. She probably thought I'd kill myself if she left me alone. It's not that my family had abandoned me, it's that we were mourning Mvelo too, so none of us really knew how to help each other heal. She'd cook horrible food and force me to eat. When she wasn't doing that, she had the TV volume on high so I would get angry and get out of bed. And I did get angry, a lot. I don't know how many times I screamed at her to leave me alone or get out of my house. She never left and stayed put until I started agreeing to go out with my brothers. She told them to bring the kids often, and they did. I think that's when I started feeling a little bit better.

“I think she didn't like you because she thought you were going to break my heart. No, in fact, she was right to think that; you had already broken my heart. You left me hanging after promising to have dinner with me, and when I followed you, I found you with a man and you were wearing skimpy pyjamas. I will never forget how I felt that morning. I was a mess when I arrived back home, and Esther was there. I told her everything. She told me to block your number, even called you a gold-digger. She made me a sandwich and we went to fix our garden. When you wake up, we must go find her. I can't believe she left and I never even bothered to follow up. We are going to get her back; we have five kids now...”

We really do have five children. Five! We planned the last pregnancy. In fact, I held her in my arms and whispered in her ear.

I said, “Baby please give me another; I swear it’s the last.” And of course, she went crazy, asked me if I know anything about labour pains and throwing up every day and heartburn and, and, and...

She left me standing there, and it didn’t help that Sbopho had earlier that morning soaked her five wigs in the bathtub, adding some bubble bath for some pampering. I turned around to see Mathongo eating soil from the pot plant. I still wanted another baby though; we had two and we had managed to keep them alive. That made us good parents in my books.

She never said yes but ngiwuZulu mina, angichami amanzi. I knew she was pregnant before she did. Her skin gets softer and her lips plumper – that’s always the sign. We knew it was twins at four months, and we were scared because of what had happened before. But everything was going well this time. We were going to get two, but we were blessed with a third one. We have only two cribs; we need to buy another...

“No, no, no, Naledi! Wake up mfethu, please! You can’t do this! We should be home, at our house that you love so much. We should be with our children, baby, not this! Please don’t do this to me! Our kids are scattered all over, I don’t get to see them every day. Just wake the fuck up! We need you!”

“Mr Zulu? Is everything okay?”

Eyi, shit...

“Everything is fine, nurse.”

“I heard you shouting.”

“I wasn’t shouting.”

“But—”

“I wasn’t shouting, sisi! Close the door!”

She’s gone.

“I’m sorry, baby. I didn’t mean to shout at you. But I do need you to wake up, this thing has caused ... This thing – you being here – is tearing all of us apart. It’s tearing our family apart – me and you. I know I’m not the perfect husband, Naledi, but you know I try, and you know I love you. Only you, every single part of you, Naledi. You won’t leave me; I know you

will not do that because you love me. Do you know how that feels? To know for sure, to be absolutely certain that a person loves you with every bone in their body. No doubt, no fear... just absolute certainty. You've given me that, Naledi. I never knew it was a real thing until you came. So you can't leave me now.

"I know all of this is my fault; I should never have made you go anywhere at nine months pregnant, but I didn't have a choice, mkami. We were facing death, and I wasn't going to risk your life like that. I thought you'd be safer in Ladybrand, with everyone. Hlomu, Zandile and Xolie once delivered a baby in a prison cell. MaMtshali was also there. She's an old woman, she would have known exactly what to do. I'm sorry about how this turned out. I'm also sorry about your—"

I can't tell her about that; what if she can hear me? Dr Masetla said it's possible for people in a coma to hear when you talk to them, but it's something you can find out only after they wake up and tell you. I do wish she can hear me because when she wakes up, I want her to be up to date with everything. Dr Masetla says I will have to give her some time, that nobody wakes up from a coma and immediately starts functioning properly.

He doesn't work here but we had to bring him in after those idiots started telling me I had to let her go and switch off the machines. Switch off the machines on my wife? They can't even tell me what's wrong with her except that she should have gone to a hospital immediately after giving birth. I told them never to come near her again.

"Mpande wants to go pay lobola for Thando in Mpumalanga because that's where her father is from. It's a bit complicated because she doesn't know that father or his family very well. Kodwa ke, her parents had been married before her mother left with her, so that's where lobola should be paid. It's not going to happen now though, not until you are back home and well,"

"They went there last week, Mpande and Ntsika because they wanted to talk to them about paying damages first. They sent them back and said they should have sent family elders. We don't have Ngcobo and Mzimela

anymore. Gumbi is so old now I don't think he can travel through provinces to deal with our family issues. Basically, we are the elders now and you know what the proof of that is? It's the way our boys have been behaving. They think they can solve problems now, and the mess they created, baby! The mess! They aren't professional criminals so everything they did was clumsy and stupid. We had to clean up after them.

"We are yet to sit down and admit that their stupidity was what saved us. Without Mahlubi's daughter, we would have ended up in a full-blown war with the Bhunganes. He'd never have come to us if the boys hadn't kidnapped his daughter. We have all acknowledged that, but we've also realised that we made them like this. Lwandle has never gotten over Mvelo's death; he carries so much anger with him and will do anything to anyone who messes with this family. On top of that, they blame themselves for Mqoqi's death. Ntsika is...*sigh*...he is Sbopho and Nomafu's son. No amount of education and isolation from us could erase that."

"Bafo."

"Sure, they let you in?"

"I had to negotiate. Nayi igawulo, bamba la."

I can't remember the last time I felt hungry; I eat because I can't starve myself to death too.

"Lutho?" he asks, looking at Naledi's still body.

"Kusafana mfethu," I say. The past two months have felt like two years.

"Asikhulume ngaphandle," he says.

It must be something serious. I kiss Naledi on the cheek and tell her I'll be back just now.

There are no balconies on these top floors, so we have to go outside and I'm surprised that it's raining. Nqoba greets everyone – it's his thing. These security guards are his friends now; he calls them by their clan names. He runs to the car and comes back with a jacket for me. It's a Sundowns jacket. I've always told him that if you are going to support a soccer team, it should either be Pirates or Chiefs, not those overpaid skhothanes who eat sushi and wear skinny jeans.

“Sure, bafo. I didn’t know you were freezing out here.”

He lights a cigarette.

Nicotine addiction in my family is something that is as normal as waking up to go to work. It started when we were teenagers raising ourselves. Nobody was there to tell us: you can’t smoke... you’re too young to be sneaking girls in... you should be at school... stealing will land you in jail.

“Your people in the North West are all over the news, ndoda. Your father-in-law fucked shit up, and you know that is not surprising,” he says.

I’m not getting involved, not this time. Since I met Naledi, I’ve been cleaning up her old man’s shit but not this time.

“He left a document with a lawyer, naming Lesedi as his successor. AmaTswana awayizwa leyo, mfethu; they are going to court. It’s a circus I tell you.”

I’m not surprised. Naledi once told me he wanted her to be his successor. That old man was always a strange character.

“But that’s not what I came to tell you, bafo. I know you are dealing with a lot here, but we are struggling with the issue of the boys. The Mzizi and Ndoni thing is sorted; no problem. The police were told what they were told. But these boys kidnapped a child from a school, there are videos now. The police picked them up this morning – all three of them. They think they can handle this themselves. Their story is that the girl’s family was being butchered and they took her to protect her. They claim, to the police of course, that they got the instruction from MaMtshali.”

“MaMtshali?”

“Yes, MaMtshali and she is in on it. She’s told the police that when she heard the Bhungane homestead had been attacked, she called the boys and told them to go and get the girls from the school before whoever was trying to wipe out their family could get to them. She’s here, in Gauteng, to corroborate their story?”

“MaMtshali, bafo?”

“Yes. Gugu told me she was the one teaching them how to cock and fire an R-5 there in the farmhouse. Hlangu can’t stop raving about her; he keeps saying ‘ugogo iskhokho mfana; nawe mama you are not bad like Mami and Mamiza.’”

I laugh. This is the first time I’ve laughed a real laugh in a long time. If you could hear the things they were planning to do there in Ladybrand man, you’d laugh. Peter left them with a bag full of weapons, and they actually thought they could have a gun battle with the Bhunganes. They almost shot us all dead when we arrived.

“How is Peter?”

“He’s fine. Ugcabile manje but isosha leliya.”

I laugh because I thought our kids were bad, but those Bhungane kids are definitely not right in their heads. At what point did they decide that their form of torture would be putting African tribal marks on a white man’s face? Those five days were the worst.

“How is Mvula?”

“He’s fine. You don’t have to worry about the babies, man. Not as long as we are alive, you know that?”

“I know.”

“He has a tooth now. Hlangu is shocked. He’s been Googling and he says babies don’t get teeth at two months old. He even asked his teacher if that was possible. But I’m sure his teachers know him by now; there’s always something with him.”

I’m glad Nqoba is here. I miss home; I miss my comfortable life. I miss my wife.

“How are Hlomu and Mqhele? I haven’t seen Mqhele in three days.” They’ve been in the North West for the burial.

He takes a deep sigh.

“Mahlubi said something to him in that room. I don’t know what it was, and he won’t tell me. But I know it was about Hlomu. He was at my house last night and he asked me a strange question. He asked if I was ever in a

situation where I had to choose between my brother and my wife, who would I choose.”

“What’s going on with those two, Nqoba?”

What the fuck was Mqhele talking about? We all know Mqhele would choose Hlomu over all of us. I’d definitely choose Naledi over all of them and they’d understand.

“I don’t know, but Mahlubi said something and it freaked him out. You know how he is, Qhawe; he can’t just be left alone to deal with it. Plus, usesigangeni umfwethu these days. Remember what he did to Mabonga?”

Eyi, not that.

“We found Mahlubi like that.”

Nkosana and I left the Muldersdrift house the moment Gaba called to say our wives were with him. Mqhele was still busy with Mahlubi upstairs; we knew he was going to kill him. And he wasn’t going to make it quick, but this is the first time I hear he went that far.

Mahlubi wasn’t buried in the yard. I thought that was the plan, but I later found out he’s dead but not dead – a man who needed to escape arrest was given his identity, and he got on a plane to some exotic island. So as far as records show, Mahlubi is still alive. Although Mpande and Sambulo melted his remains somewhere at Crown Mines.

The Bhunganés were the last problem we had to deal with. In fact, they had been the main problem since we were amateurs and thought we could kill their brother and still live happily ever after. All of it, every crazy thing that we have done all these years to protect our family, had been out of fear of them coming back. We are done with them now, and when Naledi wakes up, she will never have men with guns following her everywhere. She’ll be driving herself wherever she wants to go. I won’t be tracking her car or her phone. I want a normal life for her, the one she had before she was loved by me out of all the men in the world.

“And the boys?”

“We’ll fetch them in the morning. One night in a prison cell won’t kill them; we’ve all been there. I spoke to Sibeko, he’s still useful even in

retirement.”

“You’re not still fucking his wife, Nqoba, are you?”

He laughs.

“What was he thinking marrying a woman half his age?”

“Bafu!”

“I’m committed to my wife. No, I’m not fucking Sibeko’s wife anymore. That was a long time ago, man; I didn’t have better things to do.”

He’s not lying.

“Keep an eye on Mqhele,” I say.

I have to go back inside; I don’t want Naledi opening her eyes and not seeing me there.

“That’s your job, mfethu. You keep an eye on him and he keeps an eye on you. I don’t know how to handle him,” he says.

Nobody knows how to handle Mqhele, except for me, and that’s because he knows how to handle me.

“He seemed fine when he came here...”

“Yes, he seemed fine because he had to be fine, for you.”

I understand what Nqoba is saying. When Mqhele gouges out your eyes after he kills you, there’s nothing fine about him.

“MaMontsho will come back to us; you don’t have to worry. I have an early morning. Hlomu said I must bring the boys straight to her after I fetch them,” he says, patting my shoulder.

16

Three bowls of porridge are lined on the kitchen counter. Just like I used to do in Naturena when they were just kids, except there were three then.

Mvelo would be a grown man now, and I wonder if he'd be as insane as the rest of them. When I think about him, which is a lot lately, I picture him as the polite, harmless one whose passion is to save the world. Maybe a doctor who joins Doctors Without Borders and sends us pictures of himself vaccinating barefoot malnourished children in some war-torn country. But who am I kidding? There's blood, and then there's Sbopho's bloodline. You think you can clean and fix that shit? Nope! Not even me, I have since learned. And here they are...

“Porridge?”

“Did they give you poached eggs and mushrooms in jail? Hhe, Lwandle?”

He scratches his forehead and grabs a spoon.

“Thank you, Mami.”

Thank you wok'nuka!

“Where are your brothers?”

“Sleeping.”

Nobody is gonna be sleeping in my house, especially if they have decided they are going to be low life petrol-bomb-throwing-murderers with private school education and degrees hanging on my walls.

I heard them when they came in, it must have been around 5 am because Nyanda had just woken up. I begged Nqoba to let them stay locked up for at least a few days, but he said a lot can happen to a person in jail in just one night. He said he had sorted things out and it was all good. Like maybe they had been arrested for driving without a license or drunk brawling in a bar, not actually kidnapping a child. I cringe at the other things they did in just five days.

“Mami?”

“Voestsek!” I say as I pull the curtains wide open. “This is not a hotel, get up! Now!”

I don't even know where they have been staying, but I know Nkosana asked them politely to avoid bumping into him anywhere in this world. He also fired them from Sbopho Logistics, although he doesn't even work there anymore. In Mqoqi's house, Mqhele changed the locks. But they showed up in the North West for a funeral that none of us saw. They looked prim and proper, suits and all like they were good and comfortable wherever they stay. Gaba says they stole his money and car, so I know they had no option of running to their favourite uncle.

I look at the both of them dragging their feet to the kitchen and I wonder how with everything life has afforded them, they turned out exactly like their fathers. They sit down and eat the porridge; they deserve no bacon and eggs.

“So, how was prison?” I ask. Sbani looks up at me.

“The cell was dark and cold but at least we got pizza for dinner.”

I could throw this whole pot of porridge at him right now! What the heck?

“Do you boys even understand what you did?”

“We did what needed to be done,” Lwandle mutters. I throw a spoon at him; he ducks.

“Where are you staying?”

They don't answer me.

I'd throw everything I can find at them if Niya didn't just run in here. They leave the porridge and focus on her; she hasn't seen them in a while. The twins walk in looking like the ugly adolescents that they are. I have never understood why boys are always so ugly at 14.

"Ntsika, I need you to drive me to Dischem."

I don't need to go to Dischem, but when I get there, I know I'll find many things I need but won't be using.

I know he doesn't want to, but, in what universe would he say no to me?

He knows I'm angry and disappointed in him, but we both know this is different. This is not something I'd chastise him for; this is where we have a talk.

"Langa, look after the baby; his bottles are here."

He's good with him, patient and nurturing. I can't say the same about these other rascals. Niya says the baby is annoying – her own brother.

There's a Dischem 5 km away from my house, but we're already on the highway, and he is driving. He knew when I asked for this drive that I needed to talk to him; I feel like he needs to talk to me too.

"What do you need to buy at Dischem?"

Urgh! Child, no! The point is what we need to get to.

"Ntsika, I want you to be honest with me. Why did you kill Ndoni?"

"I already explained, she was—"

"Don't lie to me, Ntsika! I'm the last person you want to lie to."

Silence.

From the first moment I heard the story, I knew it didn't add up. I have now accepted that Ntsika is Ntsika Zulu – British accent and all – and now I am ready to hear the extent of my failure in trying to turn him into something he is not.

"We couldn't let her live after killing her father. What do you think was going to happen after that, Mami? And besides, Thando was going to leave, with the kids, if Mpande chose Ndoni over her, or if he decided he wanted both of them."

Sigh.

“That would never happen, those kids are never going anywhere?”

We are approaching Pretoria now, even I have forgotten about Dischem.

“You don’t know Thando, Mami,” he says.

So, they’re still talking?

“Did I not tell you to stay away from her, Ntsika?”

“She’s here, what am I supposed to do? Walk out when she walks in?”

Jizas! What did I ever do to deserve this? Ntsika getting close to this girl is a disaster waiting to happen. No, actually, I’m starting to wonder if it’s not Thando who is trying to create problems. It could be that her heart wants Ntsika, not Mpande, and maybe that was always the case.

“You know what this would do to the family, Ntsika. Stay away from her. You’ve already killed Ndoni. What do you think Mpande will do when he finds out you slept with his girlfriend too?”

“I had to protect my children, Mami.”

No! No! No! Wait...

“I don’t want Thando, what happened between us was a mistake, but I can’t act like those are not my children. How do I do that?”

“Those are not your children, Ntsika!”

“They are mine. That’s why I came back.”

But... he came back a long time ago.

“You knew? You knew she had kids all along? And you didn’t say anything? Ntsika!”

“I wasn’t going to say anything, but Bayede got sick and I had to fetch them and bring them home because sending money wasn’t enough anymore.”

It gets worse!

“How long? How long have you been supporting them?”

“Since she told me about them; they had just been born.”

I know this is not how I should be thinking but killing Thando instead would have made more sense. What I have figured out is that she is a cunning little bitch, and she cannot be trusted.

“So, what’s your plan, Ntsika? And please do not involve me going forward. I’m tired of cleaning up your mess.”

He never should have told me this.

“I don’t need to have a plan. The children are ours, that’s how it is in this family. I have access to them just like all the kids in this family, so I’m not worried.”

I’m not even sure if I should tell Zandile about this.

“We take this to the grave with us; do you understand me? Nobody must ever know.”

I don’t trust this silence that I am getting from him.

“No word! And stop talking to Thando!”

He looks at me briefly and I see it in his eyes. He is attached to this woman and I don’t think there is anything I can do about it. I need to speak to Zandile soon because family secrets come out, they always do, especially if those secrets are “a human”.

You can’t hide a human; my father tried to. Gaba and Mqhele thought it was a smart idea to continue where he left off long after he died. I knew my mother had endured many things in her marriage, but the extent of it had not completely dawned on me until that day Mqhele and Gaba walked in with a light-skinned, plump-cheeked girl who looked exactly like me. The girl was 17-years-old and wide-eyed. I knew there and then that this girl was either going to ruin my life or turn the Dladla family upside down. This was soon after we buried the bones before Mqoqi disappeared to some dingy town with a woman he should have stayed away from. Her name is Nonjiko and that is a Dladla clan name – my clan name.

“Gaba?” I asked. I focused on him. I was going to deal with Mqhele later because I know his lying skills are unmatched.

He looked at Mqhele. I had a feeling they had a plan, but Mqhele had derailed from it.

“Usaba umfazi wakho, ndoda? Hlomu, this girl is your sister,” Gaba said.

It was impossible. The girl was a teenager!

I looked at Mqhele because with all his nonsense, he's still the one I trust to save me from anything. But he was not about to save me; that's why he was fidgeting and looking at everything but me.

"Bab'omncane died when she was still a baby," Gaba said. He's always been the one to just say things with a straight face.

At that time, it seemed impossible. I still believed my father would never have done that to my mother. He loved her and most of all, he feared her. I had never even heard him raising his voice or saying something mean to her. Hell, except for my mother's sharp look and tongue, I had never in my life seen them argue or disagree.

"Do you remember Florence?" Gaba asked.

How could I forget Florence? She was Lethu's nanny for years. We all loved her; she was almost like family. And I remember how hurt we were when Mah fired her. Mah was angry, but we thought it was funny and that she was being petty. Some nannies beat your children. All Florence did was wear Mah's clothes when she was at work, including her nurse uniform, epaulettes and all. Mah came home early one day to find Florence wearing her full uniform, pantyhose and perfume even. And that was the end of Florence. Baba didn't even get involved, he just pulled the crying Lethu off Florence's arms and went back to the house. I told Mqhele this story once, years ago, and he laughed his lungs out.

But he was not laughing then. He was just sitting there saying nothing while Gaba did all the talking.

"What does Florence have to do with this, Gaba?" I asked.

"Florence is the girl's mother. She died a long time ago and the girl's grandmother is dead now, so she has nobody, except us. Mah doesn't know."

I wished he wasn't so straightforward so that he'd at least give me time to process things before dropping bomb after bomb.

"You know how Mah can be, that's why I didn't take the girl home."

He's always called my mother Mah and not Mamncane because she's the only mother he's ever known.

I looked out of the window at the girl sitting on the porch furniture with all my kids standing in front of her. The boys with their hands knotted behind their backs and Niya talking with her arms going up and down. I knew they were asking her endless questions; I had my own questions. I went with them when we all drove in one car to KwaMashu and perhaps what happened on that day is the reason my mother has been sitting in her house minding her own business.

I started with, “Do you remember Florence?” And she got right into it.

“Hlomu, your father had the first child outside of our marriage before you and Langa could go to the toilet on your own. I left him; took the two of you. I strapped you on my back and Langa pressed to my chest and left this house.”

Jizas! She always knew about that brother?

“But I came back. He begged and he wept, on his knees, and you know what? I never believed that child was a mistake, and when he was begging me to come back, I knew he was begging for you, not me. He was begging for that thing, the thing that made him a man. That thing that every boy grows up being told is what defines a man.”

I hated seeing her upset like that. I had come to tell her what I needed to tell her because she was going to find out one way or another.

“Boys are raised to believe that they can never be ‘men’ until they can point at something and say ‘that’s mine’ – a house with a wife and children. That is supposed to define them, satisfy society and make their families proud. Your father cried and got on his knees when I tried to take that away from him—”

“But baba loved you—”

“Of course, he loved me, Mahlomu. Men don’t marry a woman they don’t love. But still, love can never make a person whole. There’s always something missing in every one of us. Nobody is ever complete and satisfied, that’s the problem. For us women, marriage is a confirmation of our worth, that there’s a man out there who thought we were better than all

the other women. But for men, it means respect. Honestly, it's more of an achievement for them than it is for us. Your father was—”

I didn't want her to keep talking and it wasn't because I didn't believe her, it was because I didn't want her to take my father away from me.

“I told your father that I could take anything, anything but Florence's child, never!”

She's always known?

“He died knowing that very well. So whatever you came here for, I'm not interested,” she said.

I told Langa everything. I asked him to come home and do this with me, but he said he couldn't; he had things to do. I didn't bother with Lethu.

“Mahlomu, don't bring that child to my house. I understand she is your blood, but she isn't mine. I'm not her mother; I'm not related to her.”

Gaba took Noni to Nquthu, the village where my father was born. Gaba judged me. He said I had taken every motherless Zulu child in, but I couldn't take my own blood in. She's his blood too; why didn't he take her? And besides, my mother had already told me everything about who my father was in their bedroom. I do not want to live with the evidence in human form. I do not want to love and nurture another source of my mother's pain. I made that choice. Noni is a good child, and maybe one day I will forgive my father and my heart will warm up to her. She's just an innocent child, after all, as my aunt always says. What I don't understand is why she hasn't taken her in, why everybody expects me to be the one always compromising. I'm not doing that, not anymore.

I told them the same thing when they came to my house to talk bullshit when I still wouldn't let Mqhele come home. They may think it was their doing that made me finally open the door to him, but no, it was my decision. A decision I took after realising that Mqoqi initially got himself entangled with Lale because he wanted to save me from his brother. To save us, because had he not, the heartache and suffering he endured watching us love each other would not have been worth it if we broke up.

I didn't know anything about that meeting; it was an ambush really and it was the last time I saw Ngcobo alive. I'm not saying I'm not sad that he died a brutal death, I'm saying being the man he was, I'm sure I'm not the only one who thought about pushing a knife through his heart a few times. I came home and found him in my house with his two wives. Bab'Gumbi looked like he was living out his last days, his wife, my aunt, my uncle and MaMnguni sitting with them in the lounge like it wasn't her workplace.

Nkosana wasn't there. Ngcobo said they asked him to come, but he didn't and he didn't say why. I know why; Nkosana was tired. He is tired of all of us.

"The least you can do, makoti is to talk to your husband. I don't know you to have a heart like this..."

I know MaMtshali was being like that because Ngcobo was there. She forgot I know her very well. MaMtshali has never been the submissive wife everybody thinks she is. If I let Mqhele back home, I would never have been able to get him out again; that was my stance at that time. He knew what he did.

"Not my child," my uncle said. He'd been saying those same words since I was made to sit down between my aunt and MaMtshali. I would have asked MaMnguni why she opened for them without calling me first, but I figured the moment I saw her sitting next to my aunt that she had positioned herself as part of the 'intervention delegation'. And of course, my uncle was drunk. The only alcohol available in the house was my wine. He'd been drinking it because my aunt, the last time she was here, drank all of Mqhele's beer. The whisky: I poured it all down the toilet because it reminded me of him.

"Dladla, awuthule! Please stop talking," Ngcobo said. He'd always looked down on my uncle and I hated it.

"Who are you, Ngcobo? In this family, where do you come in? Who are you related to?" my uncle said. My aunt slapped his arm to shut him up.

They still hadn't explained to me why they were here, but I knew it was an 'intervention'; that's why the lobola negotiators were here. Gumbi hadn't

spoken much, probably because my aunt had already announced that Mqhele is a beater. But what they didn't know was... that was not why I didn't want him anymore.

"He put his hands on my child? My brother's child..." my uncle said. My aunt's hand was on his arm again, pinching him this time.

I sat there looking at all of them and wondering why they thought coming here would make any difference. I had heard about families and abakhongi coming together to hold family meetings when marriages fall apart – it happened with Xolie, but this was the first time it was happening with me. And it was all because I never told my family the things that were happening in this house.

"Mahlomu mntanami, this is not how you do things. You sit down and talk about things. You left your home with a kist, wathelwa ngenyongo. This is where you belong now; you must fix your—"

Was I at my mother's house in KwaMashu? No. I was in my house, so what the heck was MaMtshali talking about?

"I'm in my house, MaMtshali. This is my house." I had decided I'd keep the surname, the children and the life. I came into this family with nothing but my mind and my love. They turned me into what I have become, and I was damn right keeping it all because no matter how hard I try, I can never be Mahlomu Dladla again. They smeared me with gall, made me one of them.

"Your house? IkwaZulu lay'khaya. It doesn't matter if you lay every single brick with your own hands, it will never be your house," Ngcobo said. What that bitch-ass-old-fuck-taxi-warlord-stupid-grey-beard-polygamist-motherfucker didn't know is that a pile of bricks is just a house, not a home. *I am home!*

"Nomandla, pack your bags and let's go home," my uncle said. The name Nomandla has no significance to me anymore. Hearing someone call me that makes me feel like a clueless little girl my father treated me as from the day I was born until the day he died. I trusted my father with my life; he

would never hurt me, that I know. But he hurt everyone around me, except me. What kind of narcissistic bullshit is that?

“Hlomu, the children miss their father,” MaMnguni said. The way I was planning to fire her after that! MaMnguni has always had a soft spot for Mqhele.

“Honestly, Hlomu, how do you chase a man out of his own home? Leave him to wander around; he will go looking for comfort and he will find it in another woman’s chest. What will you do when that happens?” MaMbizana said.

I was sure that woman would send him back to me via post, but we weren’t there. We were at a place where I wanted to slap the shit out of MaMbizana for saying such things when I knew how much she resents Ngcobo and his long train of wives.

“Why are you here?” I asked. It wasn’t exactly a respectful question to ask your family members and your lobola negotiators when they are in your house, but... why were they here?

Gumbi’s wife cleared her throat. She has never been much of a talker, just one of those women whose eyes are always looking down at the floor. But she ensured her children were educated. Yes, the successful daughters who’d die before they let a man do the things Mqhele has done to me, to them. It was this family’s money that afforded them success, the money I made sure was given to them.

“MaDladla.” She’s the only person who calls me that; I don’t know why she calls me that. That’s what everyone calls my aunt. “Zulu came to us. He has his faults, just like any man alive and dead. That is why we are here,” she said and stopped there.

The men in the room may not have understood what she meant, but I did. Because there is always a woman code and it is only clear to you if it is delivered by women who know what you are going through and where you are. What she was telling me was that she was here because she had to be here. I know she sees me as one of her daughters, and she will never tell me to do what she wouldn’t tell her daughters to do.

I looked at her, her hands knotted on top of her old age stomach; her ankles crossed and her eyes on my face. She was the one who taught me how to sift utshwala the first time Qhawe did one of his goat things. She was also the one who tied isidwaba around my waist on the morning of my traditional wedding and whispered in my ear that I should not keep it in the kist. My mother was there too; she heard her. I know that because they exchanged looks. Her words meant nothing to me then; I was marrying the love of my life and nothing was ever going to separate us. I knew what the kist represented, and I was going to keep my isidwaba in it because I was going to leave this family in a coffin after dying of old age – still happy, still loved and having done what I was meant to do. But come to think of it, no woman who has ever been smeared with gall in this family leaves in a coffin, happy and content. We burn to death – Mthaniya did; Nomafu did.

“Nomandla, this man didn’t pick you up from the streets. I told Mbambeni; I told him not to allow it. You were too young and these men were not in your league. You, my daughter, were supposed to be a big thing, not raising three children at 23. But nobody listens to me in this family,” my uncle said before he burped and lay back on the couch. He closed his eyes and we all knew he was out.

I wished my kids were there to disrupt this whole thing, but Qhawe had come early in the morning and took them all.

“Mqhele can stay where he is; I don’t want him.” I didn’t understand why nobody wanted to believe this.

“What?”

“I said I don’t want him, Ngcobo!” I was done calling him ‘baba’. Not that I’d ever had any respect or fondness for him, but I called him baba because everyone else did.

“I warned these boys about you; I warned them very early,” he said, stood up and left the room. He was probably going to call one of them, but I knew they weren’t going to come here.

My uncle was snoring softly; my aunt was seated with her legs crossed and those old rural wives were all looking at me. I was avoiding looking at

Bab’Gumbi. He was once just a security guard at my flat who was fond of me, and then he became the man who negotiated the union that led me to that moment. He became family and benefitted a lot from that. And now we were here. MaMnguni shuffled her feet to the kitchen and came back with a tray of teacups and scones; I wondered where the scones came from.

“I think we must give her time,” Gumbi spoke; I still didn’t look at him.

“It’s been a long time; nobody should stay angry for such a long time. Talk to your husband, Hlomu. Do you know what this is doing to your children?” I couldn’t for the life of me!

“MaMnguni! Don’t bring my children into this!” This is what happens when you treat the help like family.

I was angry. They could see themselves out. I decided I was gonna throw our bed away and get a new one – change the paint and curtains; remove wedding pictures from the walls and paint that white room where he played his guitar black. He had left the guitar behind; my first thought was to burn it.

I heard cars driving off. It was Ngcobo’s old Mercedes and I knew he was leaving with the people he came with: his wives, Gumbi and his wife. I heard a soft knock on my bedroom door and I knew it was one of the Dladla insolents – either my aunt or my uncle.

It was my uncle. I let him in; he reeked of fermented grapes, but he’s still my uncle and with all his faults, I love him. He looks like me and Gaba and Langa and Nonjiko. And my father.

I don’t remember much about how he was when I was a kid, but I do remember that everyone liked him more than they liked my father and that with all his shit, everyone in my family treats him as important. It’s funny how no matter how drunk he is, he never staggers. His eyes will be groggy, but he will still walk straight.

I let him sit on the bed next to me and I looked at his hands placed on his lap. They looked exactly like Langa’s hands, only his had been wrinkled by age. His skin too was once light like mine, but now it was somewhere between red and yellow. We all know what alcohol does to light skin. We

had never done that – me and him sitting together having a conversation. Even after my father died, I never ever saw him as the father figure I was now left with. To me, my uncle has always been trouble, the relative you have to explain to strangers and cross your fingers he doesn't embarrass you. Langa has always been closer to him; he says his heart is pure, that he is who he appears to be. Gaba holds some resentment towards him, but he still respects and loves him. Lethu, she doesn't know the sober him.

“I would have come to fetch you. I would have come here, to this house and I would have shown him who I am,” he said.

I would have laughed, just like I always laugh at things my uncle says when I'm not completely furious at him for the other things he says. I swear I'd have laughed if his words weren't a further realisation that my family doesn't know who I became six months after I left home for Joburg.

“It was only twice, babomncane; seven years apart. We worked things out and moved on.”

“You should have told me, Mahlomu.” He was calling me by my real name? I guess he wasn't talking to the little girl anymore.

“I don't do that, baba; I don't run back home when things get tough.”

“Where do you run to?”

“I don't run.” He took a deep sigh and popped his knuckle; Mqoqi flashed through my mind.

“I told your father not to let you get married that young,” he said. I'm sure he did, but my father wasn't going to listen to a drunkard because my uncle was a little brother to him who should have done better.

My father – and I learned this long after he died – never went to school to become a court interpreter. He worked there, at that Durban high court from when he was 19, frying eggs and straining rice at the canteen. He was still frying eggs when he met my mother and got her pregnant and married her. His elevation from the kitchen stoves was by chance, and my aunt told me this with a bottle of Savanna in her hand.

“An interpreter, who was your father's friend, got so drunk they had to hide him in the kitchen. The judge was new, so he didn't know his face.

Your father wasn't going to let him lose his job, so he went to court and claimed to be his stand-in. He did such a great job that the judge asked to keep him throughout the trial." I thought that was noble of my father, but I don't know now. "He took us through school, Hlomu – me and Gaba's father. He had high hopes for us, and we disappointed him," she said.

I had never thought my aunt regretted anything about her life. She lived. She lived more than my mother; more than me. The thing about MaDladla is that she has always known who she is, and I have always loved her for that. It's my uncle whose story I didn't know.

"I don't regret getting married, babomncane. I would have still married Mqhele even if you all refused. I don't regret him, our kids, this family... I just need everyone to understand that this marriage didn't work out. He did things; I did things. We both contributed to where we are now and we can't go back." I wished he'd get me.

"Gaba's mother ran back home." We don't talk about Gaba's mother. I don't remember her. I don't even know her name.

"I couldn't do that, baba; I couldn't leave them." Not that I had ever wanted to leave until that time.

"I see, and *they* let it happen twice? Where are they now?" he asked. I don't think he understood. My issues with Mqhele are a problem, yes, but the problems of this family are far deeper and darker. "You can't love a man's troubles away, Mahlomu. Gaba's mother tried to love my troubles away, but she never asked me why I am the way I am. And when she failed, she ran."

I know why Mqhele is the way he is, but still, I couldn't love his troubles away. I still tried, though.

"Why are you the way you are, baba?" I asked. He popped his knuckles and again the memory of Mqoqi flashed in my mind. He wasn't a consistent knuckle-popper; I think I saw him doing it five or six times since I had known him, but it was always during bad situations.

He looked like he was thinking hard, and I waited; I had all the time. I thought maybe I'd understand myself better if I knew what turned him into

this. But he was already getting up because we could both hear my aunt raising hell somewhere in the house. I followed him out of my bedroom and hoped there would be a moment like this one again in our lifetime – one where we will sit side by side and he'll be drunk or sober enough to tell me who he is.

“Ntongolozzi, who are you screaming at?” he asked. Ntongolozzi is her name, but nobody calls her that. She was pacing up and down the passage on her phone, cursing and shouting.

“Hlomu, tell that driver to leave; we are sleeping here! Tomorrow I will pay all of them a visit,” she said after hanging up. She was going to do no such thing.

The driver had been sitting outside in the car since they arrived. I knew MaMnguni gave him food earlier, but I didn't know what I was supposed to do with him now that he wasn't driving back to Durban the same night as planned.

“Ntuthuko, they are going to sleep here tonight. Can you come back tomorrow morning?” He nodded and left. I went down to the wine cellar and came back with three bottles of wine. Because we are the Dladla's, we drink our troubles away.

“If your father knew that man beat you, he would have come to fetch you. If I knew, I would have killed him,” my uncle said. I looked at my aunt, expecting her to say something, but she didn't. Instead, she filled up her glass of wine and asked what we were going to eat for supper. MaMnguni had long left to go to her outside flat.

“I would have killed him; I swear I would have,” my uncle said.

“You have to move on, Mzonjani. What happened, happened a long time ago; you couldn't save me, and I have never blamed you for that,” my aunt said. I didn't know what they were on about.

“You should have told me, Ntongo.”

“I was a child; he was the reverend. You put him in a wheel-chair, that was enough, Mzonjani.” I was completely lost.

“That was not enough; nothing will ever be enough. Our mother hanged herself because of that,” he said and filled up his glass, all the way to the top.

“I should have watched over you, that was my duty.”

“Mzonjani! I’m not your duty; I never was your duty! You decided to be a drunkard, and then you lost everything for something that had nothing to do with you. You have a son, you have grandchildren, that is more than enough.” I would have asked, but I felt like they were having a conversation that they should have had a long time ago – only if I knew what it was about.

“You can never understand, Ntongo; you are a woman.”

“And what does that mean?”

“It means you don’t know how to handle a man’s struggles. You don’t know that we are also human; you want us to be who you want us to be. It’s all about you – you don’t want to acknowledge our traumas. You think everything we are, how we treat you, is about how we feel about you. Gaba’s mother left me, she never asked. She just left because she thought it was about her.”

I was shocked. Never in my life had I ever seen my uncle so serious.

“I’ve forgiven him. When will you?”

“It’s me I need to forgive.”

Okay, the tears from my uncle were not something I wanted to witness and...

“Why didn’t you tell me, Nomandla? I would have ended it.”

What I knew for sure – what I had figured out from that confusing conversation – was that my uncle will never forgive Mqhele. And it’s a problem because I have forgiven him.

They left my house the next morning with a box of wine and no mention or even a sign of remembrance of the previous day’s conversation.

My aunt came back, alone on the day Mqoqi died.

By the time Ntsika parks the car back at my house, with no Dischem items on us, I know I have more problems than Naledi being in a coma and

her baby waking me at 5 am every morning.

Ntsika is different, and I made him different. Unlike his brothers, he is his own person, and I'm afraid he believes in choosing himself. These boys must leave before Mqhele comes home from work, or they will leave this house in tears.

**Hlomu, where are you? Please come to my house,
kubi.**

An SMS from Zandile.

17

I haven't been here in a while.

To be honest, I thought they were going to sell this house judging by how they are so invested in those goats and cabbages down in Mbuba. But also, who is going to buy this house? For how much? I just think when he built it, Nkosana was maybe trying to fill some voids in his life because why on earth the fountain? A full gym and a backyard big enough to host a music festival. Pictures are still on the walls; pictures of all of us, including one of me and Mvelo when I was young and still had him to love with all my heart.

I don't see anyone when I walk in, not even after I shout Zandile's name twice. But there are cars outside, so I know they are here – all of them.

“Hi.”

“Hello.” She looks nervous.

“I'm Qhayiya. That baby is so cute.”

Qhayiya of where?

“They are outside,” she says, smiles nervously and walks on.

Okay.

Nyanda is taking one of his rare day naps and if he wasn't such a difficult baby, I'd place him in one bedroom and rely on the baby monitor to tell me when he's awake. But nope, he's not that peaceful. I have to have him here, near me, all the damn time. I'm not sure how things are going to

be when Naledi comes home, and she *will* come home – there’s no doubt about that; any doubt about that would kill us all.

Yesterday was my turn to make food for Qhawe. Mqhele took it to him at the hospital in the afternoon, and he only came back home after midnight. I don’t even ask anymore because I know he’s in a bad place. Qhawe’s pain is his pain. I just wish he’d talk to me about how he feels.

Zandile gives me that face that I know too well when I appear. Gugu and Xolie are sitting across MaMtshali. She’s the last person I expected to find here. I thought she’d be back in Ngudwini now that her mission to lie to the police is complete and was a success. Yes, she’s dressed in black from head to toe, but there’s none of that grieving widow mood thing about her.

“Makoti, I didn’t think you were coming.”

I’ve been married for two decades; when is she going to stop calling me makoti?

“Mah, I thought you went back home.”

Gugu chuckles; I’m confused.

“Pour me one of those things – the red one,” she says to Gugu.

Hhay’bo!

Xolie doesn’t hesitate; she fills up that glass with red wine all the way to the top.

I’m sitting down with the sleeping baby in my arms, waiting for someone to tell me why MaMtshali – a whole MaMtshali is being given alcohol in mourning clothes. She takes one sip and frowns. For a moment there I think she’s going to put the glass down and ask for tea instead, but no, she goes back to it; one long gulp this time.

“I don’t know how you all drink these things, it’s horrible,” she says but takes yet another gulp. “Why aren’t you putting that baby on a bed?” she asks me. I’m yet to be filled in on what is going on here.

“He’ll be up soon, so it would be pointless. He doesn’t sleep a lot,” I say.

I still feel like I’m the only one struggling here. Xolie leaves Nyezi with MaSbisi all the time; Gugu’s got some random nanny and I know she’s not

going through any raising an infant trouble, not now when she is pregnant and still has Hlangu to deal with. Me, on the other hand...

“Mah, I think what you are doing is wrong,” Zandile says.

“Never, Zandile! I know what Mah is going through. The time for reckoning is here,” Xolie says and laughs.

I think it’s time I asked.

“Hlomu, maybe you can talk some sense into her. Mah, please tell her...”

MaMtshali is halfway down the glass of wine and we all know each bottle comes with 14 percent alcohol. I’m worried.

“MaNgcobo.” Okay, she’s not talking to me, she’s talking to Zandile. “Do you remember that night you found me crying in the bedroom? When I was packing, to go back to Ngudwini for the wedding. Of course, you couldn’t come with us because you were hiding from the police.”

Zandile nods.

“Everyone thought I was fine because I was the one who went out and found Sbongile; I chose her. Can you believe that? I personally courted her for my husband. She was just some girl, dirt poor and always looking down like some mouse. At first, she resisted; she found it strange that I would be the one begging her to marry my husband. But I was tired mantombazane. I was tired of seeing the disappointment on Sgodi’s face every time I gave birth to a girl. He wanted a boy and I already had five girls. The one thing I wasn’t going to do was get pregnant again. I was tired. Isithembu was not his idea, it was mine because sometimes as a woman you have to compromise.”

I didn’t know that about MaMbizana, and right now I want to pour her another glass of wine because wow!

“Sbongile agreed eventually and a house was built for her in our yard. Sgodi didn’t really like her much, but he went to her three times a week because I insisted. I just needed her to give him a boy, and I knew that once that happened, he’d be done with her. But do you know what happened?”

Xolie fills up the glass with red wine again. I know it's a cheap one because we are at Zandile's house and she doesn't drink, so she can't tell the difference between luxury wine and the fermented grapes version of—

“Sbongile did get pregnant with two girls. I was annoyed with her because she had one job, just one job...”

“But Mah, the sex of a child depends on a man,” Gugu says.

“Yes, but do men know that? Can men accept that? I was hoping for a miracle and Sbongile was not it. She was more attached to me than she was to Sgodi; she still is. He never really loved her, you know; I think that most times he forgot about her. But I wasn't going to take her back where I found her now, was I?”

This is kind of disturbing to listen to. I mean, I've always known MaMtshali was not who she appears to be but what the fuck, chile? Oh no!

“Let me hold him,” Zandile says.

I pass him to her, although I know... He cries louder and I take him back, shove the feeding bottle in his mouth and wait for the Ngcobo chronicles to continue.

“Sgodi found the sons he always wanted in your husbands. He already had the Bhungane boys, though. After their father died, he took two of them to Joburg, Zwakele and Mahlubi. He was close to their father, you know; they had grown up together, herding cows together and chasing girls all over Ngudwini. He took them to Joburg with him, introduced them to the taxi business and all.” She stops and laughs.

The laugh is a bit unsettling, but maybe it's because she's drunk. A whole MaMtshali drunk.

“Do you know it was my money, *my* money that bought the first taxi? My father never liked Sgodi; he believed he was never going to be able to take care of me because he came from a poor family. So, when I got married, my father gave me 10 cows. Sgodi was not happy but there was nothing he could do about it. I sold the cows, all 10 of them and I gave the money to him to buy his first taxi. He was a smart man, I must give that to him, but he was also a dark-hearted man. That's why his rise to being a

wealthy man was so quick, especially after your husbands came in the picture.”

I’m not saying I’m uncomfortable with these “tales of the dark world”, but the least MaMtshali could do is tell us where she is going with this – not give us a reminder that we are, in so many ways, no different from her.

“He knew who their mother was and a bit about their father. Do you know how he met Nqoba?”

We couldn’t possibly...

“He was your first daughter’s boyfriend,” Gugu says.

We are all surprised.

“Yes, and when he found out, he gave him a beating he will never forget. Sgodi desperately wanted a son, but his daughters were the apple of his eye. He loved them more than he could love anything in this world. Nkosana came to apologise for Nqoba and that ended up with a job offer and a move to Joburg with him – that’s where the relationship between the Zulus and the Bhunganes started. At first, it was petty things, and then it was house robberies, and then cash heists. But you know that those things don’t always end well, so in the end, Sgodi had to choose a side, and he chose the Zulus; that’s why he’s dead now,” she says and sips the wine.

Of course, we all know this, but a drunk MaMtshali’s relaying it is fascinating.

“I hear you, Mah, but why on earth are you doing this to your husband’s other wives?” Zandile asks.

Doing what?

She laughs. There are laughs, and there is MaMtshali’s laugh.

“The time has come, mantombazane. Umfazi no mfazi akathwale umthwalo wakhe. I’m the one with the marriage certificate. Kuphethe mina manje. Sbongile will be fine; I’ll take care of her. The others, uphelile umbuso. Lo nombiliyane wase Spruitview and her son, ay’gubhe! I don’t even want to talk about that whore who thought she was better than all of us. You know, when Sgodi wanted to take a third wife, I refused. Sbongile didn’t care, but I did because I felt like he was taking advantage of me. That

it was no longer about having a boy anymore, it was about having a younger wife, a prettier wife.”

She’s still angry about that; her face says so.

“The girl had the nerve to call me Mah like we weren’t sharing a penis. Her whole intention was to get it through my head that I’m old goods, that Ngcobo preferred her because she made him feel young. She could make him do anything, buy her big cars and a big house in Joburg. I’m not going to lie; it almost destroyed this home. I almost packed and went back home. But heeee...” She laughs.

“A man is a man; you must never forget that mantombazane. A man will always be a man. She came here fuming to tell me that Sgodi was having an affair in Joburg, with a girl younger than my daughters.”

That laugh again.

“I could see she was relying on me to say no to it because I’m the only one Sgodi needed permission from to take another wife. I looked at her and thought... nazo! And then I called my husband and told him we still needed a boy in this family, so if he wanted a fourth wife I was okay with it. And so that fourth nombiliyane gave him a boy.”

What a scheming woman!

“But Mah, selling their houses and...?” Zandile says.

“It’s already been bought. She must pack and go to wherever she came from. When you were worried about your upcoming deaths there in that farmhouse, Sthembile was telling me all I needed to know.”

That Sthembile, where is she anyway?

“I’m not going back to Ngudwini. I have taxis all over Joburg; I need to make sure my money doesn’t go to the wrong hands.”

I’m shocked! Gugu thinks all of this is funny and Zandile looks worried. Xolie looks impressed.

MaMtshali says she needs the bathroom. She staggers a bit and I almost stand up to help her, but I remember the baby in my arms.

“You must learn how to use guns, mantombazane. We would have died at that place. A woman married to a taxi owner must know how to fire an

AK-47. Yimpi le; sishadele empini,” she says and staggers inside the house.

We all look at each other.

Zandile was right... kubi.

Zulu

Thando says I must stop coming here.

But she doesn't understand. Since she came back, I feel like she isn't the Thando I used to know all those years ago. But maybe it's because she's grown and that she still harbours some anger against Hlomu and Zandile for how they treated her – paying her off to leave as if she wasn't good enough for this family.

What I don't understand is why she chose to punish me for it. I proved myself to her, didn't I? I went to look for her; I begged her to come back and she said no. So I moved on with my life thinking that maybe she refused because I wasn't promising anything except a relationship – no marriage and no guarantee that I'd change to being the man she wanted me to be. The man all women want me to be.

“You haven't moved, Mpande; it's been eight months and you haven't even tried at all. I know you were close but going to his house all the time is not helping you, or us,” she said this morning.

She was talking about Mqoqi because, according to her, that's the only source of my frustration. I looked at her. There was so much I wanted to say to her, but I didn't. Instead, I grabbed my car keys and left the house.

It's been eight months since Mqoqi died, and two months since Ndoni died. I'm mourning and some mornings I wake up not knowing who the grief consuming me is about between the two of them. My family accepted what happened to Ndoni and moved on like they have forgotten she ever existed.

Thando said “Sorry” and that was it. She never wants to hear her name, and the one time I mentioned it, she looked at me like I did it to hurt her

feelings. She died; Ndoni died and I know they hated each other for obvious reasons, but that doesn't change the fact that her death hurt me.

Ntsika is at my house a lot; he loves the twins and they love him. Sometimes I sit and watch him play with them and all I can think about is how, without even calling me to ask, he shot Ndoni in the head and left her bleeding on the table. Just like that; easy as that. Wasn't she important to him? She was part of our family, part of my life; I loved her. I may not have been able to show it or treat her the way she deserved to be treated, but I would never let anyone hurt her. My gripe was with her father.

But Ntsika is still my brother and he did what he did to protect our family. I can't be angry at him because I wanted to do the same thing to Amanda when I found out what she did to Mqoqi. I still feel he should have let me handle it, though; he shouldn't have just taken her life like she was nothing to me. This is a conversation I will never have with him because I don't want him to ever feel guilty about doing what we had to do when all of our lives were in danger. It was a time of madness – five days of war.

Most days, all I feel is loneliness, a lot of unanswered questions and a need to be here in this house where I used to have so many laughs. Mqoqi and I thrived on being idiots. We knew we had to grow up, but we also knew we had the choice not to because we had older brothers who had already done that for us. We could float, be controversial, make bad decisions and laugh about them afterwards. It's easier when you have money because you know nothing can ever be out of reach for you.

I had never thought about marriage until I met Ndoni and the only reason I wanted to commit to her was that I felt differently about her compared to all the women I had been with; I think. That "different" feeling was love. It wasn't deep enough; I admit to that because I don't think I can ever love a woman deep enough for her to be what Hlomu is to Mqhele.

A woman destroyed my childhood, turned me into a criminal at eight years old and after I survived that, another woman took away my innocence at 14 years old. I do not know how to relate to women; I do not know how

to love and trust them, to treat them like the delicate and special creatures that they are.

Ndoni stuck around longer than any woman I've ever been with, even though I lived to invade her privacy. My obsession with keeping her in line infuriated the hell out of her and I liked that. I liked pulling different feelings out of her. She tolerated many things, things other women found to be scary about me. She even stayed through the brief return of Gwen – still psycho as fuck – and instead of being scared, Ndoni went psycho on her too. I had already told her everything about Gwen and she was the one who helped me get rid of her, hopefully for good. I believe Ndoni loved me – a difficult thing to do for any woman, which is why I cannot accept that she betrayed me like that. I wish she was still here; I wish I could ask her if it's true.

But it's no use dwelling on that now. What I need to do is move on and moving on means me doing the right thing. The right thing is to marry Thando, for my children, for them to grow up in a stable home. I never want Bayede and Madlozi to be those kids who have to be shuffled from one house to another – here on weekdays and there on weekends. I guess then, this is the growing up I needed to do: forgive Thando for keeping my children from me and make her my wife. In time, I might learn to love her like Mqhele loves Hlomu, like Nkosana loves Zandile, Qhawe loves Naledi and like Nqoba learned to love Gugu.

If Mqoqi was here, I know he'd tell me I'm mad for doing this. Just like he was against me wanting to marry Ndoni. He was fucked up; my brother was fucked up real bad but the one thing he lived for was to make sure I did better than him in the fucked up department. It wasn't always about women, you know, there were other things. I'm the only one among Sbopho's sons who has never taken a life, and that was all Mqoqi's doing.

I don't even want to talk about Ntsika and our petrol bomber sons because it would mean I'd have to pour myself yet another glass of whiskey and dwell on how much we have failed as a family that worked so hard to not have children like us.

The last time I was here with Mhlaba, he said we should empty the alcohol cupboard and take all the booze with us because there was no use for us to come here every time we needed to drink our problems away. It was at that moment that I decided to move all the expensive bottles to the study. Mqhele has that room in his house where he sits alone and plays his guitar. Mqoqi had this, his study with books all over.

“Don’t shoot me!” she says, putting the book down and raising her arms.

I don’t have a gun on me, but now I think I should have brought one because... who the fuck is this?

“The last time one of you found me in one of your houses, he pulled a gun on me.”

What the hell is happening? She’s sitting at Mqoqi’s desk. When I walked in, she was reading one of his books, with her feet rested on top of the desk.

“Who are you and what are you doing here? Who let you in?”

“I have a key.”

What?

“Who are you?”

“I’m Qhayiya; I’m here to clean,” she says.

This house looks exactly the way I left it the last time I was here. Even the glass I left in the sink is still there.

“I was taking a break,” she says it like she’s just read my mind.

I don’t trust what is happening here. A random woman I have never seen in my life sitting in my brother’s study, reading one of his books.

“And you thought you’d take this break by invading my brother’s privacy? You aren’t supposed to be in here, sisi.”

I don’t think she understands because she hasn’t moved.

“So, which one are you?”

I hate that question. I hate it with all my heart; that’s why I don’t answer her. She puts the book back on the shelf and gets up to leave, slowly though, like she has every right to be here and I’m disturbing her peace by being here.

Mqoqi organised his books by size; she put that book in the wrong place. I hope she hasn't stolen any of them because this is all my brother left, the only piece of him. This study is the only place where I can sit and actually feel his presence, although he never wanted anyone coming in here.

I remember when we were younger, after reading one of his books he said to me, "You have anxiety, it's a mental disorder. I think you should get pills." I had never heard of the word "anxiety" before and I didn't take him seriously because I knew I wasn't sick anywhere, so why would I be taking pills?

"I think it has to do with what happened." By "what happened" I knew what he was referring to. We didn't utter Carol's name; the mention of it could change everything in a split second, for me and for him.

I told him I was fine and changed the subject to how frustrating it was that we had been waiting for an hour for those guys to arrive with the stock. We had buyers waiting, and they wanted their stock that night. Moving insangu from eMsinga to Joburg was not hard for our guys. They actually travelled with it on the highway without any hassles. The problem was that they didn't take Mqoqi and me seriously; they saw us as just kids who had the potential to get caught. It didn't matter that we paid them what was due on time and with no complaints.

But also, it was on that same night we got caught. We were waiting for the buyers to call when the police raided Hlomu's flat in Berea and found it all. They slapped us around a bit before handcuffing us and taking us to Hillbrow police station. I was there for a couple of hours before I was told to go home and I immediately knew what Mqoqi had done. It angered me that he was always trying to protect me like I was a little boy, taking the blame for everything.

He came back the next morning after Nkosana made the whole thing disappear. He wasn't just going to let him off easy like that, though, so he beat the crap out of him. We were used to that: Nkosana trying to fix us with his fists, releasing the anger he harboured against our father on us. But that morning was different because Hlomu saw it. She stopped it, yes, but

maybe that wasn't the best thing for Mqoqi. He changed after that day; I could feel his anger even when he was quiet and he was quiet a lot after that. He slept more and spoke less. He also never wanted to go to Naturena or be at any place where Hlomu would be present. He was angry and embarrassed that she witnessed him being handled by another man like that.

Before that morning, I had seen the way he looked at her, but I assumed it was because Hlomu had become a safe space for all of us – a pure thing about us, about our family and all the things she didn't know we were. But after that incident, I knew that to Mqoqi she was more than just that. She wasn't a "Mami" or the woman who fed us and had the ability to make us feel like we could do better, that we had the potential to be human beings who could dream beyond killing people and stealing money.

While Hlomu's presence in our lives made us all better and less complicated people, it plunged him into an even darker place. Mqhele's actions didn't help the situation. Mqoqi thought that if he couldn't have Hlomu's love, the least he could do was protect her from his own brother. But Hlomu is Hlomu; she has her own dark streak. Mqoqi died with his feelings for Hlomu still strong and I'm going to be honest and say, it wasn't the cute face and nurturing side of her that Mqoqi loved her for; it was the fierce and dangerous side. It was like Mqhele and Mqoqi loved one woman, but not the same woman.

I find this girl; what's her name again? In the kitchen, washing the same glass I left here a week ago. She looks at me and almost says something, but for some reason, she doesn't and goes back to wasting water washing a glass that's already clean.

"You are Mpande, aren't you?" she asks.

I put the bottle of Johnnie Walker Blue Label Baccarat down on the table after pouring myself a stiff. Mqoqi drank coffee, and beer mostly. I don't understand why he bought and kept all this expensive alcohol.

"Yes."

"Aren't you the one who doesn't drink?"

Who the hell is this woman? She sees the look on my face and...

“My mom works for your brother, Sambulo. So, since there are some empty houses, including Bhut’Nkosana’s, I come to clean and open windows now and again. I’ve been here, in this one, three times.”

Three times? And nobody told me about this?

“I didn’t know MaSbisi had a daughter.”

“Well, she does. This house is quite different from the others – everything is just black. Was your brother depressed?”

I generally don’t like people who ask too many questions, and this girl...

“Who hired you again?”

“Your family,” she says. It can’t be “my family” if I don’t know about it.

“Who in my family?”

“I’m not sure, but my mother came home one afternoon and told me I could go clean this and that house, a couple of empty townhouses too, for a lot of money and honestly I wasn’t going to say no to that. It’s not like I have better things to do.”

I see.

“So that’s what you do with your life? Clean empty houses?”

She puts the glass back in the sink. I thought doing her job would mean her wiping it and putting it in the cupboard, where it should be. She pulls a chair and sits at the table. I don’t think she knows where the broom is in this house, my feeling is she comes here to chill.

“So Mpande, why are you rude?”

Rude? Me?

“I’m not rude.”

“You are rude and mean too. Is this how you treat people?”

“I met you 15 minutes ago, sisi—”

She taps her hand on the table and shakes her head.

“Calling me ‘sisi’ is rude. I told you my name, but clearly, you have no respect for me because you insist on calling me ‘sisi’, and it’s so impersonal, so belittling. It’s the same as some Karen from Dainfern calling me ‘dear’.”

I don't understand the last part at all, but when did 'sisi' become an insult?

"Can I have the Coke in the fridge? Is that okay with you?"

I don't like this woman; not her and not her tone.

"You can have whatever you want. It's what you've been doing all along anyway: chilling and reading books that you're not supposed to touch. How much do you get paid for these day vacations you claim are your job, anyway? And you talk too much for a maid."

I regret saying the last part immediately, but she shouldn't be here – not in Mqoqi's house. Whoever came up with this arrangement, I will deal with them today. It sounds like something Hlomu would come up with and she's messed with me too many times.

She pours herself a glass of Coke from a two-litre that I'm certain was sealed when I left it in the fridge the last time I was here. And then she fills a glass with ice – the same glass she'd left in the sink, and places it on the table, in the middle.

"You can't just drink whiskey like that! At least mix it with ice, not that it makes much difference, but at least it won't be as strong and as poisonous when it reaches your liver."

She points at the glass with ice.

The glass is far from me, so I have no choice but to pull a chair and sit in order for me to reach it. I don't have much experience with alcohol, but that thing she said about my liver being poisoned freaked me out a bit. It's not that I never tried alcohol; I did when I was a teenager, just one tot of Smirnoff and I spit it out immediately. That was the only and last time I experienced alcohol.

So now we are sitting across from each other; her with a glass of Coke and me with a glass of whiskey on ice. I still don't want her here though; I don't want anybody here.

"Are you going to sell this house?"

"No."

Why is she even asking me that?

“Why?”

“Why would I sell Mqoqi’s house?”

She puts her glass down on the table; I pour another double tot.

“Why?” she asks again.

“He left this house to me. I don’t know why he did that because I have my own properties, but he left this one to me, and everything in it.”

I was shocked when I found out; angry at him more than anything because the last thing I needed from him was something material. What he should have given me was an explanation and a plan on how he expects me to go on with life without him. The anger too, he should have left me something to help me get rid of the anger and the guilt – not a house.

“Is that why you are always here? To look for answers?”

“You’ve been here three times; do you think there are answers here lying around? Have you seen any of them?”

I know by how she is looking at me she’s back to thinking I’m rude and mean.

“Why do you blame yourself for his death, Mpande... I mean—”

“Fuck you! Get the fuck out of here!”

Who does she think she is? She’s still sitting.

“If you don’t leave now, I’ll shoot you. Get the fuck out!”

She doesn’t move.

“My shift ends at 5 pm, that’s when the car will come to fetch me. Unless you are willing to drive me to Orange Farm, I’m not moving.”

I didn’t come here for this! I came here for peace and—

“Mqoqi carried so much guilt with him, and you were the source, Mpande. Is that why you are so angry? Is that why you are always here?”

I’m going to slap this woman.

“How do you know all this? Qhayiya?”

She smiles. It’s just a name, how is calling her by her name the one thing that brings out a smile on her face?

“Your brother wrote things down in books that he read. He made notes, and if whatever he was reading described his own experiences and feelings,

he'd write his own feelings on every half-blank page he would find."

I didn't know that; I don't open his books.

"What Carol did to you was not your fault; you were just a child. Women can hurt boys too. You did not have sex with her or make love to her."

Nobody has ever said that to me.

"Mqoqi has lived through many things, horrible things. He could have chosen to live through the one that drove him to death too, but he chose not to. In fact, judging by what I've read, he believed in vengeance. What you need to understand is that he was ready to go, he needed to go and that's exactly what he did."

Nothing anyone can say will ever make me believe it was Mqoqi's time to die, the Bhunganes killed him, and they were intentional about it. They knew exactly what they were doing. But I won't tell her this because I've figured she's a motormouth who thinks she knows everything.

"Do you want more ice?"

I don't want more ice, but she's already at the fridge, pulling out an ice tray.

"Have you ever been... Have you ever found yourself having sex with someone you didn't want to have sex with?"

I don't know why I'm asking her this, but...

"You mean has a man ever violated me? When I was in varsity, I had sex with a guy because he'd been begging me all night, and I had no way of getting back to res until morning. So, I just agreed to get it over and done with."

She pulls out a packet of chips from the cupboard; they must have been there for over a year.

"Can you still smell him? That guy? Do you ever find yourself at a place, just any place, and his scent just comes and you feel like you are there all over again, at that moment?"

She's quiet and I'm shocked because since we sat at this table an hour ago, there's never been a moment where she gave herself a moment to think

before she spoke.

“Nope, not really. It’s not something that bothers me. It was just another one-night stand. But what happened to you is different. How are you doing? I know you lost your girlfriend recently?”

My phone rings; it’s Thando. I reject the call. I’ll talk to her later.

“Yeah, she was shot. I don’t like talking about that – about her.”

“How do you know? Who has been trying to make you talk about her?”

That’s a good question.

“Nobody.”

Thando again. I reject the call because I want to tell Qhayiya that—

There’s a car hooting outside. My watch says it’s 5 pm and I see she’s already gathering her stuff, her handbag and the packet of chips she’s been eating straight from the packet.

“My ride is here. I have to rush because you know, hooting in gated communities is a sin,” she says, and laughs, but I know she’s mocking rich people. I want to ask her who is picking her up, but she’s already out the door.

My phone again.

“Yes, Thando.”

“Why are you rejecting my calls? You said you’d be back by 5 pm; my aunt and uncle are already here.”

Shit! I forgot about that.

18

“I think you should all go to therapy.”

Obviously, I’m drunk, because there was no way I was going to say such a thing or be in this car going to where we are going, sober.

“When you say ‘all’, who exactly are you referring to?”

See? This is why.

We are late. We were supposed to be at Mpande’s house at 4 pm but Mqhele only got home around 5 pm, and I wasn’t going to ask a driver to take me because we don’t do that anymore. I can even drive myself wherever, whenever now, and he doesn’t mind. But today he asked me to wait for him, and I don’t think that’s because there’s a problem. I think he just didn’t want to arrive there alone.

“I’m talking about all of you, Mqhele, from Nkosana to Ntsika, and the boys, including Phakeme.”

“So, you mean we must all go sit in some room somewhere and talk to some man about our feelings? All of us?”

He has that smirk on his face, the one I haven’t seen in a while.

Sigh.

“So much has happened, Mqhele; we can’t all go on like everything is normal.”

I’m just saying this because I really want to convince him it’s time they at least tried to fix some things – not that there ever was a time where things

in this family were normal. The cleansing thing happened, yes, and it looked promising for a while, but what is it exactly that they were cleansing themselves of if they were able to wipe a whole family out in just five days?

“You are the one that needs to go to some feelings doctor; you had a gun in your hand, ready to go on a gun battle with hardcore criminals.”

Urgh, not that again! He still thinks it was funny.

“What exactly were you all planning in that house? We sent you there so you could be safe while we handled things. We knew you were all safe, kanti you were there planning a gun battle...”

I don't want to talk about that week, and every time it comes up, he treats it like a joke. We were really scared, but he doesn't understand that. He thinks we should have sat there like it was a hotel or something, feasting on murdered chickens and eating mielie-meal day and night.

A part of me is glad that he's back to being an idiot that he's always been – Naledi and Qhawe's situation aside. At least sometimes, he laughs and acts stupid, and that's the Mqhele I fell in love with when I was 22 – the one who can be whatever he wants to be when he is with me. He bears a lot of scars now, scars I found him without, both physical and emotional, but so do I. We are what love shouldn't be, and yet, nothing can tear us apart.

“I'm serious, Mqhele.”

“Serious about what? The feelings thing?”

“Yes, and it doesn't have to be a man, it could be a female therapist.”

I know I'm reaching, but now that we don't have any deadly enemies left, it would be nice to have less deadly and intense men to share our beds with.

“A woman? The only tears I can deal with are yours. I don't want some woman I don't know crying on me,” he says.

Not that anything about Mqhele can still shock me, but how is it that after all these years, he still manages to frustrate me as much as he did when he kept showing up at the taxi stop every morning wanting to drive me to work in some dodgy car?

“It’s fine then, but I’m still taking Msebe and Langa to therapy. They are just teenage boys, Mqhele, and they already know how to use an AK47...”

It’s interesting how I don’t even have to look at him to know that his aura has changed. If you want to get to Mqhele, bring up his children.

“Peter should never have brought those guns to that house!”

I know he is angry, but Peter hasn’t been carrying out cash heists and killing rival taxi owners all his life. All he’s ever done is launder money and keep Joburg’s most notorious criminals who hail all the way from Mbuba out of prison. So, when Peter Shapiro, yes, so cliché, realised shit had hit the fan, he did what he thought needed to be done. I still think the only reason they went to rescue him was because of that. Otherwise, they would have let that Bhungane kid razor him to death. He’s okay now, his long-legged wife and Oliver are back here in South Africa.

Plastic surgery will fix his face. Nqoba told me that the other day, and I laughed because only Nqoba can tell such a tragic story and still make it sound comical. But he wasn’t sitting with me at the hospital cafeteria to talk about Peter, I was very much aware of that. He had somehow managed to get that alone time with me after I had sat at Naledi’s bedside for over an hour begging her to wake up. She has to wake up because really, she can’t do that to us, she must know that very well. Qhawe can’t go through that again. She was the one who healed him, so she can’t be the one who breaks his soul, again.

Nqoba politely asked me to come with him when Tshedi and Omphi arrived. He suggested we give them some privacy. That’s how we both ended up in the cafeteria eating dry fried chips and drinking sugar-free iced tea together. His eyes were on me, but whenever my eyes pierced through his, he’d look away, down at the cheese and ham sandwich I knew he wasn’t enjoying.

“How is Langa?” he asked.

“Safe and okay in the US. My mom is angrier at all of you – at all of us than he is.”

He didn't look a bit interested in what I had just said, and that's when I realised it wasn't my brother he was asking about, it was my son. So, I immediately got with the programme.

"He's good, actually. A lot happened in Ladybrand, but you know, it was a matter of life and death and Langa somehow seemed to understand that better than all of us. I hate that he had to learn how to handle a gun. That was not the plan, Nqoba. That was not how our kids were supposed to turn out."

I saw the hurt on his face, but I could also see that he wasn't done with the questions. The strange thing is that what followed was not a question.

"My mother would have loved you. If she had—" He stopped.

All I could think about was how I had never heard Nqoba talk about their mother or their father.

"If she had lived, I think you two would have gotten along very well."

Nqoba obviously remembers both their parents very well. He was 14 when they both died. An age I have learned is not just a number in this family; an age my twins are currently at.

"Why do you think that?"

I was curious because I had never imagined myself having a mother-in-law, it just... I don't know... would I have even met Mqhele at a taxi rank? Their lives surely would have been different if they had been raised into men by Nomafu.

He didn't answer me, but he didn't look away when I looked into his eyes this time. He wanted to tell me something, but he stopped himself. When I think of that moment, it still worries me. I've never told Mqhele about it.

We are almost at Glen Austin, at the house Mpande built for himself and Ndoni and the future children he thought they'd have. Oh! How I wish I didn't know so much! Imagine how much peace I'd have in my life if I didn't. I'd tell Mqhele about it all, but ya'll know I married a nutcase.

I left Nyanda with MaMnguni, and that means we are going to have to leave this meeting earlier than everyone because MaMnguni will be calling,

panicking and frustrated by that strange baby. I really want her to retire now; she's too old to be working, but she's been with us for so long that I think if she were to die, we'd have to bury her.

"Makeba," the security guard at the gate says. I can never remember his name.

"Hello," I say very quickly with a smile before Mqhele starts Zulu-ing. The guy is Pedi, so of course, he can't say "Mageba" properly, but at least he tries, and he's sweet, and he wants to keep his job. That being said, there really is no need for Mpande to have a security guy at the gate, but he has kids now so everything about him is overboard. As we drive in, Mqhele takes a deep sigh, and I know he's about to start.

"It's what Mpande wants, Mqhele," I say as we park next to Nqoba's car.

Nkosana is here too? I'm surprised.

"It's what Mpande wants? This girl left him for R200 000. A mere R200 000 that *you* gave her to disappear," he says, switching the car off.

I'd roll my eyes at him if I wasn't anxious about the façade that we are here for.

"Also, where did that R200 000 come from, Hlomu because it didn't appear anywhere on our bank statements?"

Jizas! After all these years? He's only asking me that now? This man!

I ignore him. I don't have time for his madness.

"Mqhele, I expect you to be on your best behaviour..."

He shakes his head then wraps his arm around my waist and leads me inside the house. I'm not sure if the "where did the R200 000 come from" thing will be brought up again in this life. The "best behaviour" thing is definitely just wishful thinking by me. Too bad Qhawe can't be here. He's the only person I trust to think straight in situations like these.

Speaking of situations, Thando's aunt and uncle are the situation we have been trying to avoid. But now they are here, and Mpande isn't.

I know it's going to be a long evening when we walk in and find Nkosana standing in the kitchen – just standing, not even trying to attend to the middle-aged couple sitting in the lounge. Actually, they are his age. I don't see Madlozi and Bayede anywhere, I always look forward to seeing them because they are different, the best-behaved kids I have ever met in my life. Thando is going to and from the kitchen and the lounge, asking who wants what, and opening and closing the fridge. Where on earth is Mpande?

“Where are the kids?” I ask.

“Ntsika took them. He said he'll leave them at Xolie's house with MaSbisi and come back. I asked him to take them because I don't want them disrupting this meeting.”

I want to set her on fire right now! That's what I want to do. She doesn't know I know, and that's probably why she's acting like my being here means things will go easier. Nkosana made it clear that nothing will happen – no marriage process between these two, as long as Naledi is lying in hospital. But paying damages to Thando's family for the twins is something that needs to be done, and then, immediately after that, they must be taken to Mbuba and a goat must be slaughtered. I'd be lying if I said I'd bothered myself with the Mpande and Thando stuff, in fact, I don't want to know.

I look at Ntsika as he walks in and all I want to do is kick him on the balls because what he is doing – him and this girl here – is making a fool out of his own brother. And on top of that, he brought me into that mix because he knows I will always protect him.

He is the one that goes to sit with the aunt and uncle in the lounge while the rest of the brothers are being themselves, standing around everywhere looking exactly like they feel. Look, it's not that they are being difficult people – it's a trust issue thing because Thando took the money and left. She could have chosen Mpande over the money, and the fact that she didn't is the problem. I know these men, they want loyalty from their women, and the one thing that scares them the most is one of us betraying them for

money. But then again, the one thing they will not do is let their children be where they can't see them.

Mpande is still not here, and this meeting cannot start without him.

"I'd like to apologise for my brother. He is on his way," Ntsika says to these people. He's being very humble to them and I'm disgusted more than anything.

"Have you been offered anything to eat? Or drink?" Ntsika asks.

There are cups of tea and biscuits on the coffee table. Of course, they've been offered something to eat by their niece because I'm not about that life anymore. The gathering happening outside amongst his brothers is what is worrying me right now.

"Mpande is almost here, traffic is quite bad today. It's the end of the month," Thando says.

I catch Thando and Ntsika looking at each other and I know that the time has come for me to murder someone in this family. And where are my colleagues in marriage? Especially Zandile because this is the day I plan to tell her everything. I can't carry this burden alone. She contributed only R50 000 to Thando's exile fee, but she was as in on it as I was. I SMS Zandile.

Where the hell are you? I need to talk to you

She doesn't reply.

Mpande walks in just as I'm about to go outside and call Zandile.

He doesn't look sober – that's the new Mpande and we all have to get used to him. He goes straight to the lounge and sits next to Ntsika. I feel that it's my duty to make the rest of his brothers come in and start whatever this is.

"We have discussed the damages that need to be paid, as a family," the uncle says.

This is not how it usually goes – I'm from KwaZulu-Natal, so I know that when a man gets a woman pregnant out of wedlock, it is the man's family that goes to the woman's family.

“What do you want? How much?” Nkosana asks.

He’s done did it! He’s been for a while. But also, Nkosana will do anything for anything that looks like him. He’s here for Bayede and Madlozi, and he wants it over and done with.

“My niece had to raise these children on her own, even we didn’t know about them—”

“Of course, you didn’t! You didn’t give a shit about her or where she was until now! How many goats or cows do you want? If you want it all in cash, we can give it to you now.”

I asked this man to behave, right before we entered this house but what does he do? He’s being himself.

“Owami and Olwami—”

“Eyi! Those are not their names!” Mpande snaps. I hope they haven’t noticed that he’s drunk.

The aunt sighs and looks at Thando. She’s been quiet this whole time.

What I see – and I know these sons of Sbopho like the back of my hand – is that Ntsika wants damages paid and more than anything, he wants this marriage between Mpande and Thando to happen. I understand that what he really wants is unlimited access to his children because that’s how this family operates and that’s always been a great thing, until now, and it kills me that I’m the only one that knows how dodgy this situation is.

“I’m ready to pay damages and lobola; just name your price and it will be done,” Mpande declares.

There’s something about the way he says it that makes it sound so impersonal like it’s something he wants to get out of the way. I don’t think Thando sees it, but if she does, she and Mpande are clearly on the same page. He wants his children; she wants the surname, the status and the benefits that come with who we are. Oh! But girl doesn’t know shit about who these men are. She does, however, know who we women of this family are.

“We are Swati, so this process will be done according to our culture,” the uncle says. I doubt Thando can even speak Swati, but even I am ready

to get this done and over with.

“I asked you what you want. How many cows? How many goats or whatever it is that we have to do to change the children’s surname to Zulu?” Nkosana asks.

They say four cows and six goats. I’m not sure if that is Swati culture, but you know what? Four cows and six goats are small change to us.

“For lobola we—”

“There will be no lobola negotiations yet. The cows and goats you want, they’ll be delivered to your house tomorrow morning,” Nqoba says.

I’ve seen these men being rude and arrogant many times, but this is the one time where I’m impressed by it. Thando must suffer. She must know that we are not about her, we are about those children and Mpande. I know Ntsika is the one I should persecute here, but as I said those years ago, he is family. Thando is a hoe I just can’t get rid of.

Chances are, she will become Mrs Zulu eventually and I will sift traditional beer with her in that rondavel that has burnt down twice, but what she and I know is that we will never be allies. Too bad these men went and did what Sbopho wanted them to do because if there is anyone who deserves black snakes and random fires, it is this girl called Thando.

Her aunt and uncle must have achieved what they came here for because they don’t look unhappy as they announce they are ready to leave.

Oh, look! She finally decides to show up, just as these people walk out the door. I sent her a frantic SMS but the first thing she does is go to her husband to make sure he’s okay. Is he even okay? I don’t know, who can even tell? It’s Nkosana, for crying out loud.

I don’t care if mine is okay or not; I have bigger problems and I need this porcelain doll to stop being lovey-dovey and come with me to one bedroom upstairs. So, I pull her away from her man and drag her by the arm up the stairs and all the way to the last door down the passage.

This should be private enough for us to talk. The room overlooks the oval swimming pool and a Japanese garden which has never made sense to me.

“Mpande doesn’t do water, you know that? He almost drowned as a child and if there’s anything he stays away from...”

Yeah, yeah, I know all about that. This is the only house he’s ever lived in that has a pool. He’d always been a penthouse guy. He did all of this for Ndoni, built a whole house with everything she wanted but I have no time to be discussing stuff about a dead girl. We have a real problem here.

“Where have you been, Zandile? You know you should have been here with me. This is a problem we both created.”

Of course, I was the mastermind, but I don’t remember her resisting at all. She knew it had to be done, there was no question about that.

“What’s your problem, Hlomu? Mpande wants to marry the girl and build a family with her. We just have to wait for Naledi to wake up and come back home, that’s all.”

There’s so much denial about the Naledi situation in this family yazi. What if she never wakes up? What if she dies? Anyway...

“Yes, Mpande is definitely going to do the right thing, and unknowingly raise Ntsika’s children while at it.”

“Hhaybo, mfazi!!!” she shouts.

She has her hands over her head.

“Hhaybo Hlomu!!!” she says, hands still on her head and then she paces all over this room.

My aunt once told me that the word ‘mfazi’ has the deepest meaning of any Zulu word our ancestors ever created. She said women, in Zulu, are called ‘abafazi’ because that’s exactly who we are – sifa sazi, we die knowing. And I will tell you now, with no doubt, that when women decide they will take a secret to the grave with them, they do exactly that.

It’s an ancient thing – a great-great-great-grand whatever thing. Women have always been fixers of things. When a man takes cows to a woman’s home and makes her his wife, what is expected of her is to deliver children. And if children don’t come, she is the one that gets blamed because a man’s ego is not something the world wants to mess with. It can never be his weak sperms; it must always be the woman’s useless womb. Men’s egos must

always be protected at all costs, so what do women do? They gather and come up with a solution. It's usually the women in the family, sometimes even the husband's mother who sits the makoti down and tells her about 'outsourcing'. Only a woman can ever know who the father of her child is, but it's always better when the child at least has family blood. And we are lucky, aren't we? That the children of this family look exactly the same?

"Hlomu, it can't be. Are you sure?"

Would I be here with her? Away from everyone, if I wasn't sure?

"Ntsika told me himself, he's been supporting the children since they were born, sending money and all."

I hate myself for doing this to her because I know how much she loves Mpande, but I'm done carrying this family's burdens alone. I have had to do so many things that are supposed to be her responsibility. I mean, my husband is the third born, Zandile and Gugu should be the ones doing all the things I've been out here doing... but no... I'm the one carrying this family on my shoulders.

I'm about to ask Zandile what we should do next when I turn around to see Thando in the room, standing with her arms folded, face clearly saying she's not that naïve girl we intimidated into fucking off to some small country years ago.

"I can't believe I once thought R200 000 was actually a lot of money," she says and laughs. "My monthly allowance is far more than that now. In fact, I don't even have to touch my allowance, I have access to far more than that now. I can literally get anything I want, from whoever I choose to ask first."

I said this girl was a cunning little hoe. I'm telling you now that I think Amanda was nothing compared to Thando. At least with her, there was a reason, a valid reason to come for us.

"How long have you been standing there?"

"This is my house. Did you really think you could come to one of my bedrooms and whisper shit about me? This—" she says waving her hand in the air, "—this is all mine now, and you are not going to do shit about it.

You are the pillars of this family, whatever that means,” she says and rolls her eyes.

“And guess what? That means you are not going to say shit. If you open your mouths, this family will be destroyed forever. Brotherhood down the drain... imagine... after all the work you have done?”

I know Zandile has anger issues and she’s quick to strike, but this? She is frozen.

“Now, please get out of my house. Your husbands are waiting for you downstairs. I need to spend some time with my future husband. My kids are at Xolie’s house – isn’t that wonderful? That I will never have to worry about them? They have two *fathers* and six more...”

I feel every part of my body stiffen.

“Hlomu, you’re gonna have to keep them next week. I’m taking Mpande on a mini vacation. I feel like he needs it,” she says.

I hear footsteps on the passage and I know it’s one of these men coming here to tell us it’s time to go. I look at Zandile, and we both walk to the door without a word said between us.

This girl was once a timid little mousey thing that we easily got rid of by offering her small change, and now here she is, totally in control of us.

Zulu

A woman dies, takes your father with her, and his last words to you are that you are now responsible for his children. But she doesn't really leave, she floats in the air. She becomes a spirit that taunts you and taunts you and taunts you...

The one thing nobody knows about me is that I am Nomafu. Yes, she burnt to ashes and took my father with her while at it. Of all my brothers, I'm the one who knows our mama the most. I was almost a man when she died. Of course, she still had Ntsika suckling her breast, but I was the first to occupy her womb. You'd think she loved Mqhele the most, but I am the one whose shoulders she has sat on since the day her body burned to ashes.

When you are a man with responsibilities, you don't talk about these things. You don't tell your younger brothers – the ones you have sacrificed so much to watch over – that their mother visits you often.

She was the one who told me I could leave my kids with Hlomu. She told me I could trust her with them, with anything and everything. But she didn't say anything about the reason I had to leave them with her. In fact, she didn't look worried that I was taking her sons – the youngest only 21 years old – to carry out a cash heist that I believed was going to be our last job.

Like some people, I came to Joburg looking for something, and I lost myself trying to find it. It was never my plan to bring my brothers into this, into what we became. Honestly, there was a time when I thought I could work hard enough to afford all of them a better life. But I was just a boy, naïve enough to believe I was a man at 22 years old. That was why I brought them here, packed them all in a taxi all the way from Ngudwini to

Joburg. Ntsika was just five, happily clueless. I envied him, and it wasn't just because he had an innocence that protected him, I envied him because he didn't remember the life we had before that. He was going to live his life – hard as I knew it was going to be – with no memory of how we ended up being where we were. But then, two months ago, it dawned on me that he is, and always will be Nomafu and Sbopho's son – Thulula's blood. We settled in Joburg, wherever we could. We lived for years doing what we needed to do to survive.

Mama had not visited me in a long time, not since Zandile was taken to jail. When she started flooding my sleep, all of a sudden, I was angry at her. I was even angrier because she looked so happy, so content, like maybe she had come back to heal me from losing the love of my life whose only crime was to give me my first child.

I woke up the next morning – the day we were supposed to leave for our last job – feeling light and free. I couldn't remember much of what she did or said to me when she visited, but I knew that day was going to change our lives forever. I could feel it. I left my children with a woman whom I was seeing for the first time; it felt right because although I had never met her in flesh before, I had seen her, sitting next to mama, their arms hooked and her head resting on mama's shoulder. They both looked happy like they had been with each other forever. And so I gave the woman my children, but I noticed she struggled to look me in the eye. When I came back four days later, she had become their mother, and there was never a single moment where I felt like that was a betrayal to Zandile.

And now mama wants to take Hlomu away from me? No! I will not allow that. I see them – it's almost every night now. The first night, I saw her holding Hlomu's hand, just the hand. On the eighth night she was still holding her hand, but I could see her shoulder too, and all the way up to her cheek. Her head was resting on mama's shoulder. I couldn't see her whole face but I could see she was happy, smiling because I know Hlomu's face.

“Nkosana?”

“Yes?”

“You’ve been quiet for far too long. I think you are the one who should be driving this. You were 17 when the whole thing happened, right? You remember everything?”

I told Zandile I didn’t want to do this shit! And what did she do? She brought it to my house.

“You can tell her everything, by law, she can’t reveal anything said here to anyone. I also made her sign a non-disclosure agreement, so this is safe,” Zandile said before she left me sitting here, across a stranger.

The boys walked in a few minutes later and all I could do was look at them. They don’t fear me anymore; I can see it in their eyes. They are men now. They have been for a while, but to me, they will always be ‘my boys’. I do not love anything in this life I love more than my children. I could have hugged them, yes. Asked if they were okay now and again, taught them how to do a tie knot, talked to them about girls and sex and all that. When they became men, I could have tried to be a friend instead of an authority figure to them. And now here we are, a stranger between us. I hate to say it, but I don’t know my sons very well. Except that they are my children and I love them; I don’t know who they are beyond that. I don’t know the men they are, just the boys I could always keep in line with a slap and a fist.

“Before we get to how this family was broken, I need to understand the makings of Nkosana Zulu, because all of this...” she says and looks down at her notebook. “The things your sons have mentioned, including the violence, the emotional neglect and...” she looks at her notebook again, and I feel like she has a long list written there.

This is the first time I hear about the things I failed to do as a father, and it’s just two for now. I know I’m violent; it’s who I’ve always been as a man, but... what is emotional neglect?

“When you say the makings of Nkosana Zulu, what is it exactly that you want to hear?”

I hear one of my boys clearing his throat. I’m not sure which one it is.

“I already know the history of what happened; you don’t need to tell me that whole story. But you have to tell me, in your own words, what you

think you became after that night. That would really help your sons understand why you are the way you are.”

“I became a man.”

That’s the only answer I can give her. The makings of Nkosana Zulu are the makings of a man. A man cannot be weak; a man has to do what it takes, make tough decisions, fight and kill if that’s what needs to be done.

“What kind of man?” she asks.

I’d know her name if I cared, or if I wasn’t angry at Zandile for bringing her here, and more so for involving our sons. Until now, I had not seen Sbani and Lwandle since the day they killed Mthunzi. Yes, they came back after kidnapping Mahlubi’s daughter, but we have not sat them down and told them that if it wasn’t for them and their stupid antics, the Bhunganes would have wiped us all out. But that’s not something you tell your children, especially if you had bigger and better dreams for them.

Money is a thing we have, and it’s great to have, but it’s not better than knowing your children are safe and normal. Zandile said she was doing this because she wants to fix HER family – the four of us and our grandchild – and that’s one thing I love about my wife. With everything she has had to survive in this life, she still believes that things can be fixed. It is a strange and unrealistic thing for someone like her, but maybe that’s why she’s still here – resolute.

“Okay, maybe let’s start at the end. Maybe that will get us somewhere. Sbani, Lwandle, why did you assume it was your responsibility to save your family? What was your reasoning behind going on a rampage, killing people?”

I told Zandile I did not want to do this nonsense! How the hell is she going to bring a stranger to my house? And tell her things that could put our sons in jail? Does she even understand how difficult those 17 years of her being gone were for me?

“Baba, you can’t just leave...”

“You think you can tell me what to do now? Hhe, Lwandle?”

Everything in me wants to break his nose and disfigure his face, but I don't want to be that man anymore. How could they be this stupid? How could Zandile be this stupid?

... • ...

“Baba.”

“This is not the time, Sbani. Have you spoken to Zandile? She's not answering my calls.”

That woman left two hours ago, Lwandle left just after her. I thought they left together with his brother, that's why I'm surprised to see him walking in here.

At first, he stands, leaning on the wall, and then he slides down until he is sitting next to me. His knees up and his chin almost resting on them. This is something all my brothers do, sit like this when we are dealing with hard things. Mhlaba does it too. I don't understand it. To me, it resembles a foetus – a man going back to his mother's womb, for comfort and safety.

“I haven't tried to call her,” he says.

I had the iron chair and the chains attached to it removed from this room before Zandile and I decided to move back to Mbuba. It's empty now, just a space with an echo. I'm not planning to sell the house; it's my children's home. It's what Zandile came home to, but it cannot be what it used to be. We moved that stuff to the Muldersdrift house. I cried in here, many times. I shed tears for many things, including the child I lost because of my parents' sins. This... this room is the only place that could get tears out of me because it is a place that represents everything I am.

“What's eating you up, baba?” he asks.

I don't answer him because I don't know what he means by this question.

“I know you, baba. You may think that because of everything that has happened between us, I do not, but I know you, and I know that whatever is

happening, it is deeper than us disappointing you. I have seen you in many states, but I have never seen you like this.”

It’s strange that Sbani is here crossing the line he knows not to cross with me, but nothing in me wants to grab him by the throat and remind him who I am. It’s also a strange feeling that I like that we are sitting here, next to each other, our shoulders almost touching. He reminds me of Mqoqi because no matter how hard I tried with this boy, I could never turn him into a man. I thought it was maybe because Hlomu raised him, but over the years I realised that no, he is who he is, something I should have realised and accepted about Mqoqi.

“I’m fine, mfana,” I say.

I want to lift my arm and wrap it around his shoulders, or at least put one hand on his shoulder, but I don’t do that; I can’t. I know he knows I’m not fine, just like Zandile knows too, which is why she thought bringing some woman here to ask stupid questions was a good idea. She tries to make me eat, and sometimes I can, but the one thing she can’t make me do is sleep at night.

“I thought I was fine too. I told myself that lie until the day I drank so much that I woke up lying on a pile of rubbish on the street at 4 am.”

I don’t want to think or talk about that period. My son – who had just been accepted as a PhD candidate – turned into a Joburg South vagabond. When he realised he couldn’t deal with life anymore and decided to come home, my first words to him were: “Did I not tell you to stay away from that Thabitha girl?” That was enough for him to turn and walk away from me. Away to look for comfort at the bottom of every bottle he emptied into his mouth.

I understood, and I knew it was all my fault, but I am Nkosana and I have only two settings: violence and disgust for weak men.

“Do you resent me for what happened to Mah, baba? She would never have ended up in jail if it wasn’t for me.”

My stomach turns, and for the first time in my life, I feel like pulling my knees up to my chest and resting my chin on them. I have done many things

and felt many things in this life, but resenting my children has never been one of them. I don't even think about it this time – the feeling is strong and consuming – so I raise my arm and wrap it around his shoulders. I know he is shocked and confused, especially when I tighten my arm around him and pull him to my chest. I don't have words to say to him, where would I even begin? But this... this is the best thing I have ever felt in my life. I want to tell him I don't resent him; I never have. That thought has never even crossed my mind. But words aren't my thing.

This is the only time my eldest son and I have ever had physical interaction that doesn't involve my fist and him bleeding afterwards.

I'm going to hold on to this moment as long as he wants to stay in it because I want to be able to do this again when he loses his mother – the woman who raised him from when he was nine. I'd tell him what's coming but I doubt he'd understand. He'd want to do something. He'd throw Qhawe's baby in flames even, because Sbani, of all people in this family, would never survive losing Hlomu. At least with Mqhele, three children might stop him from jumping in the flames with her.

“Answer it,” he says, pulling himself away from me.

I wasn't going to answer it because my phone ringing five times is far less important than this moment with my son. I have missed calls from five of my brothers. I'm about to call one of them back when it rings – Hlomu this time. I answer it.

“Uvukile uNaledi. We are on our way to the hospital,” she says.

I tell her I'll be there soon, but still, I don't know if it's a good or bad thing that Naledi is back. She'll want her three children with her, and I don't know what mama's reaction will be to that situation because it was either that baby or Hlomu.

19

“She’s awake, yes, but she’s not going to get up and go home now,” he says.

Dr Masetla says we shouldn’t expect too much from this.

I was the first to get here after Mqhele called, he’d been here all day. He came to check on Qhawe like he does every day, and as they were sitting there, Naledi coughed and opened her eyes. The first thing she did was call Qhawe’s name. When he responded, she asked where their children were. Mqhele left the ward to call the nurses. They did what they did while they waited for Masetla to arrive. I arrived just after him. He was doing something to Naledi. I don’t know what, but I could see he was trying to talk to her.

I don’t want to be in there and I’m happy they kicked us out, but I know Qhawe does because he’s been pacing up and down the whole time. Mqhele has stood up to pace with him twice, coming back to sit with me and then going back to his brother. He’s been saying something to him, I couldn’t hear, obviously, but I know he was assuring him.

It’s still a mystery to me how Qhawe survived the past two months, but then again, these men have survived the worst things that you can ever imagine in their lives. A coma? A freaking coma? How on earth did we end up with something like that? And went on to do things in the middle of all that?

Nqoba is here with Gugu. How many times have we done this again? The whole family gathering at a hospital because one of us is between life and death? I don't even want to start counting. Anyway, Nkosana is still not here, and I know he was at his house – about 15 minutes away – when I called him an hour ago. This is unlike him, especially because he decided to stay in Joburg specifically for this situation. I'd call him and ask what's delaying him, but the boys are here, standing in front of me, looking like men. Ntsika forms part of 'the boys' to me. It doesn't matter that he is actually my brother-in-law. To me, he will always be my child.

"Mami," he says.

I haven't seen Sbani and Lwandle in a while, and I've just realised now that I should actually be worried because the last time we all paid no attention to them – thinking they were out living their young lives – they were busy obsessing over Mqoqi's death. And by the time we woke up, they were murderers, like their fathers. You know, I wanted to be mad at them. Expectedly, I'm the one whom Nkosana would normally have dragged them to with their ears and tell me to deal with them after all they did. But instead, my heart bled for them. What I wanted was to hug them and brush their heads one last time, because it was at that moment – when Mqhele told me how we got out of the Bhungane situation – I realised I had lost my three boys to manhood. To Zuluhood. To Sbopho and Nomafu.

"Where do you three stay?"

A weird question to ask for a mother, I know. But they have no jobs and I certainly do not know what they do every day. They look clean though, happy even.

"At Chloe's—"

Lwandle nudges Sbani before he finishes.

"Is Mah awake? Is she fine?" Lwandle asks me and I know it's his way of changing the subject.

Who on earth is Chloe now? Anyway...

"She's awake, but we can't go in there. They are busy with her."

They sit; Sbani on my left and Lwandle and Ntsika on my right. I feel like a dwarf in between them. They look exactly like their fathers when I first met them – too tall, too dark, eyes firm and elbows on their knees. I smell nicotine too, I'm just not sure from whom. And now they carry the same aura, some sense of danger. I understand why their fathers are the way they are... but them? Where did I go wrong?

“Has she been told about her father?” Lwandle asks.

There's that too.

“We won't tell her until she's fully recovered.” I raise my eyebrows to make sure they know I'm serious. They don't say anything, except look away. At least I still have some authority over them.

“Here,” Gugu says, handing me chips and a can of Coke Lite. I want real Coke but hey...

“Nihlalaphi?” She asks the boys the same question I asked them.

“Siright, Mah, sine flat,” Lwandle quickly says.

Men are definitely born with that one vein in their testicles that has the superpower to speed up lies from down there straight to the mouth. Gugu doesn't even suspect they are lying. She's never really been close to them. When she arrived, they were already too attached to me, and she never really bothered herself with them because she had her own battles to fight – acceptance into this family was one of them.

“So, what do we do now?” Sbani asks.

They haven't seen their fathers yet. Mqhele is probably smoking wherever he is and Qhawe is somewhere pacing up and down by himself.

“We wait,” Gugu responds.

“I thought about bringing the baby with me, but Nqoba said no. I think seeing her babies will help somehow,” she says.

“I thought about bringing Nyanda here too.”

Mqhele didn't say no, but my heart did. We've developed a strong bond with Nyanda over the past two months. It's probably because he is a clingy baby, that's what I think. But Mqhele says I fuss over him too much, far more than I did with our own children when they were babies. Of course, he

looks exactly like all of them, as expected, but I feel like he is different; I feel different with him.

“Where is Qhawe?” Masetla asks.

I didn’t even see him coming; I was deep in thought. We don’t know where he is. We don’t know where all three of them are. And where the heck is Nkosana?

“She’s up and she’s talking, but I don’t want to overwhelm her. Only one of you can come in,” he says.

Gugu and I look at each other and I immediately know she’s not going to move. The boys are looking at me. So, I do what I know I have to do. What does one talk about to someone who has just come out of a coma?

I have not spoken to her since before I left for Ghana, and that feels like a long time ago.

“Babe,” I say, pulling one of those hard white chairs to sit on. I’ve always called her that. She looks too aware for someone who has just woken up from two months of deep sleep.

“Where are my babies, Hlomu?” I smile – a wide one because I see the worry on her face and I want it to go away.

“The babies are fine, Naledi, they are at home. Mfula is living with Gugu and Nyezi is with Xolie...” She takes a deep breath, and then a sigh of relief. I’m smiling because I’m happy that she seems relieved. The less worried she is, the sooner she will recover from whatever landed her in a coma because even doctors here have failed to explain it.

“Nyanda is with me.” I’m still smiling, but she’s frowning.

What? Did she not want me to take care of one of her children? I’m quite offended.

“Who is Nyanda now?” she asks.

Masetla mentioned it was going to take a while.

“Nyanda, your third baby? He’s living with me, he is so—”

“I had twins,” she says.

“You had triplets: Mfula, Nyezi and Nyanda. I know you ended up here not long after you gave birth, but you breastfed all three of them.”

Why does she look so confused?

“I gave birth to two children, Hlomu, in a hut in KZN. Nkangala’s grandmother and a bunch of old women delivered the babies, two babies.”

Now I’m entirely convinced we shouldn’t tell her about her father yet because mentally she’s still not okay. Who forgets their own child? One they gave birth to just over two months ago.

“Naledi!”

He’s here, I’m gonna leave them to their reunion.

“Hlomu,” she says.

She still has that lost look on her face. I put my hand over hers just to assure her, instead she pulls away and grabs my wrist, tight. Qhawe is standing next to the bed and I know he wants me out of here; he wants to be with his wife.

“It was just two, only two. I saw two,” she says.

“I’ll see you later.”

Okay, I gotta go. It will take time for her to get back to her senses and I know this doesn’t sound right, but I’m kind of happy because it means I can keep Nyanda for now; at least until Naledi is well enough to be a fit mother. She needs to focus on this man who has been sitting here, begging her to wake up every day for two whole months.

When I arrive back at reception, it’s empty, they’re all gone.

“They moved to that room,” the front desk guy says, pointing me to a door on the far right.

I wonder when that was negotiated, but I find all of them in there, Xolie and Sambulo too. Sisekelo is writing his last matric exam tomorrow. Why is he here? Xolie’s eyes are red, and I know she’s been crying because even her thousand blinks a minute don’t clear the pain in her eyes.

“Is she okay?” she asks just as Lwandle gets up so I can sit in his place.

“She’s still a bit confused, but physically she looks okay.”

What put her in a coma has always been a mystery to us all. Zandile was there when she gave birth, but we’ve realised she doesn’t want to talk about that incident at all. We don’t ask her too many questions, just like we also

want to put Ladybrand behind us. She's not here, her man is not here. Whatever is going on with them, I don't think I care as much as I did 20 minutes ago. Naledi doesn't remember her own child; that's what's freaking me out more now.

"Did he have to come?" I ask Xolie. I'm talking about Sisekelo because he is the only child here.

"He insisted," she says.

Look, I know Xolie. Something more is happening here. Xolie is a feelings person – things get to her and she cries and smashes wine glasses on some wall and all that and all that... So much has happened here, to us, yet she still has the heart to feel and internalise it all. That's a blessing, I think, that she can still be that. Me, I lost all that along the way, I'm a solutions person now. There really is no point in pondering and grieving. You gotta find a way to get out and be ready to deal with whatever comes next. But... *sigh*... I gotta ask.

"What's wrong? Are you worried about Naledi? She's going to be fine."

I'm looking at her and I know the tears are coming, and they are going to stream through the hectic blinks.

"Let's go get some air," I say.

Whatever it is, I don't want the boys to hear it because who knows what they might go out and do this time?

"No, we'll go," Sbani says.

I don't think the two others agree. They look angry enough to want to know why she's crying and who is responsible for it. But they stand up and follow him. Sisekelo sits still. I raise my eyebrows at him, but he doesn't move.

"Aren't you supposed to be studying? Or be at school?"

He doesn't answer me and I can't even read his face because it's blank. He has this thing about him that's deep and... never mind. It's Sisekelo anyway.

"I'll write the exam tomorrow, I'll go," he says.

I know he's assuring his mother and not me, so I'm now thinking this conversation started before I got here. Xolie is still a mess next to me and I'm thinking that if there's anything she should be used to by now, it's Sisekelo's weirdness. We all know we should accept who and what he is, but it's not easy, especially for his mother.

"Xolie?"

She needs to start talking; this is getting ridiculous now. She looks at Sisekelo and something in me tells me we are about to deal with some dark shit again... because this child!

"I have to go," he says.

I'm good with that, happy even.

"I'll write the exam tomorrow so that at least I have matric because it seems so important to you all. But after that, I'm gonna have to go."

To university, yes.

"I'm taking Nyanda with me," he says.

What on earth is this child on about? I look at Xolie, she's staring at the wall, her arms folded, silent.

"I'm not a child anymore, Mami," he says.

You're freaking 17-years-old, you can't even sign a valid contract or do anything without your parents' consent! And now I remember he said these exact same words to me in the kitchen at that house in Ladybrand.

"And where exactly are you going, Sisekelo? With a two-month-old baby?" He must be crazy if he thinks I'll allow that nonsense.

"I have to go and fix things."

Xolie's silence isn't helping at all.

"You have no idea what my life is like, none of you does," he says, standing up and leaving.

He's going to join his brothers outside. Good, because personally, I was about to start wilding. Now, on to the issue at hand.

"Naledi is so out of it, she doesn't remember how many babies she gave birth to. She believes she had twins."

I'm thinking, let's talk about this one issue first before we get to what's going to happen when we tell her that her father is dead.

“Sisekelo—” She stops and clears her throat “—he woke me up at 5 am and told me Naledi is coming back today, and then told me he had to go because he made a deal,” she says.

Zulu

“When are we going home, Chawe? I want to go home.”

“I know, sthandwa sami. But let’s hear what the doctor has to say first.”

I want to take her home; to hold her all night on our bed and kiss her forehead if she’s lying facing me or the back of her neck if she turns to lie on her side. I want to see her irritated face when I wake her up early; to see her roll her eyes when I get irritated at her for shouting at my kids in SeTswana. I want to hear her laugh. I want to hear her moans under me when we make love – her hands on my skin and her nails digging into me as she calls out my name. How she curls herself around my body and taps kisses all over me when we are done.

I love you, Zulu.

I miss hearing her whisper these words in my ear just before she falls asleep. Those words. She says them so much, any time, every day, many many times even though maybe she thinks I don’t need to hear them anymore. Because she knows I know. But she could say them a thousand times a minute and I would still want to hear them. The most beautiful feeling is what Naledi is to me: the most beautiful sight, the most beautiful presence... the most beautiful state of mind I have been in.

I appreciate her for many things, but most of all, for allowing me to know how much love my heart can carry and give, and how much it exceeds what I had ever believed was a feeling of love.

In my arms she feels safe; in her arms, I feel human. I know I can’t just grab her from this hospital bed and carry her home in my arms, but at least I can look at her. I can look into her eyes and hear her speak. I’m holding tears; I’m good at doing that. I can’t be the one who breaks down when

there's still so much wrong with her. How does she not remember giving birth to our child?

“Two months?” she asks.

The worst two months of my life. There is not a single thing I have gone through in this life that was worse than this.

“You were here every day, weren't you?”

I nod because if I speak, the lump in my throat might just defeat me. I'm emotional, and only Naledi can make me emotional. I'm emotional because I'm looking at her. I'm feeling her and I'm touching her and she's touching me back. She lifts her arm and I automatically know I need to lower my face so she can caress my cheek.

“I love you, Zulu,” she says.

I cry. There's nothing manly about what I am doing right now – nothing is Qhawe Zulu about who I am right now. I cry in front of my wife, something I have never wanted her to see. Ever. Me, like this. She wipes my tears with her right hand; her right arm can't reach me; it's still attached to the IV. I want to take her home. The normal me would have taken her home by now, turned one of our bedrooms into a hospital ward and hired 20 doctors and 50 nurses to watch her every minute, but going home means going back to reality and truth.

Ntate is gone, and I'm going to have to tell her that when we get home.

I didn't go to the funeral; I couldn't because I knew he blamed me for this. Naledi's father was the closest thing I had ever had to a father. We had our own relationship outside of loving Naledi, aside from two children with whom we both shared blood. He never got to meet the triplets. He knew me and I knew him. We were two men who spoke the same language. And when I made that call to him to say Naledi had slipped into a coma, I had to tell him the whole truth about why she didn't give birth in a hospital. That was when he reminded me I had promised to protect her at all costs, and that was when I admitted I had failed him. He got sick, and he died.

Yes, this whole thing contributed, but nobody knows what makes a man let go except the man himself. Because a man carries things in his head and

in his heart. Because with things that test our ability to be tough, we men, are decisive. We, men, are selfish. We, men, choose ourselves.

I grieved for the twin we lost, even though he wasn't even in human form yet, according to the doctor. I grieved because he existed, and then I lost him. Honestly, I didn't know how to deal with that; I knew I was dealing with pain, but I didn't understand how to communicate it. And so I shut down. I watched Naledi try really hard to get me back to being the Qhawe I was before that night she bled my son out of her womb. I never blamed her for what happened, but I knew she thought I did. Women are feelings people. They think everything is about them. You change a little bit and they start thinking it has nothing to do with you and everything to do with them. I still don't know how she dealt with that whole thing because I wasn't there for her through it.

And now her father, where will I even begin? He let go, gave up, and chose not to go through this with the rest of us. Endurance is not a thing we, men, are born with; our hearts don't beat to that drum. That's why we strike and kill. We don't endure and then heal and then sew back the broken pieces of ourselves so we can start over and be who we were before. We tolerate, man-up like we are supposed to and stay up at night trying to break up the fight between the beast and the human inside us. If you are strong enough, or maybe lucky enough, the human defeats the beast and you are able to live a life that will make your obituary a beautiful read:

He was a good man. A great father, a great husband, a kind, caring and giving man. Everybody loved and respected him. This is a great loss. His legacy was...

That time you'd be lying in that coffin, happy that they never got to know what it took, the inner battles you had to fight.

"Let's give it at least three days," Masetla says.

He shouldn't have just come in here without knocking or asking if this was a good time. I look at Naledi and I know she doesn't want to spend

another hour here.

“Qhawe, can we talk outside?” he asks.

It’s hard for me to let Naledi’s hand go, I’m afraid to. But I follow Masetla out of the ward anyway.

“She’s perfectly fine. I’m not sure how that is possible, but everything with her is fine. She could get up and walk out of here, now. But I’m going to keep her while you figure out how you are going to tell her about her father.”

I need a year for that, not three days.

“She wants to go home, and if I can take her home today, that’s what I’m going to do.”

“But—”

“No, I’m taking my wife home.”

Masetla is more like family now, like Peter is. I trust his judgment and his good intentions, but I can’t have another three days of this. I need to bring my wife home, fetch my kids from everyone and take care of the family I created under one roof.

“Bafo.” His hand is on my shoulder. With Mqhele, I don’t even have to turn and look, I just always know when it’s him.

“I’m taking her home, bafo.”

“When?” he asks.

“Now.”

“Okay, let’s go. Can she walk out of here or do we need a wheelchair or something?” He’s looking at Masetla as he asks.

“I’ll remove the IV and get a wheelchair,” Masetla says and goes back inside the ward.

“I came in the Rover. Take it, we’ll follow you in your car,” Mqhele says.

My car is a two-seater and Naledi used to roll her eyes at how I still had a two-seater car when “you live to make me pregnant” she would say. And she wasn’t lying, but I wasn’t going to smile and look happy whenever she said that because I know she’s crazy. I wanted as many children with her as

possible, but not after this. I never want her to go through anything like this again.

They are all here. But where is Nkosana? He was here yesterday.

“Are you sure? Did she wake up... today from a coma? How does a person wake up from a coma and go home on the same day?” That’s Xolie asking, but we are past that.

If Naledi needs to recover, she’ll recover in her own house, her own bed. I’m taking her home.

“I’ll call a couple of my former colleagues; they can take care of her at home. We’ll triple their salaries and that’s it.”

Sometimes I forget she was once a nurse, but I’m relieved that she doesn’t offer to take care of Naledi herself because if there is one day I will never forget, it is the day she threw a vase at me. Yes, we fucked up with the Mabutho thing, but what kind of craziness was that? We had to duck and dive from everything she was throwing at us. I wanted to run out of that house, but we couldn’t leave Sambulo alone with her; she was going to kill him for sure.

The boys are also here. I could swear I saw Sisekelo too, but he’s not among them now.

We’re going home, and I hope we never have to come back to this hospital ever again.

... ● ...

“Sthuli sikaNdaba.”

“Malandela,” he says.

We shake hands because that’s what Mhlaba does. As to why he is standing here, outside facing the gate, I do not know. I haven’t seen him in a while. Actually, the last time I saw him was at the hospital on the day Naledi was admitted. He said he was going back to Mbuba and that

someone needed to be there since Nkosana had decided he was staying in Joburg.

I've never sat down with him and thanked him for bringing my wife and children home alive, but we don't do that; we don't thank each other for doing things like that. We see it as an insult. Mhlaba may have come from my father's dead twin, but there has never been a moment where it doesn't feel like he's been with us forever. He is us, the ninth. I wish we had found him sooner than we did because a lot of things would have made sense soon enough.

"Baright abafazi?" he asks.

I look at Mqhele next to me.

"Aright amakhosikazi. Hlomu has just left," Mqhele says.

Mine is currently sleeping on our bed, strange as this may be. Xolie is still here; she said she was sleeping over, in case there are problems.

Tomorrow I'm going to everyone's house to collect my children. I know I'm not capable of taking care of them as Naledi does, but I will try my best. As long as we are both here, in their home, as long as they see both of us every day, they'll be fine. It's Sbopho I'm worried about the most; Mathongo is still too young and the triplets don't even know us. I'm a man who created a family, and I'm the man who should make sure it stays together.

"Bafo, wasincisha amehlo? Why?" Mqhele asks.

He's right; I've also noticed how Mhlaba has been avoiding eye contact with both of us. And why is he here? When did he get here? He asks Mqhele for a cigarette and they both light up and smoke. This has always been a go-to thing for most of my brothers. I've never been the one to go there.

"Hhayi, akunalutho, bafo. Where is Nkosana?" Mhlaba asks, and puffs smoke out of his nostrils.

We don't know where Nkosana is.

"Why are you here?" Mqhele, again.

I also want to know.

“Ngizonibona. So I can’t visit my brothers? I heard Sdu— your wife was up, so I decided to come.”

I understand. They went through a lot together in just five days. There’s more. He knows we know that.

“I need to speak to lentwana ka Sambulo, uSisekelo, where is he?”

I look at Mqhele again because I’ve lost touch with everything in this family in the past two months.

“He should be home, studying.”

I want to ask why he needs to speak to Sisekelo, but bright lights suddenly blind us from the gate, accompanied by frantic hooting. I know that car. Who the heck told them? I open for them, but they are not coming inside this house with that attitude.

“She’s sleeping, Omphi, she needs time to recover fully.”

“You dragged her out of the hospital and brought her here, Qhawe? Today? And you didn’t even bother telling us! We want to see our sister! Now!”

That is not going to happen.

“As I said, she’s sleeping, Omphi.”

“Well, we are going to wait until she wakes up,” Tshedi says.

Tshedi and I used to be buddies, but that’s all over now. They will always blame me for their father’s death and everything that has happened to Naledi.

Mqhele is the one who lets them inside the house; I had no plans to do that because I know them. They sit on that same couch I once found them beating each other on. And as if that wasn’t enough, I once had to drive all the way to the North West to help their father fix a problem – a problem that’s now here, in my house, sitting on my couch like she didn’t have two children with some bus driver while married to a future chief.

“Have you told her?” Omphi asks.

Initially, she didn’t like me, and then she kind of liked me, now she downright hates me.

“She needs to recover fully first.” Mqhele jumps to my rescue, but it’s pointless because I know these women, they are here for one reason and one reason only.

Mhlaba has been quiet, and I wish he’d stay quiet.

“It’s a good thing you are here. There’s no food in this house—”

“Mhlaba!”

They’re going to kill him! He widens his eyes at me.

“We are hungry. Abafazi begcwele indlu—”

Eyi!!!

“We are not your fucking maids!” Omphi’s sharp tongue stopped offending me a long time ago.

“Baby,” Mqhele answers his ringing phone. I know it’s Hlomu.

He looks at me briefly and leaves to talk to her outside. But I know that look on his face, something is not right. He comes back rushes inside and grabs the car keys from the kitchen counter.

“Mhlaba, as’vayeni.”

“What’s going on?”

He doesn’t answer me, but the next thing I see is Xolie running down the stairs, straight to Mqhele.

They’re gone. Something is going on, but it can’t be too bad if they’ve decided not to tell me about it. So now I’m left with these two, sitting arms folded on my couch looking at me like I owe them something – everything.

“So what’s your plan, Qhawe?” Omphi starts. I’ve always found it interesting that she can pronounce my name properly.

“What’s my plan?”

“Yes, what’s your plan, Chawe?” Tshedi asks.

Look, I’m fond of these women. They are my family too, and I once promised their father to look out for them, whatever it takes. But... we are going to start having problems if they think they can come to my house and talk to me like I’m one of their garden boys. IkwaZulu laykhaya, not their village palace where they are princesses.

“My wife is still recovering; I’m not going to flood her with bad news – not now. Tomorrow I’m going to get all my children and bring them back home. We will deal with the Ntate issue when the time is right.”

Tshedi still has the audacity to stand up, go to my fridge and come back with two cupcakes. I don’t even know where they came from; they must have been brought by Hlomu or Xoli. Gugu is pregnant but I doubt she’s at the stage of eating cupcakes instead of carrots.

“We as her family deserve to—”

Nx!

“My wife – Naledi Zulu – will know about her father’s death when I – her husband – think she’s ready. When we – as her family – decide it’s time to tell her, we will tell her.”

I’ve been too soft on these people. That’s why these women think they can come here and raise their voices at me. I’ve tolerated far too much, and it was all for Naledi’s sake. But it ends now, I have too much to deal with.

“She’s our sister Chawe—”

And what am I? Some man they can come here and disrespect? Not even once did they ask me how I was doing in the whole two months Naledi’s life was at stake. Instead, they’d come to the hospital with attitude and treated me like I had no right to be sitting by her side every day.

At least Lesedi had the heart to call me now and again, and she never went a day without calling Hlomu to ask how we were all doing and if the kids were okay.

“She’s my wife! The mother of my five children. She entered my father’s house wearing isidwaba, wathelwa ngenyongo! Her surname is Zulu. And please stop this thing of feeling entitled to my children. They are mine and they are being taken care of by their mothers. Now, leave my house!”

“Not without seeing Naledi first...”

Ayi! Ayi! I don’t believe in hurting women, but these two are pushing me.

“I will drag both of you out of here with your hair. That’s if I don’t shoot you first because ning’jwayela kabi manje!”

Tears? No, those are not going to work on me, not now. I need these women out of here before I lose it.

“Get out!”

I have no time for their entitlement, not today. They don’t even know shit about who their father was. They have rejected their mother; their own mother because she chose to leave a place that would have killed her if she had stayed. I would kill to see my mother’s face again. I would die, now, if there was a guarantee that I’d come back to life after seeing Mqoqi and Oleta on the other side. I owe both of them an apology.

“Get the fuck out! Now!”

They can go cry outside the gate.

20

“What do you mean he’s gone, Hlomu? A baby? A two-month-old baby?”

Well, he’s gone. I arrived here to find the nursery empty. MaMnguni says she left him sleeping, peacefully. And we can’t blame her because she wasn’t even outside at the maid’s quarters. She was here, in the main house, waiting for me to come home before she could leave.

“So he just walked out of here and...”

Hhaybo! Why is he angry at me? I know it’s Qhawe’s child and all, but was I not with him at Qhawe’s house when this whole thing happened? Normally, I’d be losing my mind over this, but Sisekelo did say he was going somewhere and that he was taking Nyanda with him. I didn’t tell Mqhele this, but I’m this calm because I know Sisekelo has him. All I need to do now is sit him down and explain what happened at the hospital earlier. Mhlaba came in, greeted and walked out. He’s been acting weird around me, and honestly, I prefer a weird acting Mhlaba to the normal one. He talks too much, and you are lucky if he doesn’t offend you while at it.

“Sisekelo took him; he told me at the hospital he was going to. But I didn’t think he was going to come here and kidnap him.”

He rubs his hands together and looks down at his feet. It’s interesting that of all his habits, including the smirk and the chain-smoking and... and... and... this is the one I never really noticed – the rubbing of hands. They all do it, Mhlaba included.

I called Xolie when I arrived home and found the baby gone. She was still at Qhawe's house. And then I called Mqhele.

Look, I know we had our problems with those freckled people, but they're all dead now. So I'm not here freaking out, and that's because I know Sisekelo will never hurt his own brother. He's a peculiar child, yes, a bit dark even. But I know how he was raised and whatever he has gone to do, wherever it is, I know it is for the baby's benefit, not to harm him. The problem though is that he didn't take any baby formula with him or even nappies. As to what he is going to feed him, I do not know. All I know is that baby has to be brought back here in two days maximum. Otherwise, he'll die of starvation and whatever else because a 17-year-old has no clue how to take care of an infant.

"Qhawe doesn't know that his son is gone," he says.

I'm worried Mqhele is only worried about that in this particular instance, this present moment of Sisekelo – of all people – coming here and kidnapping his own infant brother. Qhawe is dealing with a lot right now, and what this husband of mine needs to do is go out there and find that baby before his almost-twin – cray-cray man that one – finds out his son is gone.

Five years ago, I'd be losing my mind over this situation, but you know what? Nothing surprises me anymore. These people went and dug up bones somewhere, reburied them and started thinking they were suddenly going to be less complicated.

"Mqhele, find them – Sisekelo and the baby – and find them soon."

He shouldn't be here looking helpless; he should be out there doing what I'm telling him to do because if Qhawe even hears that his child has disappeared, while we were supposed to be taking care of him, shit is going to fly. Worse, it's the child Naledi doesn't remember giving birth to.

"Hlomu."

Jizas! Why is he still here calling my name? He should be out there acting crazy like he always does.

"Sambulo says Sisekelo is at home, studying, he has an exam tomorrow."

What???

“And the baby is not there?”

“The baby is not there.”

That’s impossible!

“What exactly did he say to you at the hospital?”

Okay, now I’m freaking out.

“He said he was leaving and that he was taking Nyanda with him.”

He did say he was going to leave after writing his last exam tomorrow but—

“Let’s go,” he says.

Go where?

“Wake the kids up. We’ll leave them at Nqoba’s house; Gugu will make sure they get to school tomorrow.”

The boys get themselves ready for school every morning. They’ll make sure Niya is—

“Hlomu!”

Oh, Lord! We’ve lost Qhawe’s child! How on earth are we going to explain that to him? MaMnguni is so old now we can’t even trust her to wake up early enough to get our kids ready for school. And who is going to drive them there if we’re both not here?

“Should I pack some clothes?” I ask.

He shrugs, and I immediately know he has no plan whatsoever, let alone a clue about who took the baby or when we are coming back from wherever we are going. I thought they already killed everyone who had the potential to mess with us, so what is this now?

Niya is fast asleep. I pack her school uniform in one bag and hang her schoolbag over my shoulder. She’s gonna have to wake up because nobody is carrying her down the stairs – she’s 10 and tall. I ignore her complaints and hand her one of her backpacks as she walks down the stairs while I go to Msebe’s room. They have separate bedrooms now, the twins. They said they were too old to be sleeping on single beds and while at that, informed us that they were individuals and both needed their own space. Mqhele said

it's those white people schools; I didn't even bother entertaining that statement. I remembered how when we were nine, Langa and I asked our mother to stop dressing us in similar clothes like we were Ackermans mannequins. It was always Langa in pants and me in skirts, but the same t-shirts.

“Mami?”

I turn around and see him sitting up on the bed. When I walked in, he was fast asleep. He sleeps with the lights on, so I decided I'd pack his clothes in a small bag first and then wake him.

“Are you looking for something?”

Sigh.

Are all teenagers this territorial about their stuff being touched?

“No, I'm packing you a bag; you have to go to Bab'Nqoba's house, just for tonight.”

Definitely not “just for tonight” but I've been feeling so guilty since the Ladybrand saga that sometimes I find myself trying to reassure them, even by being dishonest.

“What is it this time?” he says and kicks the duvet to the floor.

I'm looking at him and... not to invalidate his feelings or anything like that, but you don't clench your jaw when talking to your mother. I know it's a sign of someone trying to suppress their anger, internalising it. I know because a jaw-clencher put him into my womb. We are going to address his tone later.

I watch him as he walks to his study desk and grabs a t-shirt he had thrown over his desktop. He picks up sweater pants from the floor and puts them on, over the boxer shorts he was sleeping in.

“Where's Niya?” he asks.

He hasn't looked me in the eye, just down at the bag he is packing his schoolbooks in. I'm looking up at him because now he towers over me, and for the first time I realise that I have not seen my little boy in him since the day we came back from Ladybrand.

“She's already downstairs with your father.”

“What’s happening? Who is trying to kill us this time?”

My stomach turns at the way he says it. I do have an answer for him in my head, an assuring one, but somehow, I just can’t transport it to my mouth. So, I stand here quiet, almost frozen.

“It’s fine; I’ll pack my own clothes,” he says.

I leave the room without saying another word and hope Langa will be less intense. He’s become a deep sleeper, something he had never been until recently.

“Hlomu!” Mqhele shouts from downstairs.

I know he wants me to hurry.

I’m going to try the same thing with Langa, try to pack all his stuff without waking him up. But... his lights are off and he is not on his bed.

I get that feeling in my stomach for a second, but then it hits me that he must already be downstairs. That’s why Mqhele was rushing me. His school backpack is on the floor though, his basketball kit is right next to it. I’m certain he would have taken it with because he has a game tomorrow. Basketball is his go-to thing, but I don’t think he’s passionate about it, he just has the height advantage, so he uses it to win. My kids need distractions; how sad is that?

“Langa!” I shout from the top of the stairs.

“Silinde nina,” Mqhele shouts back.

I’m confused because... what does he mean he is waiting for *us*? That feeling in my stomach wasn’t just a feeling; my body knew. And yet... I shout back.

“Langa is there with you, right?”

He doesn’t answer me, but I watch him run up the stairs with that face I know too well. He runs past me and straight to Langa’s bedroom. When he comes out, I’m still a statue. Mqhele knows, they all know.

“Who took him?”

“Hlomu.”

“Who took my child, Mqhele?”

I've shared my life with this man for almost two decades and I know all his movements and what they mean. I know what he's feeling by just looking into his eyes.

Fear is not his thing, and the fact that I see it now – here in this moment where he stands in front of me with his hands cupping my face – means he knows we have arrived at that place of no return.

Zulu

My team will lose tomorrow because I won't be there.

I do not know where we are driving to, but I did not hesitate to sneak out of the house and get in the car. I'm not sure when I'll be back at school.

I also don't care much about basketball, but you know, I'm good at it and all. The team relies on me a lot, so of course, I'm going to worry about not being there.

I'm tall and white boys can't jump, so I jump for the whole team. My coach said I had a good chance of making it to the NBA and becoming something like LeBron James – a multimillionaire. Does he even know how much money my family has? I looked at him and laughed. He walked away. At training the next afternoon, it was like that conversation between us never occurred at all. It is adorable, and somewhat insulting how... they always feel like they need to save you.

Look, everybody knows who my family is. We are those children who sometimes spend a day at school with bullet-proofed cars parked outside the gate all day. The school never lets the cars into the premises because they know the men in them are armed. But that is just who we are, and I don't know anything other than that.

I've heard that my fathers were once poor or something like that, but I have never lived in a house that had no swimming pool or unoccupied bedrooms. I have never wanted for anything. But then again, I'm only 14 and I know what danger is, I know how to fire an assault weapon. Two months ago, before we left with just the clothes on our backs, baba pulled Msebe and me to the garage and placed his hands on our shoulders. It was on that day that I realised we were almost as tall as him.

“Bafana, we need to fix some things, and you are going to have to go away somewhere for a few days. You will be safe there,” he said.

When Msebe and I looked at each other—

“Yeyi! I’m talking to you, look at me!” We looked at him. “You are boys, not men. Do you understand?”

I can’t say we understood, but we knew he had more words for us, so I nodded.

“While you are there, listen to your mother, never doubt anything she says, listen to her, and look out for Niya and your little brothers. Do you understand me?” Msebe nodded this time.

“When all of this is over, I will come and get you. But remember, you are just boys, kids. Listen to your mother.”

The driver was already revving the car outside, and we knew it was time to go, confused as we were. We were almost out of the garage when he grabbed both of us from behind with our necks and pressed our heads on his chest. It was not a thing we are used to. But also, it didn’t feel weird because baba may not be a hugger, but he has never withheld his touch from us. We know the feeling of his hand on our shoulders, rubbing our heads, lifting us when we were small enough and his smile and laugh. He has never denied us love and affection. Not that he has ever said the words out loud, but we know, because he tells us with his actions.

What we didn’t know until two months and some weeks ago was that intense hug, which felt like a cry of a man who would shed tears if he could. We stood still, frozen in his smother, and when he let us go, he turned and walked back inside the house, never looking back at us again. Niya was not waiting for us in the car, so Msebe freaked out and wanted to jump out. But the car was already moving. We didn’t know that driver, we had never seen him before. But when we arrived at Bab’Qhawe’s house, he shook hands with him while Sbopho and Mathongo jumped in, so that gave us some comfort.

“Where is Niya?” Msebe jumped out of the car to ask him.

“She’ll come with your mother,” Bab’Qhawe said.

Mami was in Ghana visiting malume but we still felt relieved that there was some explanation about our sister.

We spent that whole trip breaking fights between Sbopho and Mathongo until Mathongo fell asleep with a bottle in his mouth and there was peace. We were dumped at some farm and were the first to arrive. By midnight the house was packed, and early the next morning some woman we didn't know arrived. Her name was Sthembile and I have never seen or heard of her again since we left that house. She was rather interesting, seemed to know a lot about us, our family. Of course, she couldn't tell us apart, especially us, the older boys, but she knew all our names. Whenever she found moments alone with us, she'd ask or say something about Bab'Mqoqi. Mabutho claimed she was obsessed with him.

I miss him. We don't talk about him a lot. Mami doesn't talk about him at all. Every time I say something about him, she drops her eyes and changes the subject. The last time I saw him – unlike baba he was a hugger – I was 12 then so affection was still welcome. That day, I asked him to teach me how to ride a bike, he laughed and said bikes were not for boys.

“Stick to riding bicycles, mfana.”

And then he promised to start teaching me after I turn 16. He's gone now, his beloved bikes took him. I didn't know how much death could hurt until Bab'Mqoqi died. I know we once had a brother called Mvelo – his pictures are still on our walls – but I don't remember him. I was too young when he died. He was shot dead in Mbuba. His grave is there with the rest. Mami goes to it sometimes, and baba always tells us not to follow her or bother her with anything when she's there, even if she spends hours there. If he had lived, he'd be a grown man now, and maybe Mami would be happier.

Oh no... The past two hours were the most peaceful and now he's up. On top of the crying, he smells like shit. When I jumped in the car with the baby, baba just drove and we were out of there. It only hit both of us that we had no idea how to stop a baby from crying two hours into this trip. We stopped at that Ultra City garage in Harrismith, but none of those shops

there had nappies. We bought fresh milk and some meal with butternut and mashed potatoes at Spur. It was my idea; baba was completely clueless. I think Nyanda is too young to be eating butternut or mash because the only thing I've ever seen Mami feeding him is the milk in the bottle. I didn't pack any of it.

"I'm sure he has shat three times by now," baba says.

I'm not sure if this is a joke or what, because I know he hardly jokes, unless Niya is in the same room. And so, we let Nyanda cry because we don't know what to do.

I look at my phone and get some relief because it's almost midnight. What I know for sure is that Mami has been calling. I put my phone on flight mode and switched off data, so she can't find me, not even with WhatsApp calls.

"It's either he is hungry or the shit on that nappy is burning," I say.

Baba turns and looks at me, and by the look on his face alone, I know this baby won't survive long with us.

"It's midnight, we're going in," he says.

The gate slides open just as he says the last word. It took us hours to drive here. I didn't know where we were going, but I knew we had to go. Sisekelo was supposed to do this, but you know, he has done so much already. The first time he and I had a conversation about these things, I was nine and he was 12. He wanted to know why I never sleep past 5 am and I wanted to know why he doesn't sleep at all.

"Ikabani la?" I ask.

Nyanda stops crying the moment we walk in. Baba is carrying him.

He doesn't answer me, just a signal for me to stand still. I wish Sisekelo was here because he'd know exactly what's happening. He always knows. He was the one who told us we'd never see Bab'Mqoqi again as we were being driven home from school one afternoon. I remember the new driver – his name is Ntuthuko but we don't call him by name – we call him malume. I remember how he turned and looked at us with a frown on his face after Sisekelo said that.

“He’s coming,” baba says.

Who?

I hear the footsteps, but I don’t see anyone yet. Everything about this is strange: this house, the quietness of it, the fact that it is strangely placed between tall buildings and that we couldn’t drive in until midnight. But gogo told me that one day I will have to do something to save my family. I didn’t know who she was at first, just a ghost who woke me up at 5 am and cradled me when I was a toddler. Her embrace was warm, but not as welcome as Mami’s. We fought just after I turned six because I didn’t want her to visit me anymore. I didn’t want her waking me.

“You aren’t even supposed to be here; you should be with me, Mvelo and your little sister,” she said. I was confused because I don’t have a dead little sister. Niya is the only sister we have.

The man stops and looks at us, more at me than he does at Bab’Nkosana and the baby.

“So you’ve finally brought the one you’ve been hiding?” the man says.

I have a feeling Bab’Nkosana has been here before, and that he knows who this man is. This whole thing of coming here was his idea.

All I said to him was, “Gogo doesn’t wake me up anymore.”

I told him that because he asked me about her a few months ago, before my and Msebe’s 14th birthday. I had no idea how he knew about me and gogo, but I saw the look on his face and I knew whatever it was that had made him pull me aside and ask me such questions was deeper than I thought. So now here we are, the baby in his arms, following a man I don’t know down the passage and into a room. It’s dark when we walk in, but when the man switches the light on, I know what I see is not what I expected. It’s empty, just walls and the floor.

“Hlala phansi, mfana,” baba says.

There’s nothing to sit on. No chair. Nothing. But he sits on the floor and I figure this is what I should do too. So, I sit next to him, my knees up

almost to my chin. I don't know why I do that when I feel nervous, but I do; we all do.

We came here about the baby, but this man doesn't seem to care much about him, it's me he is focused on. Our eyes meet and he looks away immediately.

"You know you can't have these, and yet you kept him?" he says to baba. I'm lost.

"I'm not here for that," baba says to him. He doesn't like this man, that I know for sure, his face says so.

"Why didn't you throw this thing in the fire? Make me understand, Zulu." He's looking at the baby now.

Baba holds Nyanda tighter and looks at the man.

"Tell me what we need to do," he says.

I'm still lost.

"But you know."

"And you know I will never kill my own children. Now tell me what I need to do to fix this."

The man stands up quickly and starts pacing around the room. He's not an old man, just a strange man. He's wearing normal clothes, but that thing wrapped around his neck, I don't know what it is. It looks like some animal's tail or something.

"Give them what they want, or they will take something away from you, again," the man says.

Baba looks at me, and then at the baby.

"They've already taken too much from me. I will not give them anymore."

I watch the man rush from the far end of the room to where me and baba are sitting. I don't know what this look on his face is, but I know it's freaking me out.

"Thulula made a pact. He travelled for days, and he made that pact. If he hadn't, you wouldn't be here."

“I don’t care about Thulula or Sbobho or any of them. I just need you to tell me what to do now,” Baba says.

The man looks at me again, and I’m the one who looks away this time. He makes me uncomfortable. Not that anything about being here is comfortable, but he looks at me like he knows more about me than I do.

“Did your mother not tell you that you couldn’t keep this one? That you couldn’t have both. Why do you think she strangled your brother to death? Do you think that was easy for her? The problem with you, Nkosana is that you want to have it all; you do not understand that your own existence was a result of sacrifice.”

Nyanda starts crying again. Baba hands him to me this time and I hold him tight because this man reminds me too much of the things Sisekelo says sometimes. He said, this one time, that our great-grandfather died so we could live.

Msebe said, “You are starting again with your ghost stories,” and then left us. I wanted to know because I had my own ghost stories, so I stayed and raised my eyebrows at him.

“Why do you think we keep being reborn? One person, reborn and reborn again?”

Look, we are a strange people, but there is a biological explanation. It’s strong genes, undiluted genes, that’s why we all look exactly the same. It’s not an easy thing, you know. I think if we weren’t who we are, our lives maybe would have been miserable. We would have been teased about our eyes or called weirdos by other kids. I’m still not sure if anyone who isn’t family can tell us apart; in fact, I don’t think Mam’Naledi and Mam’Gugu can tell Msebe and me apart.

“Why did you bring Nyanda here?” the man asks.

“Because I can’t kill my brother’s child. You have to tell me what to do to end lamasimba my grandfather got us into.”

Nooooo baba doesn’t cuss... and who is this grandfather he speaks of? Even we don’t know our grandfather – his father.

“After you let him grow this old? Look at him,” the man says, pointing at me.

“You can’t do anything to him now, he is at that age...”

“I’m Langa,” I say, quickly, because clearly, this man doesn’t know what he is talking about.

I thought people like him automatically knew things. Like... they know your name before you tell them, or the day you will die and stuff like that.

“This is Nyanda,” I say, tapping the baby’s back. I hadn’t even realised he’d stopped crying.

“No, Nyanda. That one doesn’t have a name.” I look at baba. Surely, we didn’t drive all the way here with a shitting, crying baby for nothing.

“Nyanda is in Mbuba; we buried him there. We went all the way to Swaziland to get his bones and we buried him where we were supposed to, just like you told us to,” baba says.

The man laughs. His laugh is pissing me off. I’m getting even more pissed off because I don’t understand what is happening here.

“Nyanda.”

Why is he calling me that? That’s the baby’s name.

“My name is Langa.” He laughs again.

I feel baba’s hand pressing on my shoulder. I wasn’t about to get up, not with the baby in my arms, so I don’t know why baba feels the need to restrain me. Besides, the man is sitting right in front of us, with his knees up too.

“You are in my house; I will call you by your names, by who you really are.”

Baba’s hand is still firm on my shoulder.

“Tell me what I need to do,” he says.

“She will burn, you know that, right? They all burn because they do not listen.”

I’m back to being confused.

“You asked for a girl. You knew it could only be given to you through her womb because that’s what you asked for when you smeared her with

gall. But you were not ready, Nkosana. You were not ready for that gift, so Mqhele kicked it out of her womb. It's one of his biggest regrets. And you know he has many regrets in his life, but that one still keeps him awake at night.”

I look at baba, hoping for some explanation, at least, but he is staring ahead at the wall in front of us, over the man's head.

“Even after that, you got what you wanted. She came, and you named her after your grandmother because you believed she was a gift from her. You should have named her Nomafu.”

I know Nomafu was my grandmother, baba's mother, and I know she was killed in Mbuba with my grandfather – just like the brother I don't remember. Baba shakes his head and takes a deep sigh.

“She will burn to death, soon,” the man says.

“Who will burn to death?” I ask.

I don't know who I'm expecting an answer from between the two of them, but I get none.

“Niya? Is he talking about Niya, baba?”

He doesn't answer me, so I look at the man. He flashes a smile at me; a weird one because his eyes are not smiling at all.

“Thulula went to—” Nyanda cries again. The man laughs.

I don't know what is going on, that I'm sure of, but his laugh pisses the shit out of me. I look at baba and I see tears in his eyes. Never in the 14 years that I have lived have I seen tears in his eyes. They don't do that; my fathers don't cry. The man is laughing. Nyanda has stopped crying.

“You, Nyanda, you are not supposed to be here. Your mother should have strangled you to death, just like your grandmother did to your father's twin. Now look, you are here with this thing...” the man says, pointing at the baby. He laughs again.

Now I'm more than pissed off.

I place the baby on the floor.

Baba tries to grab my arm, but his grip is weak.

The tail, whatever animal it belongs to, is fluffy, but I pull it harder and harder around his neck until it feels like a thin rope.

The man doesn't fight back. Maybe he would try if my knee wasn't pressed on his stomach. I only let go when his arms stop moving and his tongue is hanging.

Baba still has tears in his eyes, but he picks up the baby and tells me we have to go. The gate is closed. So, he goes back to the house and comes back with the remote. Once we are outside the gate, he throws it on the ground and steps on it until it is in complete pieces. He then picks up the pieces and puts them in his pocket.

"Mpande will sort this out," he says.

I don't understand what he means. Bab'Mpande is about one thing; he always tells us girls are pretty but evil, so we must never trust them. I don't know him to be the man who fixes things, let alone gate remotes. When he brought Madlozi and Bayede to us, all he said was, "These are your brothers, and they are proof that girls are evil." We laughed because he always says funny things. But we were happy to meet them. They are our little brothers; they look exactly like us.

"Langa," baba says.

He never calls us by our names. It's always 'mfana' or 'Mageba' sometimes.

"Yebo baba."

"Do not tell your mother what happened tonight. Do not tell anyone."

I nod.

I'm 14, and tonight I killed a man because he kept laughing. Baba didn't get up to stop me, he sat and watched with tears in his eyes. I don't know how I feel, but I know that man pushed me. Nyanda is sleeping. Baba says we are going back home.

"Baba." He turns to look at me. "Who will burn to death? Who was that man talking about?"

"Nobody is going to burn, Mageba. Not in my generation." He pats my head with his hand.

I believe him because I trust him. But I can tell he is not himself right now. He keeps looking back at Nyanda in the backseat where we placed him. I know babies have to be strapped on a car seat, but we didn't think about bringing it with us when we left home. So if he happens to roll and fall on the car floor, we'll just pick him up and hope he didn't get a head injury or something like that. But I read somewhere that babies are like rubber, they don't break.

"Kuzolunga, mfana. Sizoyilungisa yonke lento," baba says, touching my head again.

But I don't think there's anything to be fixed here, that man got what he deserved.

"If you're tired, I can drive," I say. He looks at me and I see a brief laugh on his face – a rare sight.

"Drive? You're a kid. I'm not ready to die in some road accident."

Lwandle taught me how to drive when I was 11, but baba doesn't know that. Also, I know he doesn't let anyone touch his Maybach, so that was just me trying my luck.

Putting my phone on flight mode saved my battery, big time. And since we are on our way back home, I might as well get back online and find out what I need to prepare myself for. Missed calls from Mami, baba, Msebe and everyone, just as I expected. My team lost, as I expected, so things are gloomy here in the WhatsApp group. I'm not going to read any of these 100 messages, they'll get over it.

What I want to know is where Aluta is, and what her day was like. I've never really spoken to her because whenever she comes near me, I freeze. Of all the girls at school, she is the one that makes me feel like a little boy. She has dimples, like Mam'Zandile. Her skin is dark as night and her teeth are whiter than that stash of cocaine I found at Bab'Mqoqi's house that other day, but I don't want to talk about that.

She's two grades ahead of me. She's 16 and I hate that she's dating that guy in matric, just the sight of him pisses me off.

Anyway, I have three Science projects that I didn't submit, so I'm probably going to fail Grade 9. Mami will take all my gadgets away as punishment; that I know for sure.

I have a message from Hlangu. He wants to know if I'll be at school tomorrow and something about Niya and a boy at school who followed her to the library and told her he liked her. Now we're gonna have to deal with that boy, whoever he is.

He's probably 10-years-old or so, but...

21

Nkosana loves me.

No, not like that.

Nkosana's love for me is platonic. He trusts me; his impulsive instinct is to protect me, keep me in this family and listen to me. He trusts who I am to him and his brothers, and who I am to this family.

I'm the woman who raised his children; the woman who took him back to a home he never wanted to return to. But also, Nkosana knows me, and that is why he is here, looking down at his feet while I am talking to him. Look, in this family – and all of them know this – there is a line they can never cross with me, and they figured that out very early.

There was a time when I struggled to even look him in the eye because he was that intimidating. But now, after everything we've been through as a family, he knows I got past that shit a long time ago. What I want to know is why, and it's not the first time he's done this; he thought it proper to take my child to wherever the fuck he went with him, to do whatever he did.

“You couldn't even call me, Nkosana? Call me to say you had Langa with you? And the baby...”

He does that thing that they all do of rubbing their hands together and looks at Mqhele. He should look at me, not his brother.

“It's more complicated than you think, Hlomu,” he says.

There's nothing more complicated than this family, and yet I'm still here because by now, I know I can never leave them.

"There are things we had to take care of."

"Things you had to take care of with a 14-year-old?"

He doesn't answer me. So now he's mute?

They walked in here at 6 am, with a crying hungry baby whose nappy probably had six loads of shit. I'm not sure how they knew we were at Sambulo's house, but I suspect his brother had briefed him. Langa didn't even talk to me; he borrowed Sisekelo's uniform and off to school they went with Ntuthuko driving them. I haven't said anything to anyone, but Ntuthuko himself is starting to worry me. And where the heck in Nkangala?

"Where were you?"

I've asked him this question three times, and each time... he has dropped his eyes instead of answering me. Nkosana never drops his eyes; he looks at you until you look away. He carries that much presence and that much power. Nkosana stands tall and fearless; his word is firm and final. So, what is this now? Why has he been acting strange around me?

"Mqhele?"

He looks up at me. My gut tells me he also doesn't know what is going on, but he knows something is wrong. This is not the Nkosana we all know. Whatever it is, I fear it is the one thing that will end him. My problem is that he brought my child into it, and I will not have that happen. He knows it; Mqhele knows it.

"It didn't work," he says and looks up at me.

I don't know what he is talking about, but I know that he is back; that the Nkosana I am looking at now is the Nkosana I know.

"It didn't work, Hlomu, it didn't. We tried. I want you to know that."

I feel Mqhele's arm around my waist, but it does not feel like the usual touch of intimacy and obsession. It is more like a push, a grab.

"No, Mqhele! I'm not leaving this room! What didn't work, Nkosana? What are you talking about?"

It's not the tears in his eyes that worry me; it's the why. Why Nkosana of all people would let tears fall from his eyes? It's a rare sight and a thing that I, and probably he, does not believe he is capable of, or even deserves. He looks down at his feet, again, just after he and Mqhele lock eyes. The thing about these two is that they do not have to say anything to each other, they just have to lock eyes for them to know what the other is saying.

"Hlomu, ngiyakucela," Mqhele says.

Naahhhhh... We are past that; I'm not his little precious glass anymore that he always wants to make sure doesn't break, except when he feels like breaking it.

"What didn't work, Nkosana?"

He'd better answer me this time.

He looks at Mqhele, and I immediately know he won't be giving me any answers.

Not now.

Not here.

Not today.

They didn't have to say it; they just had to look at each other and cast me out. Just like that. An urge to grab everything within my reach in this room and throw it at them consumes me because I know this. This thing here is not just big; it is deep.

Mqhele's arm is still around my waist, but his hand is not nested anywhere on my skin. It's always a sign, a thing that I know and can feel. I raise my face to look up at him. The thing about Mqhele is that he is soul, he is feelings, and he is clear. His eyes speak more than his mouth and his feelings. With him, I always know.

"If this is about any of the children, I will kill you; both of you!"

Mqhele closes the door behind me, and I hear the key turn as he locks it. I lean on the door because when I decided or rather realised, I had to leave the room, I had no plan as to where I was going next. So, I lean and stare at the passage in front of me, doors lining it. There's Phakeme's room, Sisekelo's room, Mabutho's room and four other closed doors on either side

of the long passage before it ends. The door of the main bedroom where Xolie and Sambulo sleep is staring back at me. She is probably downstairs doing whatever. I don't know where Sambulo is because you never really know with that one, and I refuse to believe that he is somewhere in this yard smoking weed, now, at 8:30 am.

It's MaSbisi's humming that distracts me from everything. It's probably some church song because you know... women her age are all about church – my mother included. I have no connection to church stuff, I lost it all a long time ago. So I can't really be sure if it's a church song that she's humming.

“Hhawu,” she says when she sees me, standing with my back pressed on that door. She looks surprised more than anything.

I remember the day she told me about Xolie's strange habits, that sometimes she throws Champagne flutes and wine glasses on that wall to release anger. I couldn't figure out if it was gossip or concern that made her spill it out, but I knew I couldn't tell her how much I understood why Xolie was like that. You do not knowingly live and give your body to someone whose hobby is to take lives and still be as intact and content as a Thobile or a Karabo whose mjolo problems are a man not texting back.

“Uright?” she asks me.

Am I ever? I nod and tell her she doesn't have to be here today, that she can take the day off.

“Aybo! I still have four bedrooms to clean.”

Judging by the mop and a bucket she has with her, the room at whose door I'm leaning on is the one she's ready to clean. But she can't go in there, even I was kicked out of there.

“Take the rest of the day off, MaSbisi; you don't have to be here today. I'm giving you permission to go home.”

Well, actually she lives here, but I'd gladly call her an Uber to Orange Farm right now.

“If Xolie—”

“Don't worry about Xolie, go home.”

It's an instruction now. I can't be arguing with her over mopping floors and changing linen right now; we have bigger problems here. I hear voices getting louder inside the room, so I voluntarily pick up her bucket and instruct her to follow me downstairs with her mop. There's no need to call an Uber, one of these men here can drive her home. The problem with this one is that she meddles too much and talks too much. I watch her as she walks to her outside apartment and comes out with a bag, into the car and out the gate.

And now I'm going back to that room. I will bang on the door until they open for me because what was that all about anyway? Mqhele and Nkosana raising their voices at each other? They don't do that. None of them does that, not even in the worst of times. Gugu once described it as weird.

Look, deep down, I know that sometimes they disagree on things. Like there was no way Sambulo voluntarily offered Sisekelo for that Ntsikeni thing, and there was no way Mqhele would let Nkosana drag his daughter from a hospital bed to Mbuba, in front of me and my mother. That's why he was not there, and that's why he switched his phone off.

But what I know – what I have always known – is that anything and everything they do is meant to protect this family.

“Mqhele!” I shout.

I've knocked on this door six times. They aren't arguing anymore, just silence, and that's worrying me even more. I've realised that we are the only people in this house. Xolie is definitely not here, along with her dodgy husband.

No answer.

“Mqhele, please open the door!”

Still no answer.

I don't know what it is, but it makes my body tremble and brings tears into my eyes. If I wasn't Hlomu, I'd stand here and weep in silence, but I'm me. So I wail, I scream, kick and punch the door until Mqhele's eyes are staring into mine.

Normally he'd grab me and press my head to his chest, kiss my forehead and try to calm me down, arms wrapped around me. But this is not a normal situation. I know because his eyes are red too; tears have been coming out of them. One hand is still holding the door handle, the other is in his pocket. He hasn't said a word, just his eyes on mine.

I'd be able to peep behind him and see Nkosana, if his tall self wasn't blocking my view inside the room.

"What's happening? Why were you fighting?"

I manage to ask amid all the emotions and confusion I'm overwhelmed with right now. He still hasn't reached out to touch me, and that's unlike him.

The thing about me and Mqhele is that there is never a disconnection between us. We could be going through the worst; we could hurt each other in the worst possible ways, but our hearts never disconnect. We are one. Our story is impossible to explain or comprehend, but by now I know, and he knows. It's just that we've never talked about it.

"Let's go home," he says.

I feel the urge to touch him, to pull him to my body and feel his heartbeat. I want to touch him.

"Let's go home, Hlomu."

He steps out and pulls the door behind him. I do want to go home. I want us to be cuddling on our bed with my head on his chest because then maybe he will tell me why he is like this. That has always been his vulnerable place, a safe place even, when he has his whole arm around me, holding me so tight that he's certain I will not break free even if I tried to. But—

"Where is Nkosana?"

I'm sure Nkosana would have said something by now or left this room or... something.

"Let's go home," he says, again.

I grab his wrist. This is not the intimate touch I was longing for minutes ago. This is me panicking. He blocks me with one arm when I try to push

the door in.

“We’re going home,” he says.

His grip on my arm is tighter than any touch I have ever felt from him. And I can feel him; I know this him. He is taking me home, and if it means he has to drag me down these stairs, he will.

“Hlomu, let’s go home. We need to talk about Langa; we need to talk to him.”

I don’t like this.

“It’s only 10 am, Mqhele. He’s at school.”

“We’re going to his school then. I’ll drag him out of class if I have to.”

Yoh!

We are indeed en-route Parktown. Look, I’m also mad about what Nkosana did, but I think fetching our child from school at 12.30 pm is a bit extreme, especially because we know we can sit and interrogate him about where Nkosana took him in the afternoon when he is home. Besides, Qhawe wants his baby back – all his three babies back by this afternoon. I’m sure Xolie and Gugu have delivered them to their rightful parents, I’m the only one still holding on to this one whose mother doesn’t even remember giving birth to. I cleaned him up in the morning and ordered nappies and formula through Checkers60, he’s been sleeping ever since.

Mqhele leaves me in the car at the parking lot and goes inside the school. I know whatever he will do or say inside there will be inspired by his taxi rank persona so... this is where my educated girl persona is going to nest her bum because of all days, this is not the day I want to be subjected to embarrassment by a thug with too much money.

I ignore Qhawe’s call for the sixth time. The only reason I haven’t turned around to see him behind me is that he can’t leave Naledi alone in their house. He can find me, that I know. In fact, he knows exactly where I am right now. But he’s just gonna have to be strong until I make it to his house – whenever that will be – because his brother is on some thug tendencies today.

Oh, there he is, walking out of the school entrance without Langa. I'm sure the principal said NO.

"He's coming," he says, just as he sits on the driver's seat and knots his hands behind his head.

We wait... about five minutes. Qhawe calls again and I ignore the call. It's only a matter of time before he loses it and starts being the Qhawe that I know he is.

Oh look, turns out the taxi rank persona worked after all because... no wait...

He opens the back door and sits in the backseat, all his school bags with him, including the basketball kit. Why do I feel so detached from this whole drama? I feel like I can sit back and be a spectator.

I can feel Mqhele; I can feel everything he is right now. It's interesting because I'm trying to stop myself from laughing right now.

"Where's your brother?" he asks him.

I've made a decision to not get involved in this, even if it's just for 10 seconds. I really do want to laugh but...

"You think I can't tell my own children apart? Msebe, where is Langa?"

I have never seen him this angry at his own child. This coming from a man who went berserk on me for even pulling these children's ears when they were young.

"Where's your brother, Msebe?" he asks, agitated, bordering on intense anger.

"He's writing a test, baba. He can't get out of class, not now."

"And you thought you could pretend to be him? Do I look like isilima to you?"

What a day!

"Where is he?"

He is fuming, but I know he's not going to get violent with his son, so I'm just gonna sit here quietly and let Sbopho's bloodline deal with each other.

My father died a long time ago, and he's never been an angry ghost who comes back to haunt me, probably because Satan is busy frying him in hell.

Zulu

“We’ve been on the road all day, malume. Kanti, where are we going?”

I wish Langa would stop with all the questions. I know where we are going and I told him to trust me.

I sat and discussed this with Malum’Ntuthuko last night and he told me he’d driven three men and one woman to this place way before he started working for my family. I don’t know where they found him and why he was hired because we already have enough drivers, but he is the coolest we have ever had. I like him, he’s not a robot like the others.

I wrote my last matric exam paper yesterday and Langa here was supposed to be writing his exam at 12 pm, but you know... we have bigger problems than school. So here we are, seven hours on the road.

I told Malum’Ntuthuko to use the Piet Retief/Pongola route, but he insisted on using the N3 because maybe... I don’t know... he wanted to enjoy the cruise on the highway rather than dodging potholes and cows on small inroads.

“You boys know I’m going to get fired after this, right? I’m going to lose my job because of you.”

“Don’t worry about that, we’ll make sure you don’t lose your job.”

Why is Langa lying? We are in deep shit and so is this driver, but we are doing what we have to do.

“How? You two don’t have a cent; I had to buy you food.”

He’s right, it’s over for him. But maybe if we are able to convince our fathers to understand this had to be done, they’ll have some mercy on him.

Truth is, Langa and I could have driven ourselves, but we don’t have driver’s licenses, so imagine what would have happened if we got caught up

in a roadblock and were arrested. Headlines!

We have just driven past Mkuze, the board said we are 83 kilometres away from Umhlabuyalingana, but we still have to drive another hour from there to Mbazwana. I know the house; I've seen it in my dreams. I know the man's face; I've seen him in my nightmares. I know what my great-grandfather did, and I have always known I'm the one who'd have to fix it one day.

My life has been nothing but constant torment from things that should not have been put on my shoulders. The last time I felt like a child was just before mama came out of jail. I didn't understand what was happening then; things would just come out of my mouth and I'd end up getting into trouble for saying them. But I had to say them because mkhulu would get angry if I didn't. I would feel him every time mama entered the room. He never came to the houses, he'd take me to where he always sat, at the bank of a river. I was six, my mind hadn't developed enough to understand what was possible and what was impossible.

I kept telling them what mkhulu was saying, but nobody took me seriously until he sent a snake and burned the rondavel. Mkhulu left after mama and Bab'Nkosana got married in Mbuba. I started feeling his presence again when I was 11, but he only took me to the river bank a week after he came back. I didn't sit, I was scared because I was old enough to understand that I was looking at a ghost. He hadn't changed or aged at all, same clothes. It was like looking at all my fathers, at all of us. I wanted to run, but where was I going to run to? How? A ghost basically kidnapped me, but my body was at home packing clothes for our trip to Gogo's party in KwaMashu.

He tapped the ground next to him until I gave up and sat down, knees up, just like he did.

'What do you want this time?' I asked.

I wasn't a clueless little boy anymore; I knew exactly what was happening. I was still scared though because he wasn't talking, and he looked really troubled.

‘Why are you always sitting here? Shouldn’t you be in heaven or something? Or hell?’

Church is not our thing, but I knew people go between the two when they die. They don’t sit on riverbanks and torment their grandsons.

‘I’m waiting for my brother,’ he said.

I could feel the sadness in his voice.

‘You have a brother? Mamiza said you had no family; that nobody knows where you came from. That’s why we don’t have relatives.’

He was quiet for a while, and I was curious, so I asked.

‘Is he here in the river?’

He didn’t answer that.

‘Mama won’t welcome me, she rejected me. She said I shouldn’t come anywhere near her without my brother. She told us never to separate, but we did. My brother never came out of this river; I don’t know where he is.’

I was confused, I was, after all, only 11.

‘Do you see that hill over there?’ he asked, pointing across the river.

I nodded.

‘Behind it is where I was born – me and my twin brother. Before us, there were eight others, but they died at birth. Their graves are there; my father’s grave is there. I never met him. He died on the day we were born. Mama doesn’t have a grave; she burned alive, to ashes.’

The story sounded familiar, although my fathers didn’t talk about it. I had found on Google what my grandfather was and how he was burnt to death with my grandmother in Mbuba. When I was born, we already had our home in Mbuba, and it has always felt like home to me even though the story of how my fathers left that place is a gruesome one.

‘When Nomafo and I decided to build our own home in Mbuba, I came here, crossed this river and went behind that hill. There was nothing left, not even walls to show that there was once my home there. But the graves, I knew exactly where they were. So, I took soil and put it in a plastic bag; I planted a tree and left.’

I looked up and an old woman was walking past right in front of us; she didn't even look at us.

'She's deaf,' mkhulu said. I saw the woman again weeks later.

'What did you do with the soil?'

'I dug up a hole in Mbuba, then put it inside and planted a tree.'

I figured it was the tree our fathers were always sitting under.

'You have to find my brother, otherwise, I will never go anywhere.'

'Why me?'

'Because you are the one.'

I still had questions, but Gog'MaSbisi was pulling my toes, trying to wake me up.

"You said you wanted to pack your clothes yourself, and now you're sleeping, at 1 pm, ayi mfanyana!!" she said and clapped once. "Were you having one of your dreams again?"

I shook my head, got up and continued packing my bag.

... ● ...

"Okay, bafana, we are at Mhlabuyalingana now. Where exactly are we going?"

"Mbazwana."

"I don't know where that is—"

"But malume you said—"

"I said I had driven people to KwaMhlabuyalingana for their witchcraft activities; I don't know Mbazwana..."

"GPS says it's an hour away," Langa says.

It's already 3 pm.

"Langa, we agreed to switch our phones off! What are you doing? Stalking Aluta as always?"

I don't understand his obsession with that girl; she's pompous, and on top of that, she's older than him.

“We need the GPS.”

“No, we don’t. Take the third right after the municipality offices.”

They both look at me, surprised. We have no time for that. We don’t have much time; we need to get there while the sun is still out.

I know malume is not enjoying the gravel road we’ve been on for the past 20 minutes, but I can see the house now. I just won’t tell him until we are almost at the gate.

“My head is spinning, ndoda, how is this place so flat? It’s messing with my head.”

It’s called Mhlabuyalingana for a reason, Langa.

“It’s that house, malume.”

It doesn’t look like it did in my dreams though. It was bigger; there were many other houses in the yard, and kids and people all over the place. Now it looks abandoned, just dilapidating walls with no roofs. The only thing still standing is the grass hut, iqhugwane, they call it. We drive in; you can tell there was once a gate, but someone probably stole it.

“What is this? There’s nobody here. Kahle kahle, bafana, what are you here for?”

He should have asked this question before he risked his job and drove us here.

Langa looks a bit agitated. I didn’t explain much, just that we needed to go and fix things. He agreed because just like me, he knows what he is and that it is not normal. And that was proven two nights ago. It’s strange how everything about my feet touching this ground feels so familiar; it’s like I’ve been here before. I know exactly where to go.

“No, malume, stay in the car.”

He doesn’t protest because he’s freaked out.

It’s clear nobody has lived here in a long time, except this very old man crouching at the corner of the grass hut. We didn’t have to knock; the door is open, but we are respectful enough to stand at the door until he tells us to come in.

“Shoes off,” I whisper to Langa.

We left home in school uniform but changed clothes in the car. The old man raises his hand when we walk towards where he is sitting. We stop and he points us to the far side of the hut. He doesn't want us too near to him.

'I've been waiting for you; I've been waiting for years,' he says.

He looks like he is 100 years old or something: one long tooth, skin wrinkled to the bone and eyes blue. I wonder if he can even see us.

"What do you mean? Waiting for us for what?" Langa asks.

He looks at Langa more than he looks at me. With me, it's like he knows me.

'A life for a life,' he says.

I came here hoping we could end that shit. In fact, I came here to end this shit.

"My grandfather was lurking around for years, sitting on a riverbank waiting for his brother. We found his brother's bones; they are now buried in Mbuba. He has never come back after that. Everything that needed to be done was done. So, what is this now? What is happening? Burning our baby brother? Burning Mami?"

"Sisekelo?"

This is why I didn't tell him everything before we came here.

"What are you talking about?"

He must stop freaking out and let me talk to this fossil crouched in that corner.

'Your grandfather never came here; it was Thulula, your great-grandfather who sat there, where you are sitting, knees up, exactly like you are sitting. I would not have agreed if he didn't sound so desperate. He knew that if at least one of you got to live, there'd be many of you after that. But he also knew there'd be a price to pay, that price was his life.'

Okay, I understand that.

"So that was done; he died. Now, what do you want with us?"

'I want nothing. Nomafu ruined everything. She sat on your mother's shoulders and clouded her mind about what needed to be done.'

He's looking at Langa.

‘Your mother should have done the same thing Nomafu did to your father’s twin, strangle you to death at birth.’

Mami would never have done that. And Langa needs to calm down, the way he is breathing and shaking next to me isn’t making this easy.

“So there has to be a person who dies for all of this to be over?”

‘And you know who. He was given to you. Your father Mhlaba should have thrown him in that fire, but he didn’t. His mother would not have even known about it; she doesn’t even know him.’

No! Nobody else in my family is going to die because of some witchcraft pact made decades ago.

“Langa, please go check on malume outside.”

He doesn’t move; he is sweating from forehead to armpits.

‘You took a life two days ago and you are just a boy; you think it’s going to stop?’

He’s talking to Langa. But I want him to talk to me. I’m the one who knows everything.

“Langa, go check on malume.”

He still doesn’t move. I want to slap the little boy out of him!

“Bafana.”

I thought I told him to stay in the car.

“Who are you talking to?”

What does he mean? Can’t he see that old man crouching over there? I point at him with my head, but he doesn’t seem to get it.

“Some woman outside just asked me what I’m doing here. She said nobody lives here anymore. This used to be the home of some famous inyanga, but he died in 1983. All his children left for big cities. Who were you talking to?”

What is he talking about? The man is right there at the corner.

“He’s gone. I don’t see him anymore,” Langa says.

No, he’s not, he’s still there, staring right back at me.

“Can we talk outside?” I say, grabbing Langa’s arm and pulling him up from the floor.

Malume looks like an alien ship has just landed on earth and tried to kidnap him. I thought he was a brave man. I was wrong.

“You’re gonna have to drive back home now. I’ll stay here; I still need to talk to this man.”

“What man, Sisekelo? The person you came here for died before you were born!”

I’d tell him ghosts are my people but, ayi, I still need him to take my brother home.

“I’m calling baba.”

“To say what, Langa? Go home. I’ll stay here; I’m the one who has to fix this.”

“I’m not leaving you here. That’s not how we were raised, Sisekelo!”

He’s being his stubborn self now.

“What could possibly happen to me here? I said I want to talk to this man, that’s all.”

“I’m not leaving without you!” Langa insists.

“What will I tell your father? They’ll kill me!” Eyi! Ntuthuko!

Of course, they are going to kill you, but I have bigger things to take care of here. I have a responsibility to fulfil.

“Okay, get a place to sleep around here, I’ll call you when I’m done. You can come pick me up.”

“No!”

I’m tired of negotiating with these two. I don’t have the time. I run back to the hut and close the door. I know Langa is right behind me, so I press my back on the door and wait until he stops shouting my name.

The old man is still there, still crouching at that corner. It takes about 10 minutes before I hear the car start and drive off. What I know for sure is that Langa has made that call, so I have to make this quick before baba and all of them drive to Mbazwana like maniacs.

“It’s me, take me. I’ll die in place of whoever has to die next,” I say to the man.

He laughs, showing that one long brown tooth. And now that it's just the two of us, I feel his presence more – stronger. To be honest, I insisted on Ntuthuko staying in the car because I knew we were here to talk to a ghost. It's just that when he came in, I didn't expect Casper here to hide from him.

'What are you trying to do, mfana? It's not up to you. I knew you were the one who was going to come, and you brought the one with you; the one who should never have lived.'

Langa?

That will never happen! Never!

I look around the hut – all grass.

'You know, he doesn't have to be anymore. You've been gifted one to replace him. Your grandfathers Sbopho and Nyanda are together now, and they did this. They gave you a solution. All of this could end now if you just do what you are supposed to do, burn that baby,' he says and throws his hands in the air.

He's mad if he thinks I'd burn my baby brother alive.

"Leave Langa and Nyanda out of this. I'm here. And leave Mami out of this."

He laughs, again, and it's fucking irritating.

'Let me tell you what Thulula asked of me.'

I already know.

'He sat there, right where you are sitting, like that. He looked exactly like you – a spitting image,' he says and shakes his head like he doesn't fully believe it.

'I had done many things in my work, helped a lot of people, but when Thulula walked in, I knew he was a helpless case, that he'd have to go back a long way to fix things. I told him that, but he said he had no time, that he was going to lose his wife and two children in a week or two if he didn't do something. He had already buried eight children.'

I know that because their bones are in Mbuba now.

'He was born in a polygamist family – the only boy out of 16 children. His mother, MaNgubane, suffered a lot in that household for that. Thulula

was her only child; his twin died before she reached six months of her pregnancy.’

That’s what happened to Mam’Naledi, but that doesn’t mean anything.

‘The other three wives hated MaNgubane, but they hated their husband more for loving the boy child more than the others, calling him indlalifa in front of them and their children. Mfana, you must always know this... there is nothing more dangerous than a woman scorned.’

This reminds me of what Bab’Mpande always says, that women are evil, but laughs with us when we tell him it’s not the women, it’s him who makes them crazy.

‘So they gathered and made a plan that it ended there; that their husband’s legacy ended there. They didn’t kill Thulula. No, they weren’t going to do that. What they did was travel all the way here from Ntsikeni. Three mountains away from where your great-grandfather settled after he married and tried to start his own family.’

Well... this is all new information to me, but let me take it in. If only he could get to the point now; I’m not a patient person.

‘Yes, mfana. They travelled to KwaMhlabuyalingana, but they didn’t come to me,’ he says and raises his arms.

I’m surprised the arms can still go up; he is one old ghost.

‘It was witchcraft, mfana. Bamuthakatha umkhulu wakho, although his mother had told him many times not to eat at the other wives’ houses, he did. He was too young to realise their resentment for him. That’s why all his children kept dying; he was never supposed to take his father’s name forward. He was going to live and die without ever having a child.’

I stopped counting the number of my family members when Nsingizi was born. There are a lot of us. I even have a nephew, so whatever those evil women did, it didn’t work. Or did it?

‘So even for me, the best in the job, that was hard for me to fix. There was only one option: a life for a life. It was his wife, Mthaniya who was supposed to die, but he said he’d rather die instead. It was not supposed to

be like that. For that to happen, there had to be another sacrifice, and he agreed to it,' he says and stops.

“What was the sacrifice?”

I want him to continue, time is not on my side. I came here knowing exactly what needs to be done and I can't do that with my fathers here, let alone my mother if they decided to bring her along.

‘He died and Mthaniya lived. She knew the sacrifice was that in every generation in your family, a woman will come, change things, take the family forward, and then die when the time comes. Whoever that woman would be, her bones would not lie with the ancestors of the Zulus. She'd not be honoured with a grave, she'd burn to ashes.’

I know he's talking about Mami; I've seen the fire in my dreams many times. We all try to save her – all of us, but we fail. Bab'Mqhele is never around when it happens, and it's always that she sent him somewhere to get something. I always wake up when the gate opens and he drives in. The strange thing is this happens at a house I do not recognise.

‘Have you ever felt an urge to kill someone?’ he asks.

Right now, I have an urge to kill him, except he's already dead. But no, I have never, which is why I don't understand why dead people are so obsessed with me.

Gog'MaSbisi once caught me smoking behind the house one afternoon.

She folded her arms across her chest while looking at me and shaking her head. I knew she wasn't going to tell on me because she thinks my mother is crazy and somewhere in her head, she thinks it's her duty to protect me from whatever my family is. I threw away the cigarette and apologised to her. But that didn't stop me from stealing my father's cigarettes on weekends or buying them from the white boys at school. White parents let their children smoke.

I light a cigarette, it's my third one today because we stopped at only two garages on our way here, and I had to pretend to be going to the toilets just so I could get a place to hide and smoke.

‘Why are you doing that?’ the old man asks.

What? Flicking the lighter?

It's a shame there are no curtains in this hut, not even a window, but old dry grass catches flames very easily and quickly.

I'm tired.

"I want to go to them; I want to talk to them. From my great-great-grandfather to his three wives, my grandmother too. I've met Sbopho, I've never met Mthaniya and Thulula. I want to talk to them. I want to be with them. They brought me to this earth to fix this, and I'm going to fix it now."

This is where it ends.

'Mfana?' he says when I flick the lighter and light the grass wall right next to me.

I'm not sure if he's shrinking or melting, but he's gone by the time I flick the lighter for the eighth time and watch the flame gain more power.

I sit back down and light another cigarette.

At least my family will know where to find my charred remains.

Zulu

“I missed this.”

“You missed what?”

“The silence, the quietness in this house.”

There’s never been silence or quietness in this house. We started having babies not even a year after we met. By the time we got married, we had two, and they are two years apart. We’re sitting at four now.

“So what you really miss is us, before our brood. We didn’t have much of that, you know, like where we were just a couple – jolling, just the two of us,” she says.

She’s right. She got pregnant very early, or I got her pregnant very early. It wasn’t a big deal though; I was very happy because I knew she was going to be my wife eventually. I love Xolie. There has never been a single moment since the day I met her where my heart didn’t yearn for her: her touch, her presence, her voice and that abnormal blinking of hers. I definitely think it’s some kind of condition or disability, but we are not ready to talk about that.

“There’s no crying baby!” she says and raises her arms.

Oh, I see! We took Mfula home this morning. He’s not a crying baby, he just eats too much. But the boys were so obsessed with having a baby here that they fought about who should hold him and feed him all the damn day.

Phakeme is not about that life anymore, we see him when we see him. He insisted on staying at res even after we offered to rent him a townhouse because we didn’t want him sharing a little box room and sleeping on a single bed with some other boy we don’t know. But then again, Sbani taught us many lessons. We got him a car and all, and the next thing we

knew, he had his own family at 20. And then there was Lwandle; we gave him a car and a beach house, and what did he become? A blesser and the life of all parties in Durban. Phakeme is a different story altogether. And now, we're going to have to drive Sisekelo to university in a couple of months. I'm not even sure which one he chose and what he'll be studying.

I'm just glad that my children will never have to steal or kill to survive. Our ancestors must be proud, our father and mother are surely looking down at us – with all our faults – but with pride and joy. Mqoqi is there with them; I hope he's finally found happiness.

“Does this mean you don't want another baby?”

I'm just saying this. In fact, I've never thought about it until now.

“Sambulo, do you know labour pains? Have you ever experienced them? Do you know how it feels to be fat and vomiting for nine months? And then having your vagina stretched to the size of a human head?”

Eish... what have I started?

“Your vagina will always be my favourite place.”

I see her blushing. Great! Her tantrum lasted for five seconds only.

“I'm joking, mkami. We have enough kids, and I think this is the time for us to start umjolo wethu. These kids robbed us of that. They must raise themselves.”

She laughs.

I've always loved her laugh; it gives me butterflies in my stomach. There was a time when I didn't see or hear it for a while, and it was the worst time of my life. She threatened to castrate me, divorce me, and kill me and all that stuff after burning my car... But once you hurt a woman the way I hurt my wife, and you see what it does to her, you hate yourself more than she hates you. We found our way back to each other because I was never going to let her go. I begged, I wept, I grovelled – I did it all. Because the one thing that was going to kill me was losing my wife. My everything. Yes, I kill people here and there... but you know, a man – even one like me – needs to have a reason to live, and I found mine in her.

“We can leave them alone, can’t we? Go on a holiday for a month or so?”

“They have eight fathers...”

It’s seven now.

“And four mothers excluding you. Let’s go to Jamaica, the weed there is top-notch.”

She laughs. There’s something beautiful about making your woman laugh.

She presses her hands on my chest and leans her head on my left shoulder, then whispers in my ear, “I love it when you fuck me high.”

The anaconda hears it and comes alive. She kisses my neck and starts walking away. Where the hell does she think she’s going? I grab her by her waist and pull her to my chest.

“Our bedroom is that side,” I whisper in her ear.

“I’m not wearing panties,” she whispers back.

Fuck, our bedroom is too far! I push her down Sisekelo’s bed. She was lying about not having panties on. I’d pull them off if I had the time, but she’s pushed me too far. So, I pull the panties aside with one hand and enter my paradise; my happy place. She knows I want to feel her skin, I always do. So, she pulls the dress over her head and throws it on the floor. How can one person be so beautiful? So soft and delicate? And she’s mine? Me? Sambulo Zulu?

Her moans and her hands on my back turn me into the beast that I am, and she loves it. What she doesn’t know is what being inside her does to me. Her skin on mine, her lips on my neck, her beautiful face looking up at me as I pleasure her and she pleasures me. There’s love, and there’s what I feel for Xolie. I don’t know how to explain it; it is beyond that simple four-letter word. There’s this thing that she does where she wraps her legs around my waist tightly and then cups my face so that I look straight into her eyes.

“It’s yours, all of it,” she whispers.

She knows that drives me crazy, and then she untangles her legs around me and pushes me right off after saying that. She loves doing that: pushing me out, grabbing my penis and putting it back inside herself, whether it's from the side or the back. When it comes to sex, she takes control. She makes it clear that whatever this power and status I walk around carrying outside this house, is nothing compared to the power her body has over me. My wife is not shy when it comes to sex; she's daring and intentional.

I remember the first time she asked me to tie her up. I thought she was joking until she pulled out fluffy handcuffs and two leather bands for her ankles. I was still lying on the bed trying to understand what was happening when she stripped naked and got on top of me – as in sat on my face and gyrated as I ate her up, my tongue inside her and her clit rubbing my nose. I didn't tie her up, but I fucked her three times on that day. I just couldn't get my hands off her. I don't know what happened to those fluffy handcuff things, but two days later I woke up, packed these little monsters we created in the car and dumped them at Nqoba's house. There was a long rope in the car boot Mqoqi had used to strangle someone a week before, I don't remember who. He had nowhere to put it on his bike, so he threw it in my boot and forgot about it.

She was drinking one of those green tea things at the back of the house when I found her. I didn't say anything, just pulled her by hand to the end of the garden, tied her arms and shoulders to a tree, opened her legs and pulled them up. I fucked her until she recited my clan names. Of course, the tree trunk wasn't exactly smooth, so I had to wash her back with Dettol for four days for those scratches to heal. She still let me fuck her from behind though, in those four days of healing from tree sex. That tree became our favourite place, and the rope too. We added a pillow to the package because we learned the hard way the first time.

It was all fun until we went there this one time and found a snake resting comfortably on one of the branches. I ran for my life, leaving her – my wife – behind. She still teases me about that incident, obviously because she knows I'm a man of despicable atrocities, yet I ran like a little boy because

of a snake that didn't even look up at me. That's how our relationship with that tree ended. We had to come up with other kinky stuff, but when she came home with that rubber penis, that's where I put my foot down. That monster thing was two times bigger than my penis, it even moved on its own, spinning around and vibrating and shit... I threw it away. The only thing that will ever enter that vagina is my dick, my fingers and my tongue. I don't play when it comes to that.

“Where is Sisekelo anyway? He said he was coming home?”

All the kids are at Mpande's house. Thando likes having them over, she says she wants their twins to bond with them.

“He sent a message just after he left for school to say he was going to a ‘pens down’ thing with the rest of his matric class. Ntuthuko is driving him, so he'll be fine.”

“Pen's down? What's that? Phakeme never had that.”

“Ah, but you know Phakeme, he didn't even go to his matric dance,” she says, dismissively while fixing our son's bed which we've just had sex on.

We have a child at university, one who has just finished matric, another in Grade Six and another in Grade R. This thing we talked about of travelling and jolling was just a pipe dream.

“I'm hungry.”

“I would have had time to cook if your penis didn't work overtime. It's 7 pm now. I'll make you a fruit salad and yoghurt.”

This woman! I follow her to the kitchen, hoping that maybe she'll be the wife she's supposed to be and make her husband who took 11 cows to KwaMzobe, Empangeni proper food.

“Whatever that ‘pens down’ thing is, I hope it doesn't lead to some old women knocking on our door with some girl, pregnant.”

She rolls her eyes at me.

“He's not even having sex yet, he's only 17,” she says.

I bought him condoms when he was 15, no questions asked. I just gave them to him because I knew, I could tell. His mother doesn't have to know

all that. I don't understand why women don't get this: past 15 years old the penis replaces the brain. That's just how it is until we figure things out.

“What's wrong?” she asks. I've just pulled my phone off the charger.

“I have nine missed calls from Nkangala.”

Something is wrong.

Zulu

Prison was better than this, I swear.

By the time the sun comes out, someone will be lying dead, here, in this yard, and that someone is this stupid driver. I keep asking him what kind of drug he was on when he agreed to drive these boys all the way here when he was supposed to take them to school. Have I gotten an answer? No! All he's been doing is walking around this yard with his hands over his head, shaking like a bloody bitch. I swear if Thule wasn't here, he'd be bleeding through his ears by now. Bengizomgxoba anye.

“Langa!”

“No, no, no, Mhlaba, please! It's enough now!”

I just want to ask him some questions so that by the time my brothers get here, I'm able to explain this. But I can't because Nokthula has blocked the car door. She won't let me anywhere near him. I need to know exactly how he thought it was proper to leave his brother here, in this place that does not make any sense to me. But instead, all he's been doing is crying like a girl.

When he called me, I heard his voice shaking. All he said was that they were at Umhlabuyalingana and that Sisekelo was acting strange. His reason for calling me was that I was in Mbuba and I could get here sooner than my brothers in Gauteng. I got in the car and went straight to Nokthula's house. She still doesn't like me, but I told her the kids were in trouble and she stopped being difficult and got in the car. My mind was all over the place, that's why I had to have her with me because I know she doesn't play.

“Where is that sjambok of yours? I think we will need it. These boys need to be put in line,” I asked her before I started the car.

“Just drive. Do you even have a driver’s license?” she asked.

I don’t have a driver’s license but my brothers are rich, which makes me rich so nobody is going to put me in jail ever again. She’s always impatient with me. I know I’m a jailbird and all but... I’m a good man now... well... I’ll always be Mhlaba Zulu, but the least she could do is give me a chance. I’ll treat her right.

She was trying to make calls all the way, but for some reason, she wasn’t getting through to anyone.

We arrived at Mbazwana three hours later, to this! A house burnt to ashes with the police and community members all over the place. Langa was sitting on the ground crying like a baby; he couldn’t even put together words to explain what happened. I didn’t see Ntuthuko until about 30 minutes after I arrived because he tried to flee, but later came to his senses and came back here to face his mess. The first person I called when I was on the way here was Nkangala, because I know he knows someone everywhere. I didn’t call my brothers, but I know he did, and they are on their way here.

“Are you the father?” a woman with a jacket written ‘Forensics’ asks me.

I nod.

“We found remains, not much because the hut was all grass, so the fire spread very quickly, and aggressively, but from what we have, we can conduct DNA tests.”

“His brother says they left him alone in that hut.”

“Yes, we found remains of only one human, and the fire started inside the house, so this could be a case of suicide. The police can explain better after further investigation.”

Suicide? We can’t have this again. Not when everyone in this family is still blaming themselves for Mqoqi’s death. Years in jail taught me that a man doesn’t cry, a man doesn’t break. A man must take whatever comes his way with his chest out and head up. But this was my child. I can’t explain it, but this was my child. Am I now supposed to call Sambulo and tell him

his son is dead? That he burnt himself to death? Because if he was alone in that hut, it means that's what he did.

"You should have thrown that baby in the fire," Nkangala says and walks past me like I'm some spirit he needed to pass a message to and leave to figure out what is happening.

It's almost sunrise and the one thing I'm dreading is my brothers arriving here to see and hear this. He goes straight to the car, and surprisingly, Thule steps away and lets him get inside. He's not even family; Thule doesn't even know him. She's not supposed to, even the wives weren't supposed to know who he is, but ke— things happened, desperate times.

"You're the guy who gave me R30, a long time ago, that time at Southgate and—" Sdudla was shocked when she saw him. But that was no time for confusing reunions, we had to go. Nkangala didn't say anything, he just drove.

I'm not sure where he has been. The last time I saw him was at his grandmother's house; on that day three children were born in a hut and I made a decision.

I don't know what he is saying to him, but I know Langa is talking. I can see him through the car window. There is something about Langa that makes my heart beat faster, even though I never got to meet my father. We both know it's there. I did, after all, wake up to him staring at me at 5 am, in his father's house almost two years ago, just hours after the prison warden opened the prison back door and told me to go. I found Mqhele in the car.

"Bafo, we need you," he said.

And then he drove me straight to his house. It was the first time I slept on a double bed in 15 years and woke up to a kid who looked exactly like me staring at me, and later saw a woman who felt like home to me, although she screamed at the sight of me. Is this my fault? Should I have thrown my brother's son into the fire? My own blood?

"Mageba?"

They are here. But I don't see Sambulo; it's just Nkosana, Mqhele and Nqobizitha. I'm relieved the women are not here.

"What is happening?" Nkosana asks.

Where do I even begin?

"There was a fire. They are going to do tests and all that stuff; Langa is there," I say, pointing at the car.

I see some relief on Mqhele's face, but it doesn't last long.

"And Sisekelo?" he asks.

I've just told him his own son is alive and fine; that should be enough, but no, he doesn't go to the car. He is standing in front of me for Sisekelo – all three of them, eyes big and spelling danger. It's like looking at myself. It feels like the feeling I had each time someone tried me, from when I was 14 until now. We did that thing with the man in Margate, so why does this moment here feel like that long time ago? The time when I didn't know who I was; the time of the urge? I should have thrown that child in the fire, but I don't say that to them.

"He was in that hut," I say, pointing at the ashes.

They don't know anything about the hut because there is no hut now – just police, firefighters and people with hands over their mouths. There are so many stories about this place, and people here are not shy to share them: true and false. What kind of place is this anyway? People here are okay with being called Amashangane, but they say they are amaThonga, and witchcraft is normal here. It's a thing they fully believe in.

"Mhlaba, where is Sisekelo?" Nkosana asks.

I know by the way he is looking at me that he knows. We had a conversation at the hospital that other time.

He knows.

I have never missed a prison cell more than I do right now.

I'm not answering anyone's call.

They can miss me with the drama.

What I know is that my child is missing and his father is out there to find him. He will find him. He knows not to come back to my house without him. Msebe – what kind of demons did I give birth to – wouldn't tell us where Langa is even after we were sure he was not in class writing a test.

Mqhele's anger was at its worst. He was at the edge of all edges, but I knew he would never raise a hand to his own child. So, I watched him sweat and clench his jaw until we arrived at Qhawe's house. Qhawe was obviously mad at me for ignoring his calls all day. I know that because he just snatched his baby from me and went upstairs without saying a word. I followed him up the stairs because Nyanda was already crying hysterically and if there's one thing I know about Qhawe, it is that he has no clue what to do with a crying baby.

Naledi was there, on the bed – conscious and aware of everything around her – but what shocked me the most was that she still didn't know about her father's passing. But strangely, she reached out her arms for the baby, brushed his face and put him on her breast. The same baby she denied giving birth to almost three months ago. Also, can you breastfeed an almost three-month-old? After they have been on formula since they were three

days old? I watched as she caressed his face and smiled at him. Qhawe was right next to her. I take it he had already informed her that his name is Nyanda because that's what she kept calling him. Look, there are things about me in this family that are just weird, but Naledi is right behind me when it comes to that.

“Are we ever going to stop giving birth to them?” Naledi asks, laughing.

I don't laugh, because if you really look at it, it isn't normal. But I feel a little bit of something leaving my soul when I watch Naledi breastfeeding Nyanda. I feel some loss like I've lost something that belongs to me. The strangest thing is that I feel like the loss is stronger than it should be. This is, after all, her child. All I had to do was take care of him until she was well enough to do so herself.

My phone rings again and I ignore it. The only time I will speak to Mqhele is when I get home and see Langa in the house. Other than that, he can leave me alone.

“I can't wait for Ntate to meet them; I know he'll struggle to tell them apart. We've never had multiple births in my family. They still can't tell most of the guys apart and it's so funny,” she says, laughing and looking at Qhawe, but Qhawe is looking at me.

There are things that only Qhawe can do, and this is one of them. He deactivated her phone a long time ago; I won't even start on TV and all media because the news of a woman taking over as one of the Tswana clan chiefs is the biggest right now. Men being men and women screaming patriarchy. Look, I like Qhawe, but I know Qhawe. His decisions are not always logical when it comes to Naledi. He is – and I say this with my chest out – the most logical in Zulu family matters, but *whoah!* When it comes to his own household, I don't even know what to say.

Naledi's father died and was buried. We have moved on to other problems. And yet here we are, him looking at me as Naledi talks about her father like he's there in North West drinking 'summer tea' or whatever it is that old man's weirdness entailed. I assume Xolie, Gugu and Zandile have

been here a while. They came here to deliver the children and yet, they haven't said a word to her about her father. Qhawe leaves the room.

Oh, hell no! I follow him and catch up with him on the passage, just as he is about to take the stairs down.

“You haven't told her?”

“I can't, Hlomu. I've tried, but I can't do it.”

I know this because of the way he is looking at me. We all know Naledi is cray-cray... well... we all are cray-cray, but Qhawe shouldn't be doing this. Since when is he a coward?

“I have to drive to KZN, it's going to take me hours, but please, don't leave her alone, Mahlomu,” he says.

Qhawe never calls me by my full name. It's that psycho almost-twin brother of his who calls me Mahlomu when things are bad.

“But Qhawe—”

“She's fine now. She was asking for the baby, that's why I kept calling you. I was surprised because all along she acted like he didn't exist.”

Okay, that's great, but can we talk about the issue at hand here?

“She has to know, Qhawe, and what you did to her sisters was not right. Tshedi called me, threatening to take us to court and all that.”

He frowns, but I know his frown has a lot to do with his arrogance. Also, I don't like the way he is looking at me right now.

“Qhawe—”

“Please, Hlomu. I'm begging...”

“You can't do that; she will need you. She will need you to be here for this.”

He looks into my eyes and I know what he is saying. He is not strong enough for this; he is tired.

I turn and walk back to the bedroom; he goes down the stairs. The moment I open the door, Gugu, Xolie and Zandile all stare at me, and I know, I just know they were waiting for me to arrive so we can do this. I look at her two babies sleeping on the cot bed, and I look at her kissing Nyanda and cradling him and kissing him all over again.

“Babe...” I’ve always called her that.

She laughs.

“You called me that even when I was half-dead,” she says.

“You could hear?” Gugu asks.

“Sometimes – a few times. I heard Qhawe four times, but he says he talked to me every day. I heard Hlomu twice, and Sisekelo, the one time he came.”

Of course, she was going to hear that child!

“Sisekelo came to see you?” Xolie asks.

Naledi nods and goes back to kissing her baby everywhere. I really want to know what Sisekelo said to her, but she doesn’t look like she wants to talk about it.

Now... the issue at hand.

“Naledi, there’s something we need to tell you,” Zandile starts.

Great, she’s taking charge for a change. And why is there no alcohol in this room? I’m waiting for Zandile to spill it out, but no, she’s looking at me.

I don’t even know where to start.

“Ntate didn’t make it,” Gugu says, it’s almost shocking.

Naledi looks unfazed as if those words didn’t just come out of Gugu’s mouth.

“It’s fine, he doesn’t have to come here, I’ll take the babies to North West. They’re almost old enough now. It’s three months, right? Zulu culture says three months,” she says.

I need Xolie to hold those tears back. Now!

Sigh.

I guess I have to do this.

“Naledi, your father didn’t make it. He passed away while you were in hospital. We didn’t want to tell you until you recovered.”

Silence.

She looks at all three of us.

Frowns.

Looks down at the baby and raises her eyes to look into mine. I'm quiet because I'm not sure if she understood what I just told her.

“Chawe!!!” she screams.

We don't know what to do.

She creams Qhawe's name six times. No tears, just a look of panic on her face. I grab the baby from her when she lets her body loose and starts shaking. It's either a panic attack coming or... I don't know. But when the door opens, we are all surprised by who we see.

“Qhawe called me to come here and—”

The last time I saw him was at the Montsho house during the funeral arrangements. Before that, we had not seen him in a long time. Not that he is someone we have or need to see, but he is Naledi's friend so... he's like... someone we know.

“Tsietsi!” she says.

Now her tears come.

He sits on the bed and takes her hand.

“Tsietsi, they are lying to me. They say Ntate is gone. He's not! He wouldn't... he wouldn't leave me like that! Where is my husband?”

The two babies are up; it must be all the noise that woke them.

“A lot has happened, Ledi. Ntate couldn't handle it. You know how much he loved you. He fought so hard until he couldn't anymore. We are all devastated, but we couldn't tell you, not in the state you were in.”

The four of us have just decided to stay quiet and focus on these three babies because...

My phone rings, it's Mqhele again. This is a good chance for me to leave this room to at least get a breather. It's morning now, so surely, he's back home with my child.

“Hello.” That's all I say before he weeps.

No, no, no...

“Mqhele, what's going on? Where is Langa?”

I wait, listening to his weeping, snorts and all. You gotta know that when a man like him sheds tears, it's something big. Something that will yet

again... change our lives forever. If he was here, maybe I would put his head on my chest and let him cry. But I can't do anything for him over the phone. All I want to know is if he has my child with him.

"Langa is fine, he's in the car."

Thank you.

"So, what's happening? What's wrong?"

He's quiet for a while.

"Where is Xolie?" he asks.

"She's here with me, we've just told Naledi about her father."

Silence, again.

"Okay," he says.

I can hear he's done crying. He is trying to compose himself now.

"I love you," he says and hangs up.

Hhaybo!!! Mqhele is hanging up on me? I call him back and his phone is off now.

I don't even know if he's home or if he's still wherever they went with Nkosana and Nqoba. They picked him up at our house, and it was strange how Nkosana avoided me the whole time. I offered to make him and Nqoba food, but Nqoba said they had to rush. Nkosana couldn't even look me in the eye. He wanted to be out of my house as soon as possible. Actually, I've been feeling that from him a lot lately, that he is hiding something from me. But anyway... it's time to go back inside the room of horrors.

Jizas! What happened?

The mattress is on the floor and the side lamps are both broken. Everyone is standing by the door, including Tsietsi. Naledi is not here... Oh, there she is on the balcony. I didn't even know she was well enough to pace up and down like that. But I should have figured it out, the nurses are not here anymore.

"She demanded to call Tshedi, so I gave her my phone," Tsietsi explains.

Ohhhhhh... I see.

This is going to be as bad as I thought it would be. In fact, whatever it is that Mqhele was crying about might even be worse than Naledi losing her

mind right now. I would sit and count all the things that have led me to be this person, the one who folds her arms amid the turmoil. I don't know Nomafu. I don't even know what she looked like, but I'm pretty sure she dealt with far less than I have dealt with in this family. All she did was give birth to eight boys and choose a man over them.

I am nothing like her.

I'd kill her children for mine.

"I'm going home. Tsietsi, take me home!"

All she grabs is a handbag and I don't think it's the one that she carried before all the madness with the Bhunganes started. She just grabs the first one she sees, which is probably empty.

She hasn't asked where Qhawe is again, and by the look of things, she's going alone. None of us tries to stop her, so we are totting behind her and Tsietsi with her babies in our arms. Sbopho and Mathongo have been downstairs watching cartoons this whole time. Their mother doesn't even look at them. She opens the door, gets into Tsietsi's car and she's gone.

What are we going to tell Qhawe? Also, why would she leave her children behind? We are left standing at the door, not knowing what our next step is. Mqhele's phone is still off. All their phones are off.

And why – of all people – is Mpande driving in with Thando and their kids? They had all the kids with them until this morning when they dropped them off at their respective homes, unannounced.

"Hlomu, please control me? Keep an eye on me because you know I can't with this one," Zandile says as we watch them getting out of the car with the kids running past us.

"We will leave her here with all these children; she must learn," Gugu says.

I'm not sure where her dislike for Thando stems from because we haven't told her anything about her shenanigans. But ke, Gugu is always a great ally, she's a fast thinker.

"Ladies," she says, smile and all.

Mpande greets and goes inside. He comes out with bottled water and two beers, gets in the car and leaves.

We are all shocked.

“He’s so moody this one,” Thando says, with a half-smile.

We all know Mpande, and one thing he is not, is moody.

“He’s mad because we spent the whole morning buying blankets for uMembeso. We’ve decided we’re going to do it all in one day – amalobolo and umembeso – just to get all those things out of the way so we can have our dream wedding. I’m thinking Mauritius, but I hear Qhawe has property in Zanzibar, so...” she says and shrugs.

Urgh! That is next weekend. She looks so excited, it’s disgusting to watch.

“Where is Naledi?” she asks when we are all back inside the house.

She’s never been here to see her since she came back from the hospital. I doubt she ever visited her in hospital either. Nobody answers her.

“Can you hold him for a minute? I need to get the nappies from the car,” Zandile says, shoving Mvula in her arms.

“No, actually we need to get more nappies. There are only two packs left; we need to go to the shops,” Gugu says. And off they go.

Mqhele’s crying occupies my mind, Mpande’s behaviour is also a clear sign that something is not right.

“I’m going to fetch the kids; we might as well all camp here because I don’t even know when these men are coming back,” Xolie says. And off she goes, leaving Nyezi lying on the baby mat on the floor. The boys surround him, tickling him.

I also have things to do; I’m not sure what they are, but....

“Naledi is upstairs in her room. Did you even visit her in hospital? I’m sure she’d like to see you.”

She looks like she’s feeling guilty – good.

She goes up the stairs and I walk out the door. Nyanda with me. Qhawe begged me not to leave Naledi alone, but is she here? No.

His kids? I left them with the new makoti.

Me? I have wine to drink and a crying man I need to attend to.

Zulu

“Are you going to speak? Or are we just going to sit in this car and watch people passing and staring?”

I should have come here in a different car, a cheaper car. I thought about calling her, but then I didn't want to have to explain where and how I got her numbers. Besides, she might have refused to see me, and I really needed to see her.

“Do you want to come in and have something to eat, at least?” she asks.

I shake my head. The reason I'm parked two houses away is that I don't want her mother to see me. I sent some random child I found here on the street to call her for me. And when she stood outside my window, she was shocked to see me. She must have assumed I've always known where MaSbisi lives, but I didn't. I didn't even know she lived in an RDP house.

“Okay, tell me about your morning. How was it?”

Dreadful.

“I went to buy blankets.”

“Blankets for what?”

I was asking myself the same question the whole time Thando made me touch this and that blanket to feel its quality. First of all, I don't do that stuff, Thando could have asked one of the women that work for us to go with her. But no, she insists on us doing things together; says something about bonding as a couple.

“Umembeso. I have umembeso next weekend.”

She widens her eyes at me.

“So, you're getting married? Next weekend?”

The word *married* gives me anxiety.

“I should be in KZN, something happened, but my brothers won’t tell me exactly what. They just said I must come, and I know it’s something bad.”

She looks worried about that.

“Did you tell your wife... future wife? Shouldn’t she be on her way to KZN with you?”

I didn’t tell her shit. I just dropped her where the rest of the women were and left. Besides – this one here shouldn’t be worried about that – she should be worried about why I’m here, which is what I’m also worried about.

“So why aren’t you there? Why are you here?”

I look into her eyes. I can’t. I look away quickly. Also, this is getting too much. I can’t have the whole of Orange Farm staring at us.

“Can we go somewhere quiet? Let’s just take a drive.”

I’m crossing fingers she says yes because if we are, to be honest, I don’t know her and she doesn’t know me. I also don’t know how much her mother has told her about us, and if it’s good or bad.

“Okay, let’s drive out of here,” she says.

I’m startled because it sounds like she’s been desperate for me to suggest this.

I press on the accelerator and the kids who’ve been loitering around my car with their mouths open start jumping and clapping. I’m not into these types of cars, but if your brother shoots the woman you were planning to marry dead – soon after your brother killed himself and somewhere in between you find yourself living with the woman who hid your children from you for years – you are bound to change. You try anything and everything to help you heal and fill the void. I really wasn’t interested in a Lamborghini, that is something Nkosana would buy because he has always been obsessed with cars. But I bought it, and after I dropped Thando and the kids at Qhawe’s house in a Mercedes, I went back to my house and took this one.

The plan was to drive straight to KZN when I left the house. I avoided any interaction with my brothers' wives because I knew that if I even started, Zandile was going to get it out of me. So, I took water and beer and left. I really was going to KZN, but my mind wouldn't let me, so I took a turn and came here. I don't understand why I couldn't resist. I want to explain it to her, it's all here in my head, but somehow it won't reach my mouth.

"Is it always wise to do the right thing?" I ask her because I trust her.

It's a strange feeling for me to trust a woman. It's even more strange because this is only my second time meeting her.

"It is only wise if it's the right thing for you too. But if it's the right thing for others, and you do it just because it serves them, then it leads to resentment. They'll be happy, but you'll be miserable. Where are we going?" she asks.

I don't know, wherever this car lands us.

Have I ever been happy in my life? I don't even know. I have just lived; that's all I have been doing, living. Mqoqi's death made me realise that.

I've been giving myself to things that I thought mattered. Living the celebrity life because in that space, no matter what, there are always people who want to be around you. But then, when I'm alone on my bed at 2 am, tossing and turning, begging sleep to come, my mind goes to its own place, a place where I ask myself who the fuck all these people I surround myself with are.

Mqoqi once said I must see a doctor, but that was rich coming from a man who was always trying to kill himself. My doctor is the shooting range, that's where I go for peace of mind. I could have gone to the shooting range instead of KZN, but I ended up here, with this woman who says smart things; things I dread to hear but know are true.

"You don't love this woman, do you?" she asks.

Why does she always ambush me?

"So why are you marrying her?"

So, she's not even going to wait for a yes or a no from me?

“I loved her once, but a lot happened. I think it is more about trust than it is about love.”

I’m a grown man now. I need to have a family, to raise my children in a house that has a mother and a father, like my brothers. We grew up in the streets, poor and exploited by anyone who had the chance. So, we make certain choices because if there’s one thing we would rather die than have, is our children growing up as we did. There are so many things I’m not sure about now. Did I ever really love Thando? Did I even love Ndoni? What are women to me? Are they even worth loving? All they’ve done is hurt me. I turn and look into her eyes; it’s still difficult for me to admit or accept.

“So, you don’t trust her?”

“She is the mother of my children, Qhayiya.”

She looks surprised. Doesn’t her mother tell her all about our business?

“I didn’t know about them until they were—”

She raises her hand to stop me.

“Yes, I know all about that. The reason I’m shocked is that the only reason you are ready to marry her is that she is the mother of your children. What does that have to do with anything?”

She doesn’t understand, does she?

“We give our children stable homes; that’s what we do.”

She scratches her head. I wish I could offer her money to go to a salon and do her hair because that thing she has on her head is horrible. It’s a wig, I think, one that covers her forehead but is short at the back. Look, I like women pretty, tall and dark. I like the long nails and long artificial eyelashes, proper eyebrows and all. Ndoni was none of that, but still, I believed she was a keeper. She’s dead now and although it’s still painful, I lie awake at night and wonder if it was her I wanted or the idea of her. The fact that she was different from what I drooled over and could easily get. Ndoni was hard to get and hard to control too.

“So, when you say ‘we’, who exactly are you referring to?” she asks.

It’s interesting how she always asks the questions I never knew I needed to be asked.

“All of us, my brothers.”

“Do your brothers love the women they married?”

“Yes, and it wasn’t easy for any of them to get them to marry them and stay married to them.”

Mqhele beat Hlomu soon after they met. She left, and he did everything in his power to get her back.

Qhawe kicked Naledi out of his house, but he never let her go. Even in the two months that she was gone, he still called her “my wife” and made us all make sure she was safe.

Sambulo made another woman pregnant and made us hide the truth for six years because he would have rather hidden that child until his dying day than lose Xolie.

Nkosana waited for Zandile for 17 years.

And here I am, thinking about all the things I wouldn’t do for Thando. Even buying blankets and watching her excited about it was a lot for me. I had a horrible morning if I’m to be honest. I’m sitting here thinking: *That would have been annoying even if it was Ndoni*. Maybe I’m not made for this deep love and marriage thing. Perhaps Ndoni fascinated me because she was home. She was Mbuba – a home I had longed for all my life. I will never get over her death. I never even got to ask her the important questions or say goodbye. And now here I am, stuck between the right thing and the thing I want.

“But Mpande, you are not your brothers.”

I *am* my brothers, we have always been each other all our lives. We would never have survived this life if we weren’t each other.

“We came from a bad place, Qhayiya. What we cannot have is history repeating itself.”

She runs her hand over that dreadful thing on her head and I’m trying my best not to look at it.

“You know, you could have gotten any woman pregnant. That’s what happens sometimes when people have sex. That it was this one doesn’t mean anything. You two had sex when she was ovulating, and that’s it –

biology. It doesn't mean there was some magic or maybe superpowers or ancestors sitting somewhere deciding and making sure she's the one you'll spend the rest of your life with; miserable as you are right now."

"Miserable?"

"Yes, you are miserable. Have you ever, in your entire life, felt loved completely and unconditionally by a woman? With no reservations, with no doubt and fear that they are with you because of who you are?"

What does she mean? Yes, of course, my love life has been nothing but drama. Half of the women I've been with in South Africa hate me. And then there was Gwen with her flaming hot coochie and down-by-the-riverside brain. And now that I think about it, I've been through so much with women. Not that I'm a saint myself, but why did it have to be Thando that I'm forced to end up with? And why is it that this one sitting on my passenger seat is the one making me all these questions about myself? When I look at her, I don't see Carol. I don't see anything or anyone but Qhayiya.

I'm getting married next weekend, no rings or vows, but once you pay lobola and do umembeso, the government says you're officially married.

"At some point, you are gonna have to choose yourself, Mpande. Have you not done everything that needed to be done? You know your kids and your brothers' kids are set for life. They are not going to grow up as you did; you've made sure of that. Now, why are you here? Choosing everything and everyone but yourself?"

There is no 'yourself' in this life. We were born to better the lives of the generations after us – our children and their children, that's why we've suffered so much.

I park the car at the exact spot Nkosana parked his Sting when he brought me here, so many years ago, at only 14 years old. There's been so many stories about Crown Mines, including the one about that Mongezi Jingxela guy. I have concluded that this place may be cursed, and yet here I am, with her.

“Why are we here, Mpande? When I was at varsity, I wrote my thesis about—”

Yeah, I know what her thesis was about.

“Can you shoot a gun?”

She looks at me, startled. I hand her a pistol. She takes it and looks at me.

“I don’t like guns, they kill.”

“They also heal,” I say.

“This is messed up, Mpande,” she says.

I look at her, and my eyes stay firm on her now, I don’t look away. I know she is a qualified psychologist and whatever, but this is me she is dealing with, none of that textbook shit she learned at varsity can work on me.

“This is the trigger, squeeze on it until you can’t anymore.”

She does that, then bullets go everywhere and anywhere. I know the sound scares her, but she doesn’t stop firing. The sound makes me happy; I want her to keep firing. She empties the pistol and throws it on the ground. That’s dangerous – but I don’t tell her that – I just pick up the pistol and follow her to the car.

“Do you want to drive?” I ask her because she looks so damaged right now.

“I can’t drive.”

Okay... For a moment there, it escaped my mind that there are people who can’t drive because nobody in their family or life has ever had a car. I have to take her home now because maybe this was a bad idea on my side and her side. I’m quiet because I don’t know what to say, and I assume she’s quiet because she’s never done anything like this before.

“Who were you shooting at, Qhayiya?”

“Everyone,” she says.

Not the answer I was hoping for, but what I’ve decided now is that I’m never taking her to a shooting range ever again. That was selfish of me; it

was all about me. Although I can't deny seeing her emptying that gun was rather sexy to watch.

"We could go somewhere you'll like... drag racing, hunting, bungee-jumping or anything cool like that."

Why does she look freaked out now?

"First of all, Mpande, I'm not into shooting animals for fun, or jumping from high bridges and stuff."

Strange coming from a woman who emptied a gun on 'everyone'. Shooting blanks yes, but I could feel her release. I need a proper comeback...

"Okay then, a coffee shop? And..."

What other soft boring things do women like doing? Ndoni never really had time for all that stuff, Thando just wants marriage.

"I like cuddling on the couch watching TV, eating home-cooked food and laughing at cheesy comedy love stories."

I don't cuddle, I don't even watch TV unless I find myself sitting in front of it.

"My boyfriend is okay with that. We do it all the time," she says.

Boyfriend? What boyfriend now?

"Listen, you came here to drop me off after work. That's the story we are sticking to. Nkosi already doesn't like me working for your family because he thinks you are all man whores with too much money—"

"Nkosi?"

She rolls down the window and smiles at him.

"Sthandwa sami."

What the fuck? What is this short thing standing at my car window?

"This is one of my bosses; he was just dropping me off because none of their drivers was available today," she says, opening the door to get out of the car.

We are already lying to the boyfriend? Okay, that's a good sign. I'm looking at this guy, he's looking at me.

"Linjani mfethu?"

Linjani? He's Zimbabwean. I'll have him deported by the end of this week. Boyfriend yok'nuka!

"Qhayi."

"Thanks, Mpande. I'm not sure which house I'll be working in next, but my mom will tell me tonight. I hope your wedding goes well next weekend."

Ayi maaan! I watch as she enters her yard and that stupid midget has his arm around her waist.

Yerrrr, Mqoqi messed me up with his protective big brother shit. He should have let me kill people, at least one. Now I have to make calls and send that little man back to where he came from.

Thando is calling again. I do not have the time or energy. Now she's texting.

Myeni wami, they left me with all the kids at Qhawe's house. They said they were coming back but it's been hours. Where are you? Please come help me out, there are three babies crying here. I love you.

I need alcohol.

I'm driving to Mhlabuyalingana. Whatever my brothers are hiding from me, I'd rather deal with it than the mother of my children.

By the time I drive into Mseni Beach Lodge, it's already late at night. Mqhele is standing on the balcony of one of the wooden chalets, staring at the not too far ocean and smoking. Langa is standing next to him. What's the kid doing here? I don't try to get their attention, even though I'm pretty sure they saw me parking. At the reception, I see no familiar faces, just a young man who greets me with a smile and tells me there are no vacant rooms left, but one of the rooms my brothers booked has two single beds. I feel like he's been preparing himself all day to explain this to me, but I see my brothers gathering outside. So, I walk straight out the automatic door

without saying a word to him. I didn't even bring clothes with me, not even a toothbrush.

“Ntwana.”

Why is Mhlaba here? And Nkangala? And Mhlaba must stop calling me ntwana, I'm a grown man.

“Where have you been?”

What does Nkosana mean? I had to drive hours from Joburg to here, and I didn't even know about this beach vacation in the middle of Mhabuyalingana. I can actually see Mozambique from here. I don't like that country – a girl did me dirty in that country.

“I was driving from Gauteng, potholes and goats and cows all the way. What's going on? What are we doing here?”

“Waiting for DNA results,” Nqoba says and lights a cigarette.

He leaves and goes inside before I can ask “whose?”. I know those things take a while, backlogs and stuff.

“Bafo?”

I'm talking to Nkosana, but he doesn't even turn to look at me. I know this behaviour, and I know this feeling I'm feeling.

“Bafo, whose DNA results?”

I'm talking to nobody in particular, but besides Nkosana, Mhlaba is the only bafo here. Nkangala knows I'm not talking to him.

“Eyi, ntwana,” Mhlaba says, placing his hand on my shoulder. “Lomfana kaSambulo... uSisekelo. They came here; his brother left him in a hut. The hut burned down and I've been here since last night. They took what they found and said they were going to test it, to make sure it was him. They took my blood and put an earbud in my mouth.”

What is Mhlaba talking about? I dropped these kids off at school yesterday morning. Ntuthuko was supposed to drive Sisekelo to some matric thing later in the afternoon.

“I don't understand.”

Nobody is explaining anything to me, properly.

“Sisekelo burned himself to death; ask him why,” Nkangala says, pointing at Mhlaba with his head.

Noooo...

“Bafo? Nkosana?”

He won’t even look at me.

“Where is Sambulo?” I ask.

We can’t deal with this again. We can’t lose another child.

“Where is Sambulo, bafo?”

“We haven’t called him,” he says.

This happened yesterday and they haven’t told Sambulo?

“Ntsika?”

“He was supposed to drive here, but he said Naledi was gone and he had to be at Qhawe’s house.”

And where the hell is Qhawe? I know he’s supposed to be here. My phone beeps... it’s a WhatsApp message from Thando.

I’m actually handling the kids very well. Your brothers would be proud of me. Hlomu also left hers here and went to the North West. We have to meet with the décor lady tomorrow morning, don’t forget. Love you.

Why is Hlomu in the North West? And why am I so clueless about what’s happening? My phone beeps again. It’s Qhayiya.

Hey, are you okay? Did you travel well? I hope it’s nothing bad. Call me. I’m worried about you.

I can’t call her, not now. I don’t think I’ll be able to utter the words.

It’s bad.

My phone rings immediately. My first instinct is to reject the call, but my thumb presses on green.

“What’s going on, Mpande?”

“I’m not exactly sure yet,” I say.

I’m not sure if I’m lying or telling the truth right now. Sisekelo cannot be dead. Yes, there are things about him, but why would he burn himself?

“So how do you know it’s bad?”

I don’t know how to respond to this.

“Okay, I won’t sleep until I know you’re okay. I’ll be waiting for your call or any communication. I’m worried about you.”

I don’t think this needs a response, but it’s making me feel a little bit better to know that she’s worried about *me*. Too bad I’ve already made that call to my Home Affairs contact to send her little man back to Zimbabwe. I put my phone in my pocket and look up, only to see Nkosana’s eyes staring back at me.

“We need those DNA results by tomorrow morning; you know that’s your job,” he says, taps my shoulder three times and goes back inside.

Let me start making calls.

I'm holding her hand as tightly as I can.

Look, I know I shouldn't be here; I should be out there trying to figure out what these men are up to this time.

I didn't tell Xolie, Zandile and Gugu that I was driving to the North West after midnight with no idea where I was going to sleep because I'm not welcome in that Montsho house. I'm here with Naledi because she called me and said nothing. She was breathing on the other side of the line, just breathing. So, I decided maybe that's what she needed, for me to say nothing and just listen to her pain.

I remember when I lost my father. It felt like a large part of my soul had been shredded to pieces. Fathers – if they are good fathers – are always a safe space for daughters. There's being loved by a man, and then there is being loved by your father, which Dladla did unreservedly. Of course, I'm angry at him now, I will never forgive him for being a two-faced narcissist. But still, there's a part of me that's still hanging on to what he was to me.

Ten minutes later, Naledi hung up without a word being said. I woke Msebe and Niya, put them in the car, dropped them at Qhawe's door and drove off. I didn't even see Thando or the other kids, they were probably all sleeping. Naledi called again, this time she spoke.

“Hlomu, why didn't you tell me?”

“Qhawe was trying to protect you, we all were. I'm on my way.”

I was 40 minutes away from her home when we spoke.

I found her waiting for me at the gate at 3 am, wearing the same clothes she was wearing when she left her house, looking worse than she did on the day I found her sitting on my bedroom floor after reading Mandisa's suicide letter. We went inside, and straight to her bedroom where Tsietsi was sleeping on the floor. I climbed into bed with her, with no words and no clue how to comfort her. I knew sleep wasn't going to come for either of us. We were just lying there waiting for the sun to come out so we could deal with what daylight had in store for us.

I put my hand on her back and brushed it. She reached over, pulled my arm and wrapped it around her. She had her back to me, but I knew she was crying; I cried with her. At 5 am, we wiped the tears and left the house. Tsietsi was still fast asleep on the floor.

"He's a deep sleeper," she said when she noticed me looking at him.

We walked.

Two women walking up a hill in the wee hours of the morning. Me having no idea where we were going. The walk must have taken us about 30 minutes before we reached this place. I don't know how to describe it. It isn't a kraal because it doesn't have wooden poles tied together with a rope or wire, but its thick trees and leaves form a big circle around it. I realised that when she pushed aside thick leaves and unlocked a gate I had no idea was there.

Inside, all there is are graves and graves; all the way from where we stood to as far as I could see. She found Ntate's grave with her eyes. It was easy really because it looked the freshest and newest. And now we're just kneeling next to it, me with my bra tied around my head because she forgot to mention before we left the house that we couldn't enter wherever we were going with our heads uncovered, or with our shoes on. It feels sacred, calm and exclusive. It feels like... the people here are resting in peace.

"I don't know what to say to him, Hlomu. I don't know if I'm angry at him or angry at myself."

Being angry at the dead is pointless, especially at Naledi's father because if we are, to be honest, when he decided it was time for him to live for himself, he did exactly that. He was a remarkable man who loved and raised strong four women on his own. His death was painful, none of us expected it to happen. He was going to pull through – for Naledi, for all his girls – because that's what he had always done. But not this time, and what he left behind was a mess. I'm yet to fully understand what my task here is, but I'm ready and willing to fulfil it.

She begins to talk...

"Ntate, you should have at least waited for me. You should have at least given me a chance to say goodbye to you. What you did was not fair. You should have fought; I fought Ntate. I fought because I knew I had to come back to my children, and you. I still can't explain or fully understand everything that was happening in those two months. My body was there, but my mind was in another world."

This is the first time I'm hearing this, but maybe that's why she brought me here, to hear these things.

"I belong to them, Ntate. I understand that fully now. I know you blamed them. Everybody blames them, but it wasn't their fault. There is a reason I'm in that family."

Errrrrrrr babe, everything is their fault. Everything that has happened to us – the ones with vaginas – is our husbands' fault. The sooner you understand that the better.

"I have five of their children now, Ntate. Five. The most any other woman in that family has borne. I don't know what it is exactly. I can't explain it, but I can't leave Chawe and come back home like my sisters want me to. I can't do that. It's complicated."

I'm just here wondering when and why they buried him without involving us. I mean, we were there the whole time, but this is the first time I'm seeing his grave, it even has a tombstone and all.

"I don't belong here anymore, Ntate. I belong to where I chose to go to."

I don't know this Naledi – this deep and frank Naledi – but what I know for sure is that her sisters won't like this. There's a war currently happening, and to win it, they need her. But as I kneel here next to her, in front of a grave, our hands knotted together, I know she will choose the Zulus over everything; just like we've all done. She's speaking Setswana mostly, so half the time I don't know what she's saying, but I still hold her hand tight. Her isiZulu has improved, a lot. She's dedicated herself to learning the language because no child in the Zulu household speaks English – they leave that at school.

“Sbopho asks about you a lot and I'd been promising to bring them to see you with the babies. But I didn't know you were gone until yesterday. He doesn't know you're gone. They didn't let him see your burial. You were his best friend, Ntate; he misses your video calls. Mathongo is too young to feel your absence. Sbopho will eventually forget you because he's also too young to feel the pain of it all. But they will know you, Ntate. They will know everything about you and what a great man you were. They will know and be able to speak our language. I'll keep your pictures with them on our walls. They will know who you were, and they will be proud that you were their grandfather.”

Why am I crying when the person who is supposed to be wailing and rolling on the ground is so composed? I have always admired Naledi's strength, more so because her own personal problems built and shaped it before there was a Qhawe and us. She came to the Zulu family with it. Me? I arrived in that family a naïve, snobbish girl; they turned me into stone. Naledi has her own specific place in the Zulu family, and I believe her when she says there is a reason she is one of us.

“I brought Hlomu here. I had to because as long as she is around, you never have to worry about me. She's held me down, unknowingly most times, and I know she always will.”

Okay, now I'm just going to let the tears flow.

I've been in the Zulu family forever, but I've never really thought of myself as a holding space; a safe space for any of the women that came

after me. I rule with an iron fist sometimes. I do what needs to be done to hold the family together. There have been many good things about me being Hlomu Zulu, but I can't deny that the identity has hardened my heart, and at this point, there aren't extremes I wouldn't go to for this family.

Naledi here may not have realised it yet, but she is there too, and I know she has decided and accepted. In fact, she didn't even think hard about it. Somehow, I believe that with me and her, somewhere, our paths crisscross in whatever this family is about. Sometimes I wish I had met Nomafu, but also, I would have preferred it if she had died soon after meeting me because I'm not about that life of mother-in-law being in the picture of my life.

"I'm good now, Ntate. I need to go to Mbuba and make ukhamba for Mfula, Nyezi and Nyanda. Beautiful names, aren't they? I know you would have hated the names, but guess what? Mhlaba, your favourite person named them."

She's kind of, sort of, laughing and that's some kind of relief for me because wow, this is, after all, a graveyard of ghosts who have nothing to do with me. I'm just glad they are Montsho ghosts, not Zulu ghosts because those are downright ratchet.

Ntate and Mhlaba had an interesting relationship.

Mhlaba once said, "That man went from being a cop to being a chief? His true calling was being a criminal, that I know for sure."

But it was at a time when I had no time for Mhlaba. I really struggled to warm up to him; there was just something in me that wished he'd never shown up. I don't know, maybe it was because the eight problems had been enough for me. I didn't want to deal with a ninth one.

"Do you want to say something to him?"

I'm startled because I thought I was just here to give moral support. The only grave I talk to is Mvelo's. I have never visited my father's grave and I will never visit Mqoqi's grave.

"Ntate, I'm sorry about everything that happened. I will take care of Naledi. I know she was your jewel."

I don't know where that came from but... I was asked to say something, and it just shot straight from my heart to my mouth, sincere as fuck.

She gets up on her feet, so I figure we're done here because it's 7 am now and this is North West in flippin' summer. I'm a light-skinned girl – the sun is not kind on my skin. I get up and wipe the soil off my knees. Life keeps humbling me, I tell you.

I expected us to go back to the gate, but no, that's not where she's going. We are manoeuvring through graves; all the tombstones have Montsho written on them. Again, I find myself kneeling next to a tombstone that clearly was erected a long time ago. There's overgrown grass around it and it's clear nobody has visited or cleaned it for a long time. It's written Baboloki Montsho. Not that I'm interested in knowing who that is, but...

“You were an asshole, Ntate. I was young when you died, in fact, I don't even remember much about you except for a picture of you in a shebeen there in town. But you tore my family apart. I grew up without a mother because of you.”

I'm confused. Didn't her mother leave on her own accord? And I definitely know she is not apologetic about it.

“I need you to do something for us, for Ntate. I know you were a loose cannon, but can you at least be a good ancestor? Fix this thing. Ntate chose Lesedi, your daughter...”

Jizas!

“She chose her to succeed him, and you know he always made smart decisions, good and bad, but they were always smart decisions. Now get your crazy self-destructive ass to work; do the right thing for once. Fix this mess our family is in,” she says and gets up on her feet.

That's it?

I'm just glad I'm following her to the gate now, not another grave. We're out and suddenly it feels like I'm in the real world again. She locks the gate and pulls the thick leaves over it. Now, people are up and all over the place when we reach the bottom of the hill. I'm not sure why they are looking at me funny until I remember I have a bra wrapped around my

head. I pull it off and put it under my armpit. This has been a strange morning. Also, I haven't heard from my husband since last night. Naledi hasn't even said a word about hers since I arrived here.

"I'm sorry, Naledi, about everything."

We are at her home's gate now, and I really want to get this guilt out before we walk in there and deal with her family. She turns to look at me. I know she isn't mad at me; I see it in her eyes, but also, her calmness makes me uncomfortable. What if it is Qhawe that her wrath will be unleashed on? Look, I love Naledi, but girl is kind of extreme and impulsive.

"Qhawe had no control over what happened, Naledi."

I'm trying to fix things before they go...

"I know. Qhawe loves me, Hlomu."

Whew!

"And I love you," she says and gives me a tight hug.

Okay. It feels weird because... we don't do this, but I want this hug to last forever.

"Bathong! Where have you been? We've been worried all morning!"

Our intimate moment ends, just like that. Naledi scoffs and walks past her like she isn't even here. But me, sometimes I'm polite...

"We went to Ntate's grave, Naledi needed to see it and say her goodbyes."

"The graves? Women are not allowed to go in there."

Hhayke! I walk on and leave her looking shocked because first of all, why is she here? The phuzza face is not as bad as it was the last time I saw her at Agape's birthday party a couple of years ago. I went to that party only because Niya pestered me about it, and I had to go with her.

I walk into a house full of women, including Mme Menkwe and Tsietsi. I know my family thrives on drama, but how on earth are Ntate's aged slay queen wife and Naledi's biological mother living here? Together? The last I heard, they hated each other.

"Where are you going?" Omphi asks as Naledi approaches with her handbag, the only thing she left her house with.

“Home,” she says.

“Naledi, Ntate would have—”

“I’ve spoken to Ntate, Omphi. I’m going home to my husband and children. They didn’t kill Ntate.”

I’m not getting involved in this one.

“Naledi, your father died because of—”

“My father died because his time had come. Now you’re all here, united in hating and blaming the wrong people because you can’t deal with your own problems. I’m going home to a family I created. Mme—”

I know she’s talking to Mme Menkwe; she never calls her biological mother “Mme”. I don’t even know what she calls her.

“—Remember when you told me to leave you and Ntate alone and go deal with my own problems, with the man I chose? That’s exactly what I’m doing now.”

And just like that, we walk out the door, leaving everyone standing in complete silence.

I have so many questions, but I don’t ask them. I just start the car and get on the road.

Also, it’s been almost two days now, where the fuck are our husbands?

Zulu

I've been ignoring his calls since last night. Now he's texting.

Ndoda, Sisekelo didn't come home last night. It's almost afternoon and I can't get hold of Ntuthuko. Xolie is losing her mind. Where are you? Everyone's phone is off. What's going on?

I can't switch my phone off because my wife has just found out her father is dead, and she decided to go all the way to the North West without telling me. On top of that, she hasn't called me. Not even once, at least to cry ke or swear at me. I'm a tough man, but that was one thing I could not be strong for. So, I left it to the women – Hlomu to be specific. I know she drove to Naledi's home in the middle of the night, but I don't know what happened there.

I just want my wife back, my family with my many kids. That's all I want.

I went through two months of uncertainty and hopelessness, and when I finally got to bring her home, I couldn't even touch her because of the guilt and everything I was too afraid to tell her. I craved her. I craved her touch, her body; I wanted to be inside her. I was desperate for her moans under me, her perfect full body wrapped around me and her voice whispering how much she loves me. But I couldn't touch her because I felt she was still too fragile, confused and healing from giving birth to three children in difficult circumstances.

Now on top of that, here I am, ignoring my brother because I can't get myself to say the words that we all know are true. Sisekelo is dead, he

burned alive like our parents and our grandmother.

The man from Margate is also dead.

Ngcobo is dead.

Mzimela is dead.

At this point, I don't even know what our next move will be. But the more we delay telling Sambulo about this, the worse things will get. I could lie and tell him the boy is 17, so he's probably somewhere sleeping off a hangover with some naked teenage girl next to him. But I'm a bad liar, Naledi always says that about me.

Since Naledi hasn't called – among the many things I'm worried about – is what's waiting for me back at our home. That's if she plans on coming back home. But... let me deal with this problem here, and then go fetch my wife. We've gotten through many things, we'll get through this too. I'm just relieved that she left my children in our house because if she had taken them with her, I wouldn't still be here.

“Have you spoken to Hlomu?”

“To say what to her? I called her yesterday, but all I did was cry. I can't get myself to speak to her again. She's caught up in the Naledi thing. I'm not even sure if she's back from the North West.”

It's unlike Mqhele to not be constantly talking to Hlomu every hour or so. But this... this is shit we are not going to grieve for and move on from. Xolie is a different kind of species; Sambulo has our father's soul. How does one even begin explaining to Sambulo that his child is dead?

“Where is Ntuthuko?” I ask.

Sambulo made us hire him, for a reason we all don't know, but he said we needed someone to manage our Uber business and that he had the perfect guy, so we did. But there was something about him that made us trust him with not just the Uber business, but with our kids and wives as well.

“He's in that room. He hasn't come out since we got here.”

I see. He drove our children through two provinces without us knowing? And one of them ended up dead?

“Qhawe,” Mqhele says, grabbing my arm. “This is not the time; let him stay in there until we get the results.”

The results are not the main thing here. The main thing is that the man took our kids without telling us and brought them here. He knew not to do that. Who is this Ntuthuko man anyway? We didn’t even vet him. We employed him and paid him more than he deserves, and now this?

“We need him alive.”

We have never needed anyone who messes with us alive.

“Why?”

“For the boys. If he disappears, we’ll have a lot of explaining to do. They trust him,” he says.

Which boys? The kids or the petrol bomb throwers whom we haven’t seen in a while? I don’t even know where Ntsika, Sbani and Lwandle live. But I know there’s something about some white girl they don’t even like.

“I talked to Langa last night. Let’s keep Ntuthuko for now.”

“So, what am I supposed to say to Sambulo? He’s been calling since last night.”

“Switch your phone off.”

I don’t understand why they are acting like they don’t know Sambulo. He will find us, and I hope it’s later than sooner. I have not slept in two days, none of us has.

“So what the fuck happens now? We sit here and wait? Ntuthuko must tell us why these boys came here, surely, they told him.”

“I asked him; he said he didn’t know.”

When did Mqhele become this person? The Mqhele I know would pull that man’s teeth out one-by-one until he gives us an answer. Because how does a man employed as a driver drive all the way to Mhlabuyalingana – almost nine hours from where he was supposed to be – and not know why? So now Ntuthuko takes instructions from kids?

Mpande is sitting there shaking his legs as usual. Not that it’s a good thing, but I’m glad Mqoqi’s death drove him to drink because he doesn’t bite his nails or pull that elastic band around his wrist until it’s bruised and

swollen anymore. He just grabs whatever alcohol is near him and drinks it like it is water. Our lives were difficult and painful when we were just kids trying to raise ourselves and each other in this fucked up world. We were supposed to have an easier adulthood. Everything we have done to get to where we are now was done with the belief that our lives would be easier, perfect even.

Sambulo is calling again. I ignore the call. He will never forgive me for this.

I leave Mqhele with his one cigarette after another and go outside to find Nkosana. All he does since I got here is stare at the ocean, most times with a beer in his hand, sometimes with both his hands in his pockets if he isn't drinking beer. If our father was still alive, he would look exactly like Nkosana does now. I was 10 when our parents died. Sbopho didn't have full grey hair yet, just a bit here and there. He died younger than me. Mama must have been Hlomu's age.

"Bafo, I think it's time we tell Sambulo what's going on."

The more we ignore him, the crazier he will get. Not that he'll shoot and kill us like he's been doing to other people all his adult life, but his wife will definitely burn us alive.

"This is going to tear this family apart, Qhawe," he says.

Nkosana's phone has been off too, and I wonder what Zandile is thinking wherever she is. I know she's been trying to reach him because, after Mqoqi's death, she doesn't trust his sanity anymore. She's become so paranoid that every time he is not near her, she freaks out.

The thing about this brother of mine – who tried to raise us the best way he could – is that even now, in his aged life, his main goal is to protect us, grown men. I'm not talking about how he has spent his life making sure we don't get killed. I'm talking about how he won't let us see his face or look into his eyes when things are worse than we think they are. We've dealt with grief before. We've lost children before, in fact, three. I can't say this one is going to be the same, but we can't keep Sambulo in the dark anymore. Sisekelo was his child, our child.

“Sisekelo made a choice. It was either Nyanda or Hlomu, but he decided. The boy made a decision,” he says and then turns to look at me.

So, I know he is not about protecting anything now; he is about truth and how we are going to handle it going forward.

“Nyanda was never supposed to leave that hut alive. Mhlaba was supposed to throw him in the fire, and that would have been the end of everything. Do you remember the life we dreamed of? The things we did, hoping we’d achieve that life? The blood we’ve spilled. The things we have survived. The bodies buried under our Muldersdrift house – everything Qhawe. Everything we have done and what we did it for, throwing your child in the fire would have given us that. A peaceful and safe life.”

What is he talking about?

“We were roaming around, and I was fine with that, but you decided to bring them into our lives – the ancestors and all. We were fine not honouring them Qhawe because what have they ever done for us? Why did we have to slaughter goats and burn incense for them? Our mother chose Sbopho over us. What reason did you have to honour her?”

“Bafo?”

“What reason, Qhawe? Now they keep taking and taking from us. Our children, Qhawe. And they won’t stop because the person they really want is Hlomu. She has done what they brought her to us to do. Now they want her, and they won’t stop until they get her back.”

I’m trying to understand what my brother is saying, but it’s not making any sense to me. We went to the man in Margate; we dug up the bones and buried them where he said we should. We did everything that we needed to do. Of course, we did a lot of bad things to have all the money we have, but now we are grown enough to know that money cannot buy the healing we need. And still, we move because we can live with our baggage and trauma. As long as our children live a life where they never have to heal from their childhood.

“Call Sambulo,” he says.

Why me?

“Bafo, you know you’re the only one who can handle Sambulo. I can’t just call him and say—”

“You brought them back, Qhawe. They tormented me. They tormented my wife and they had us digging up bones. My son carried the bones of my grandchildren in a plastic bag. You knew I was against it from the beginning, but you insisted on it. Call Sambulo, Qhawe. Let him come here to see the remains of his son.”

“Mageba, are you blaming me for all of this?”

He’s quiet.

“Ndabezitha?”

Silence...

“Nkosana?”

Silence...

I can handle anything, but not the assumption that I’m responsible for all my family’s suffering. For Sisekelo’s death? No! I’d stand here and let Sambulo blow my brains out if that is what it takes.

“Bafo, don’t walk away from me, please.”

He turns to look at me just as the automatic door senses his feet and opens.

I know he wants to say something, but he doesn’t. Instead, he walks back to me and I watch the automatic glass door close behind him. He pulls me by the neck and presses my head on his shoulder. I have to bend a little because we are of the same height.

“We’ve been fighting all our lives, Qhawe. Father named you that, a hero because he knew what your duty would be in this family. I’m tired. I’d like to die happy and free. I’m tired of fighting, Mageba,” he says, pushes me off him, turns around and goes inside.

I’m left wondering what he meant by all that. If being a ‘hero’ means killing my own child, that is not going to happen. But who are we without Hlomu? That means killing Mqhele, our unruly kids who have now grown into men, and pain, unhealable pain. My hands are shaking as I press the green button. He answers on the first ring.

“Where are you?” he asks.

No greeting.

“At KwaMhlabuyalingana,” I answer, unsure if I’m even ready to break the news to him.

“What? Nenzani lapho? Sisekelo is missing, I need you all here. Where is Mpande? His phone has been off since last night.”

Yeses!

“Is Xolie with you?” I ask.

“No, I’m at the school; they say he didn’t pitch up for that matric what-what thing. Something is not right, bafo. Where the heck is my boy?”

I can’t get the words out of my mouth; it’s hard and it’s painful. The worst part is I can’t get it out of my head that this is all my fault.

I remember how he pestered me about the Naledi thing. He was so worried about the whole thing; said he was just waiting for me to say the word and he’d deal with it. But he didn’t do that when he felt it was too much. He called and said he was on his way to Kimberley, and that he was going to kill that idiot cop and bring my wife back home. Sambulo has always been that person. He doesn’t waste time. I really wanted Naledi to come back to me when she was ready. I never wanted her to find out what her father did. In fact, I would have rather had her think it was me who killed that idiot man instead of her father. I still don’t know how Sambulo killed that idiot cop, but I know his remains are in Muldersdrift, somewhere in the yard. And now here we are...

Mama had us two years apart; she never really nurtured me. I was my father’s child while she focused on Mqhele more. I remember she breastfed us both at the same time. Mqhele could already walk and had teeth; I was just a baby. That’s one of the strange things about me. I remember things I shouldn’t. She changed when Sambulo started swelling her womb. She let Mqhele go and me, even though I was still too young and I still needed her.

“Qhawe, I asked you a question. My child is missing and you are at Mhlabuyalingana? For what?”

Eish...

“Bafo, something happened. These boys came all the way here and—”

“Which boys?”

“Sisekelo and Langa.”

“What? How?”

Where do I even begin? They snatch the phone from my hand before I gather the strength to say the most painful three words I never knew I’d ever have to say in my life: Sisekelo is dead. I’m not sure who snatched my phone, but my brothers are here, forming a circle around me.

“It’s not him,” Mpande says. “It’s not Sisekelo. The remains are not his.”

I wish I could say I see the relief on their faces, but no... because if he is not dead, where is he? I see Ntuthuko standing behind Langa, looking too pale for a pitch-black man. I still want to kill him for what he did.

“We need to go back home before Sambulo drives here; I’ve just told him where we are,” I say.

I’m sure he’s already on his way here.

He should not bring his wife with him because... she will kill us.

“We must pray.”

Jizas!

We don't do that Zandile!

God is probably sitting over there in the clouds thinking: *please let these heathen bitches live forever because even hell will be easy for them.*

“You can go to the other room and pray, Zandile, if you think that will help, you're free to do that. But what we need to do right now is keep our eyes open and try to figure out where Sisekelo is,” Gugu says.

She's pregnant so if anyone should welcome prayer, it's her. More so because three miscarriages later, she should beg God to give her this one.

“What if he's dead? It's been days,” Xolie says.

Yeah, our dodgy husbands came back home to tell us Sisekelo disappeared somewhere at Umhlabuyalingana. They all looked helpless and lost. None of us like them right now. In fact, that lobola and umembeso thing that we were all supposed to be at didn't happen. Mpande didn't seem to care much, but Thando came here crying on Monday, screaming at us, threatening us. That was when Naledi, Xolie and Gugu found out why we sent her packing those years ago.

“One of our children is missing, Thando. If you think your lobola and membeso are more important than that, then you don't understand the

family you are marrying into; you don't understand who we are," Naledi said to her.

Naledi still had the energy to explain things to her. I was sitting on Xolie's couch trying to compose myself and she, Xolie, was so mad she was ready to strangle her to death. There are levels here; Xolie and I have been dealing with things since we were in our 20s. Zandile spent 17 years in jail and Gugu had to survive being unloved until she was loved. So, forgive us for being hard on Thando. This girl doesn't get it, she doesn't know shit about why we are still here. I envy her sometimes though. Imagine being a Thando, clueless and excited about the surname and status.

And imagine being Hlomu... no fuck that... nobody will ever be a Hlomu in this family. It's unimaginable.

"I need to talk to my children," I blurt.

Look, desperate times call for desperate measures. Everybody looks at me.

My children are 14-year-old boys and a girl who has just turned 11. We couldn't even throw a birthday party for her because of all the Zulu problems. But I know Zandile knows who I'm talking about. I stopped caring about her feelings a long time ago when it comes to this. She's the one who decided they'd rather think she's dead than know she was languishing in jail. Honestly... I'm not proud of who they have become, but life has taught me that fate brought me into this family with some power. Effective power, yes, but I can't fix things that go generations and generations back. So I will do things my way.

"I'll go with you," Naledi says.

She's different; I kind of like it. She's not that girl who got freaked out from finding out her man was not a saint and thought she could leave him anymore. She's Naledi Zulu, and that surname comes with a lot. Whatever happened to her when she was lying in that coma looking dead, I'm all for it.

"I'll drive."

“Babe, I could use a nap on this long drive from Houghton to Monavoni. I personally think Centurion is a creepy place, and to be honest, I know the name of the estate these boys are squatting at, but I don’t know the house number. Put Silverstone Estate on GPS,” I say as I fold my arms and lean my head on the passenger window to make myself comfortable for that nap I’ve been desperate for.

“Bathong! it says 40km.”

I’m not interested, I just want to sleep for at least 40 minutes while she drives. I’m thinking this would be the best time for us to have a conversation about that two-month coma, but I really need my sleep. I’m deep in it when I feel her hand firm on my shoulder, shaking me, aggressively.

“Hlomu, the house number,” she says.

I wake up from deep sleep to see a security guard standing at the driver’s window. I don’t know the house number, but I know these boys live here.

I sit up and poke my head towards the driver’s window, flash a smile and look at the security guard straight in the eye.

“I’m not sure about the house number, bhuti. Kodwa uyazazi izingane zami angithi?” I read his name badge before I spoke. His surname is Ngema – he is Zulu.

“You mean labafana bamehlo amakhulu? They live at 493 with intombazane yomlungu.”

I nod, smile, and see his face light up at the sight of my smile. He taps his own disk and the boom gate opens. No phoning the house owner to get the code.

“This is why Mqhele is so obsessed with you. How on earth did you even do that? He didn’t even ask for our names!”

Girl needs to stop asking useless questions. What we need to do is find house 493 in this large estate. It takes us some driving around in circles before we see a very big 490 written on the wall of one house. Look, I’m still sleepy so I’m not even trying to help Naledi figure things out.

“The odd numbers are on the right and even numbers on the left. I think that’s the house,” she says.

I’d really like to be much help but... just get us to where we are going babes, it’s the least you can do.

It’s a house with no fence or gate. It’s kind of small – five bedrooms maybe – but I know it’s the right one because I see Ntsika’s car parked in front of the closed garage.

“What are we here to say to them?” she asks.

Yerrrr...

“We don’t negotiate with our kids, Naledi, they do what we tell them to do. We are here about Sisekelo, and if anyone is going to find him, it’s these boys. Follow my lead.”

This woman made me kneel on graves, so please... she has no right to freak out about anything I make her do.

I’m the one who knocks because I learned a long time ago that I’m the one who has to take the lead. A white girl opens the door – pretty as fuck, blonde hair long and dangling on her back. We don’t need to introduce ourselves; she lets us in and tells us they are sleeping. She’s cooking breakfast, I think, and she looks rather anxious. What the hell have these boys done to her?

“They are sleeping where?” Naledi asks.

“Upstairs,” she says.

To be honest, I want breakfast, and I can smell bacon and eggs. So, I stay downstairs while Naledi climbs the stairs. She’ll call me if we have to resort to violence.

“Are the eggs poached or fried?”

“They are fried; there are mushrooms and baked beans too,” she says.

Okay, blue-eyed makoti. I see you’ve been taking good care of my boys, if only you knew what they are capable of.

She puts two fried eggs and some mushrooms for me on a plate. I don’t do baked beans at all; I went to boarding school so reliving the beans trauma is not my thing. I’ve just swallowed the first piece of the fried egg

when I hear noises coming from upstairs. The mushrooms look divine and the bacon is as dry as I like it. It's nice to have someone make breakfast for me, especially this blue-eyed makoti who is about to learn—

“*Whoah!* What’s happening?”

I don’t flinch.

She looks at me like I’m crazy, or deaf because we can both hear what’s happening upstairs.

“Don’t worry about that,” I say, waving my hand in the air. “Do you have chillies? What’s your name again?”

“I’m Chloe; I have Nando’s peri-peri sauce.”

Not hot enough, but it will do.

The noise from upstairs gets louder and louder. I can hear Naledi shouting in her dodgy Zulu and the boys – actually, grown-ass men – on some ‘yebo mama’. This girl here looks so freaked out, I know she wants to run upstairs.

“Give me the sauce. I don’t like mushrooms, but they are better with something chilli.”

She looks conflicted, but this is me sitting in front of her. My eyes speak louder than my mouth. She opens the fridge, pulls out the hot sauce and places the bottle next to my plate. I know her mind is not here, it is up there – upstairs where shit is happening.

“Don’t worry about them, Claire. Sit here and have breakfast with me.”

“It’s Chloe,” she says.

Oh, my bad. She still looks freaked out, so I raise my eyebrows at her. She gets it, whatever is happening upstairs, has nothing to do with her.

“Whose house is this?”

“My parents bought it for me when I graduated, but I’ve never really lived here until...”

Interesting... it’s fully furnished, and it looks like a textile designer did all the work.

Chloe... what an interesting young lady. Letting these boys live in her house for free, probably not even knowing why they won’t go home. They

charmed the shit out of her, and I'm pretty sure Ntsika is responsible because... white women are his thing. She'd give us some cute exotic kids though – big eyes, light skin and curly thick hair. But I wonder if the Zulu ghosts would let them touch Mbuba soil.

“So, which of my sons are you with, Chloe?”

Am I scary? Because she's looking at me like she's scared to answer me. Not that the noise upstairs has stopped, but... I am eating. Naledi is doing the Lord's work upstairs and Chloe is nervously cracking more eggs into the frying pan.

“So, are you the one who helped them kidnap that girl?”

I know the whole story, but you know... Chloe here does not deserve peace, not when she's gotten herself involved in things that are above her.

“They told me they were trying to help her; I didn't know they had kidnapped her.”

And yet here you are, letting them 'hide' in your house, cooking for them. I know black dick is magic, but dear child... you have no idea what you've gotten yourself into.

“Where are your parents?”

There's a light scoff on her face, and I know it wasn't intentional.

“Germany the last time I checked, but I'm 26 so they really don't need to worry about me.”

Parents worry about their children until their last breath, but obviously hers – whatever her surname is – have no idea that she's harbouring black criminals in a house they bought her. I'm taking my boys home with me today. If Ntsika wants her, she'll come back to fetch her. Me, I'm flexible. I'll get her a doek and a scarf to tie across her chest in Mbuba.

“Mami?”

Fokof!

I'm watching them rush down the stairs with Naledi behind them. If she had a sjambok, she'd be whipping them right now. I know by the look on her face.

“Mami wok’nuka! We’re going home! We have problems that need fixing.”

Never in my life did I ever plan to put such a burden on my boys’ shoulders. They were supposed to live their simple Model-C life and not even know how their fathers got to be this wealthy. But ke, their brother is missing. So, it’s either I do this or be in denial about who they are because losing their brother will make them worse than they already are.

Oh, my dear children! I used to brush their heads with my hand and take them to Spur to eat and play. Now I have to raise my face to look them in the eye. I see their fathers in their eyes – exactly the way they were when I first met them, standing in a circle around me at that hospital, and I knew deep down that my life was just beginning.

You come with a kist and leave in a coffin. Something tells me Naledi understands that now. She’s slowly but surely becoming *me*, and it’s weird because not so long ago I was sure I was dying. But Sisekelo said whatever I thought was killing me was not going to kill me; he said I’d burn to death. Like... what the fuck? Mqhele would never let that happen. None of them would ever let that happen.

“Problems? What problems, Mami?” Ntsika, *the problem*, asks.

Who the hell shoots their brother’s girlfriend dead? Just like that? But anyway, his craziness and darkness are what we all need right now. You put them in good schools, and they go all the way overseas just so they can be different from what you know, and yet, the DNA sticks with them.

I failed dismally, and I accept that now, so... it’s bee season. Let whatever needs to happen, happen.

“Sisekelo is missing.”

I’m not talking to any one of them specifically because I know I lost them along the way – my bug-eyed babies.

Where was I? They were mine until they weren’t mine anymore. I must have missed the time when they transformed from being boys to men. The time Ntsika slept with his brother’s girlfriend. The time when Sbani became a father; the time when Lwandle looked me in the eye and told me he was

Lwandle Zulu before he went and wiped out a whole family. Truth is, they have never been Zandile's children – her labour pains mean nothing. They love me more than they love her. I *am* their mother – Ntsika included – Nomafu can miss me with her, “my man over my children” shenanigans. I would never choose Mqhele over my children, never.

“Sisekelo is a grown man, how does he go missing?” Lwandle asks.

How is a 17-year-old a grown man? I want to slap him so hard, but I don't want to freak out the white girl. I want her to glide in as we all did; it will be kinda interesting to watch. I'm not being mean or anything, but girl chose to get with the programme. Now she's here making breakfast for the idiotic bug-eyed men. I'll personally buy her isidwaba and shove her long straight hair inside isicholo.

“We have to go, your fathers haven't been able to find him, and it's been days.”

“Also, how do you not know that your own brother is missing? You don't check on your brothers?” Naledi asks.

Lwandle grabs the door handle and they all rush out. I like the scary “MaMontsho”, as Mqhele calls her. I feel like I can relax and retire from being the “Scottish King” of this family now.

We leave Chloe with her many eggs and bacon, but a part of me feels like this is not the last time we're seeing her. They all get in Ntsika's car and drive. We follow them in my car, but we get delayed at the gate because I, yet again, have to negotiate with my magical smile for a different security guard to let us drive out without an access code. By the time we reach the R55, we can't see their car anymore. Naledi says they definitely joined the N14 highway. I'm not sure why she thinks that but she's the one driving and I have no energy to argue. Even with her driving at 160 km/h, we don't find their car on the highway.

Me, I want a glass of wine. I don't know what girl here on the steering wheel wants, but I know she must forget about these boys. We can't pull them out anymore – they are who they are. Also, we are not in the same place she and I. If Mqoqi hadn't died, I believe I would have left Mqhele.

Right now, I know the boys are out to find Sisekelo, I just hope they don't petrol bomb anyone while at it.

"Have you ever seen what Qhawe's grandmother looked like? In pictures at least?"

Hhaybo! How?

"Nope, and you know they don't talk about those things much. They never even met her; she died when their father was 14."

She stares ahead at the road and keeps driving in silence.

No, she can't just drop a question like that on me and then act like it didn't come from anywhere.

"Naledi, what exactly happened in those two months you were in a coma?"

"A lot," she says, without even turning to look at me.

Zulu

It's not him I find sitting on the riverbank as I expected, it's a woman.

And we are not on the riverbank; we are inside a rondavel, a firepit at its end and a pole in the middle. It feels familiar, but I can't remember where and when I was in here.

"Do you remember how you burnt this place down? You were just a little boy then," she says.

There's a smile on her face. I'm sure I'd remember burning a house down, even as a little boy.

"No, I don't. Who are you? Where am I?"

The smell feels familiar, but I know the last thing I smelled was smoke and flames.

"Who are you? Where am I?" I ask again.

She taps her hand on the space next to her. Let this not be another ghost! She looks like nobody I know, but her aura is warm and welcoming – not cold like my grandfather's on the riverbank.

"You've ended it," she says.

Ended what? I'm here, alive. I still don't understand what pulled me out of that burning hut, but I didn't die like I wanted to.

"You've ended everything. It was always your duty, and you did exactly what you needed to do," she says and wraps her arm around my shoulders, pulls me close to her chest and brushes my head. I can feel her touch, so maybe she's not a ghost after all.

"Who are you and how did I get here?" I'm going to keep asking until I get an answer.

She doesn't answer me, instead, she smiles and touches my face. Her hand is warm, but it's not soft like Mamiza's and Mami's. She looks different, with glistening hair, all-natural and combed. The oil on it smells foreign to me, thick and minty. She's wearing a tight yellow t-shirt and a green wool skirt. She's slim, not as extreme as Mam'Gugu though. I reach my hand out to touch her face, but I can't feel her skin. It's like... she's here, I can see her, but my hands – although I'm looking at them cupping her face – are floating in the air.

“Are you a ghost?” I ask.

I'm probably the only person in this world who doesn't fear ghosts; they are obsessed with me. I've made peace with that. What I don't understand is why they won't leave me alone. I don't even know them.

“Why are you all tormenting me? Why me?” I ask.

She laughs.

Langa said to me – I think he was nine and I was 11 – people who laugh in serious and strange situations piss him off. It was so random how and when he said it. I don't remember what my reaction was, but I know we were back on our bikes a minute later, riding and letting dust cover us, knowing exactly that Mami was going to shout at us when we entered the house, dirty and hungry. I worry about Langa, our relationship is different, sacred and strange compared to the relationship we have with the rest of our siblings. As we grew older, we got to understand things better, but he is only 14 and I am 17. So, I did what any big brother would do, and besides, I'm tired. I don't belong here. I don't belong with the living. If I did, I wouldn't be the haunted one, fearless and comfortable amongst ghosts.

‘It's over, mfana wami. Ndabezitha, Mageba, Sthuli sika Ndaba!’

I know it's summer, but it's too warm in here, so hot that I'm sweating. I look at her hand on my shoulder. It doesn't have those long nails that Mam'Zandile and Mam'Gugu always have. Her hair is different too. She looks like those women from a long time ago who combed their hair upwards and made it glisten like oil was about to drip on their shoulders. Like Gogo MaSbisi, but I don't like the smell of her hair at all. Unlike

Gog'MaMnguni, she never covers her head with a doek or something. You can smell that oil in her hair from far.

'We will never bother you again,' she says, her forehead pressed on mine.

Why is it that I can feel her touch when she touches me, but I can't feel her skin when I touch her?

But... all I did was try to die so Mami and my two brothers could live. There are no further plans for me from here; I've always known this about myself. I know my parents want me to go to university and be some kind of professional or whatever, but I can't do it, that's not who I am. I finished high school and I know I passed even though the matric results are not out yet.

I'm not going anywhere after this; I have to go back to Ntsikeni and make sure the land is returned to its rightful owners. I have to rebuild my great-grandfather's house and live there for the rest of my life. That's why they took all the bones to Mbuba, except his. The man from Margate told them to do that. I wasn't there, but I know that's what happened. I have to go there and revive Thulula's spirit, his legacy. My fathers think they made all this money they have for all of us to live a lavish life, but I know. I've always known that it is meant to take us back, to undo what was done.

'I have to go now. I promise nobody will ever bother you again.'

Something about her reminds me of Mami, but I can't figure out what it is.

'You know you were born on the same day your grandfather was born, the same day your great grandfather died,' she says.

I didn't even know that.

It's strange that out of all the ghosts that I've met, she's the only one whose touch I can feel, even though she can't feel mine. She grabs my chin. I'm a good kid and all... but I don't really like being grabbed like that, especially by someone I don't know.

'Listen to me, Ndabezitha, you did good,' she says and kisses my cheek.

I feel the kiss. I've been kissed before. In fact, I've had sex many times, so I know what a girl's lips feel like, but this is different... I feel like she left a stamp on my cheek; a feeling that will never leave me.

'You know what you need to do now. And no, Sisekelo, you are not being tormented. I whispered your name to your eldest father in his sleep. You are the foundation, isisekelo of it all. This is it – The End of it all.'

Again? Why me? But I don't ask her that because as soon as she said the words, something in me felt different. Like something that has been sitting on my shoulders all my life has just melted into nothing. I feel light.

"Langa said we'd find you here."

I didn't see or hear the door open. And suddenly this rondavel looks like the one I know, the one my fathers built after the one with the thatched roof burned down. They used the tiles for the roof on this one. I turn to look at her for answers, but she's gone. There's nothing, nothing at all where she was seated just now.

"How did Langa know where—"

"Eyi ntwana, we don't know, but you know how you two are. At first, he thought you were dead, and then he dreamt of you being here or whatever. Shouldn't you be at school?"

Schools closed last week, but obviously, these three wouldn't know that.

"Let's go. Mam'Naledi poured water on our faces, that's how she woke us up," Lwandle says, grabbing me by my arm to the door.

But... how am I at home? In Mbuba?

"You drove all the way from Umhlabuyalingana to Greytown? And you don't even have a license? You're worse than me," Lwandle says.

I hear him, but I'm trying really hard to understand what the heck is happening. I see the car – it's the Range Rover Malum'Ntuthuko drove us in, but I'm pretty sure I didn't drive it all the way here.

"Brah, Mpande could have easily tracked this car and found Sisekelo here," Ntsika says, raising his arms in the air.

I want to go inside the main house and take a shower, at least. But no...

“We have to go back to Joburg, the old men are worried as fuck,” Sbani says.

I hope my father hasn't killed anyone over this because I know that's what he does as a side hustle. I don't think he knows I know, but I could always smell blood on him for a day or two after he did what he does. Not that he brought home anything bloody with him, but I could always smell it.

Ntsika drives the Rover. I'm pushed to the back seat of his car by Lwandle; Sbani is driving. They don't ask me to explain anything on the way because they know me. But all I'm going home for is to pack some clothes and go to Ntsikeni, Emaweleni.

That woman didn't tell me to do that, but somehow, I know that's what I have to do. I have no money and no plan, but I know I have to go back to that place and build a house, even if it's a mud shack for now. Nothing I say to my parents will make sense, but I know my brothers will help me, even if it doesn't make sense to them too. I have three days of my life totally missing. I don't know where I was or what I was doing. We're going home, but that's not home for me anymore; I don't belong there anymore.

“What happened in that rondavel, ntwana? When did you arrive in Mbuba? The least you could have done was call and tell us or someone where you were and why,” Lwandle says.

I'd explain if I had a clue how I got there. I don't even know where my cellphone is. The last thing I remember – before I was sitting next to a woman – is me sitting on the floor smoking, watching the fire spread, fumes and smoke filling up the room.

I thought the old ghost had left, but no, I could still see him through the smoke, sitting and looking at me like he approved. Well, a dead man can't die, so it made sense. All I wanted was to go with him, to the other side because clearly, I live on both sides, here and there.

Right now, it's Langa I want to talk to – he'd understand.

“I don't know, but I was talking to a woman I don't know.”

Of course, they think I'm being crazy.

“What woman? You were alone in there,” Lwandle says.

They don't know half of it...

"She was there. I don't know who she is, but she was there."

That's all. I'm not going to tell them what she said.

"What did she look like? You're too old to be having wet dreams about women you don't know; you should stop watching porn," Lwandle says.

They both laugh. What boy my age doesn't watch porn? Anyway, I'm going to need their help, even though they don't have jobs and nobody knows where they live. They look well fed though.

"She was nice. She kept hugging me and touching my face. Her left hand had a big black mark, almost covering the whole back of her hand. I think she is left-handed because she used it more—"

And then? Why are we stopping? I've just almost banged my forehead on the front seat.

"Brah, are you sure you should be driving? Did you even see the truck behind us?"

I know Sbani doesn't drink anymore, but at this point, I think it's Lwandle who should be driving. I tried to die a few days ago and it didn't work, I'm not about to be killed by Sbani's driving now. I refuse. Now they've both turned to look at me in the back seat.

"She had what?"

"A big black mark on her left hand," I say and widen my eyes at them.

They look at each other, and back at me.

"What did she say?" Sbani asks.

I'm not telling them shit about all that. Lwandle pushes his phone screen to my face.

"Is this her?"

It's a picture of a woman wearing a red beret, her left hand on her pregnant belly, the big black mark there, visible, as clear as I saw it. She has a baby on her lap that looks exactly like all of us.

I'm conflicted. I don't know whether to nod and be honest or shake my head so they can leave me alone. I want to talk to Langa first. I want to know if this is the woman who woke him up every day until recently. He

never really described to me what she looked like, just that he called her gogo. We have a lot of old women we call ‘gogo’ in our lives, women who are alive.

“Sisekelo, is this the woman?” Lwandle asks, shoving the phone screen closer to my face.

This looks like a picture of a picture.

I decide it’s no use lying to them; I’m going to need them anyway so I might as well let them in on this...

“How do you know her?” I ask.

They look at each other again, and what I see now is worry and fear in their eyes. They need to be upfront with me, nothing can shock me now, not after the past four days.

“I see ghosts, I talk to them. Who is this woman? I know she’s dead, but who is she?”

Lwandle scratches his head and looks at Sbani.

“It’s our grandmother, Nomafu.”

I had never seen a picture of her – nowhere, not even on Google. There are stories about her and my grandfather being killed and why, but not their pictures. In fact, there are more stories about our fathers being their children and how nobody knew they were alive until just before Langa and Msebe were born. Apparently Mami got hijacked while pregnant with them, that’s when the stories about my family started flooding the internet. It seems like everyone had forgotten about their parents until that happened.

“Where did you get her photo?”

Silence...

They’ve been interrogating me since they found me, and now they’re not giving me answers?

“I’ll get out of this car, now Lwandle!”

I’m not sure what it is exactly that has freaked them out more, that I see ghosts or that I was sitting in that rondavel with our dead grandmother. I thought everyone in my family knew about my dances with the dead.

“Don’t worry about it, ntwana, it’s a long story. When was the last time you ate?” Sbani asks.

When was the last time I felt hungry? That’s the question they should be asking. I don’t know the answer because I don’t even know where I’ve been since the burning hut until today. Sbani starts the car and we get back on the road. Lwandle makes a call.

“We’re coming home with him,” he says.

“Yes, we found him, he’s fine.”

I don’t know who he is talking to, but I feel my eyes getting heavy and I lie on my side in the backseat, my feet on the floor because I’m too tall for my whole body to fit on the seat that can actually accommodate three people.

I just want to get home and see my mom.

Too bad I’ll have to leave her soon after that.

Zulu

I'm here, again; not that dusty Orange Farm and its rowdy kids.

I'm here because I knew she'd be here today – to do nothing.

Legally, this is my house, and it makes me angry because Mqoqi knew I didn't need yet another house; I need my brother. I need him to be here with his weird mind and fucking duality. If he was here, he'd tell me what to do, but just before that he would have laughed at me and told me women are more powerful than I think they are.

A part of me died with him, and yet, I think his death changed me in a way I'm yet to understand. He had his baggage, and I think somewhere in his last moments, he took some of my baggage with him. There's pain, and there's the pain you can only ever feel over losing your sibling, who was not only just that but your best friend. Mqoqi's death would have driven me to the grave if I hadn't found out I had children just before he left me to try to be who he always wanted to be. My brothers didn't understand that, but I did. That's why I never tried to convince him to come home with us as we sat in one of his nightclubs in Witbank. He was never like me; he knew exactly who he was.

I'm going to get that little girl he loved so much, and I'm going to raise her as my own. But I need to be happy, to put myself first. This is a strange feeling for me – a new feeling, but I'm certain about it. I've always been Mpande Zulu, too sure about my identity and my duties.

To be honest, I've never really sat back and imagined my life outside of being what Nkosana taught me to be. We are a family of protocol. We move a particular way because we don't know how to be individuals, how to divert from what we've always known ourselves to be. I'm not blaming

Nkosana, he was just a boy who was forced to be a man. And now here I am. The girl I thought I was going to marry is dead. A woman who gave birth to my children is sitting in my house waiting for me to give her a new date for when I plan to make her my wife. I'm not mad at her anymore, it's just that...

"You're stalking me, aren't you?"

I don't understand why they always use the word 'stalking'. Yes, I used my skills to find out she'd be here today, so I came to see her. There's nothing bad about that, is there?

"I decided to come to my brother's house, and it just happened that you are here today."

I'm a man. I lie. It comes naturally. God gave women many things – more than he gave us men – but I appreciate him for giving us men the ability to lie with a straight face. Although I've been to church only once and swore never to go back there, I have to credit the white guy who woke up one morning and decided there should be heaven and earth, Adam and Eve and a snake in between. Night and day and all the stories white people told our forefathers. I love being black, but I hate the humanity that comes with it. We wouldn't have suffered so much if we weren't such good people.

"Mpande, your silence makes me uncomfortable sometimes. I feel like you transcend to another world and leave me here."

She's right, my mind goes to different places. Getting it back to where I am physically is always a struggle.

"I was just thinking about some stuff, sorry."

I don't like what this woman does to me, she makes me vulnerable, and she makes me just blurt out things that I feel.

"How did your membeso go?" she asks.

Membeso? Oh, that!

"It didn't happen."

Thando is still angry. But how on earth were we all going to go to Mpumalanga and have some sort of celebration when one of our children

was missing? He's on his way home now, and I'm happy that he's alive and fine. But then again, this means things have to go back to normal and plans that were made have to continue.

It started with Naledi waking up from the coma, and now Sisekelo has been found. I'm sitting here, looking at this girl, and I'm conflicted as fuck. Are all these things a sign that I should go ahead and marry Thando? Our lives were better when we were just floating with no proper background and no connection to where we came from. This whole cleansing ourselves of Iqunga thing complicated our lives instead of fixing us.

"Are you thinking about some stuff again?" she asks.

Eish... Why can't my mind stay in one place? Here. With her. I ignore her question.

"You aren't cleaning anything here; we both know that. Let's go somewhere."

I don't know the 'somewhere' I'm talking about, but I want to get in the car with her and drive. Just drive to wherever the road takes us.

"I'm not going to fire guns with you again, Mpande. I don't even know why I did that in the first place."

Not that I was thinking about taking her to the shooting range again, but...

"Okay, let's go to a coffee shop and eat scones," I suggest.

She laughs, and I know she's laughing *at* me because she can read me, and it's fucking insane.

"You don't like scones, Mpande. Coffee shops are not your thing. You don't like peaceful, relaxed places, you like wild heavy places. Places where you are surrounded by noise, gunshot sounds and all. And yet, with all the noise around, you still feel alone. That has always been your solace."

It's interesting how she says all this stuff with a smile on her face, and how her eyes always look warm when she does. I think she sees me; she sees parts of me I cannot see.

"This is why you party so much and change women like underwear—"

Whoah!

“I don’t do that anymore, Qhayiya.”

Her name is beautiful.

“I had one girlfriend for years, and I was public about it.”

That was a good thing, wasn’t it? It changed my reputation with people I neither know nor care about.

“Did you love her?”

Why does she ask such questions?

“I did.”

“No, you didn’t. You loved the idea of her. You wanted to settle down and be what your elder brothers are.”

Why is she always trying to drum this into my head? That my life revolves around my brothers?

“No... I’ve never been under pressure to do—”

“How long has she been gone?” she asks.

“A few months.”

“And you were going to marry another woman last weekend? Whom you technically left at the altar?”

She doesn’t understand, it’s not like that. I really want to dispute what she just said, but I have no proper words because she’s right.

“Let’s go, but we are going to a place chosen by me. We are going to do someshouldersthing that I like.”

This woman lives to torture me.

I grab the car keys, fast. She has a new hairstyle, and of course, I hate it because I prefer good looks over substance. That’s why Ndoni stressed the shit out of me. Women should be objects; flawless things on whose arms you hook yours around and pose for pictures until they understand you are fucked up and leave you, or you meet another one who looks more perfect and leave them. Women are not supposed to be like Qhayiya, getting under your skin and shit, seeing through you and all that nonsense.

“Turn left here,” she says.

I don’t know where the heck we are going, I’m just happy to be going with her. I turn left, drive for five minutes, and watch an automatic gate

open. It reads “Day Spa” and I don’t bother reading what the actual name of this thing is. I know what a spa is, my brothers bought one for their wives, but I’ve never been to one to actually do the things that are done there. This is not my life, but...

“This will help you relax,” she says as I lock the car.

The thing about Qhayiya is that I’m not sure where I stand with her.

She pays for the whole thing and doesn’t even discuss it with me. I’m offended because I wasn’t raised to be taken care of by women. I grew up in the streets, and the streets taught me that your wallet is your power. Anyway, after she swipes her Capitec card, we are led to a room with two single beds. They aren’t exactly beds, just two high mattresses that I know I’m too tall for. We had to take our clothes off in different bathrooms and wear white robes. I tried to put on the white slippers, but they were too small for my feet.

So, I’m lying here – half of my legs and feet dangling in the air – with just my underwear on. I know she’s also half-naked, but I can’t even steal a look because my face is squashed in a hole and I’m looking down at the floor. Besides, I’m not there yet, it’s her mind, heart, and soul that draws me to her. I’ve never wondered what her body looks like under her clothes. I’ve never craved her touch and her moans. It’s a strange thing for me. Because every time a woman comes into my life, that’s the only thing I look forward to, and after I get it, I want to wash them off me.

There are two women in this room, one for me and the other for her. Mine is a bit older, hers talks too much.

“This is going to help you relax, it’s called self-care. Men need that too,” Qhayiya says.

I want to get myself out of this hole and ask her how the fuck lying on a high bed half naked with some strange music playing in the background is going to help me relax. But this is what she likes so I say nothing because I’m thinking if this is what she’s into, me taking her to a shooting range was a lot for her.

“So, the couple’s package includes—” my lady says.

“We are not a couple,” Qhayi says, quickly before my lady even finishes the sentence.

It hurts a bit. I know we are not a couple, but the way she says it kind of hurts. I don’t say anything.

“You’re so tall! I’m not sure how I’m going to do your legs and feet because they are not on the bed,” my lady says.

I feel something poured on my back, something oil-like. This woman’s hands start on my shoulders and move to my back. This is not relaxing at all. I feel anxious.

My heart starts beating fast, and I know I shouldn’t have agreed to this. I clench my fists and imagine myself holding a gun, shooting at nothing. It helps my mind get out of this room, this situation of being touched by this older woman. It doesn’t last long though because her hands move to my thighs, and I know I can’t take it anymore. The chest pains start. I try to endure it, for Qhayi’s sake.

“You are too tense, this will help you relax. Let loose and enjoy it,” my lady says as she slides her hands on my inner thighs.

Carol always said this to me before she stuffed my 14-year-old penis in her mouth. I didn’t want it, but I ejaculated every time she did that. I could not understand why my body and mind couldn’t work together. My body listened to her, even though I felt violated and disgusted; it told her I was enjoying everything she was doing to me.

“Qhayi, I’m struggling to breathe,” I say.

My chest pains are getting worse, and I want this woman’s hands off me now! I can’t take it anymore.

“What?”

“I can’t breathe, Qhayi.”

I’m definitely dying today – now. The more I try to fight it, the more the chest pains get worse.

“Please leave,” she says to the two women.

We are not even halfway through this thing we came here for. They seem confused, and they don’t move until she sits up.

“Leave the room,” she says, pointing at the door.

I’ve never seen her like this. But also, I’ve never felt like this, so vulnerable and so emotional. By the time the massage ladies close the door behind them, I’ve already jumped off the bed. I don’t know what’s happening right now, but I’m sitting in the corner of this room, knees up and my chin resting on them. Nkosana says it is a sign of weakness, he calls it a foetus reaction, but we all do it. Qhayi comes and sits next to me. I’m shaking, I can’t breathe and I’m sure I’m about to die.

“Lie down on your left side.”

I do as she says because she’s the only woman I’ve really come to trust since I was 14. Yes, MaZulu made me break into people’s houses when I was far younger than that, but I was still too innocent to understand what she was doing to me, to us.

“You’re having an anxiety attack. Breathe in through your nose, and out through your mouth.”

I do as she says, for about 20 minutes. Surprisingly, it works. I don’t know if it’s the fact that she’s holding me through it or that she’s told me what it is. But I hold her hand tight as she repeats the words over and over.

“Breathe in... Breathe out... You are not dying. You were triggered, it will end soon.”

It does end soon enough for me to be embarrassed by how things have turned out.

We leave the spa without seeing our two touchy ladies. She offers to drive. Didn’t she say to me the other day that she couldn’t drive? She doesn’t have a car and does she even know someone who owns a car?

That short boyfriend of hers is back in Zimbabwe now. His shack in Orange Farm is now empty and if there’s one thing I know for sure, it’s that he didn’t have a car. I agree and give her the car keys, reluctantly so. That thing that happened in there scared the crap out of me; I really believed I was dying.

“How are you feeling now?” she asks.

She can actually drive, so I'm more relaxed than I was when she started the car.

"I'm okay."

I know she doesn't believe me.

"Anxiety attacks happen, especially in people who have gone through trauma and have not dealt with it or talked about it with a professional. You don't have to be embarrassed about it."

Sometimes I feel her intention is to emasculate me.

"You said you couldn't drive."

I know she knows I'm changing the subject on purpose, but she doesn't push, and I like that about her.

"I said I couldn't drive on that day. You had me firing a gun, how was I supposed to drive after that?"

I'm still feeling a bit down, and scared. I feel like that thing is going to come back again, but I'm not going to tell her that.

"Who taught you how to drive?"

"Some guy I used to date before Nkosi. You know, Nkosi calls me through WhatsApp every day, crying. What happened was an injustice, he'd been here for years. And how do you send someone back to Zimbabwe? To do what? Starve to death? His family depended on him for everything, and he was here legally. It doesn't make sense at all."

I won't even lie and say I feel guilty. He had to go.

"So, the guy who taught you how to drive, what's his name? Where does he live?"

She looks at me and frowns.

Yeah, maybe I shouldn't have asked that, old habits die hard. For her, I will be a good man, a normal man.

"I just want to know more about you."

That's my come back, and I know it's weak as fuck.

"He passed away."

Okay. I was just asking, I swear.

"Where do you live?" she asks as she parks next to Mqoqi's old GTI.

We haven't done anything about his stuff. He had more bikes than cars, and we haven't touched any of them. I feel like my brothers have left all of that to me, but I have no plans to do anything. I'm not letting him go, I can't.

“Mpande?”

Oh, yah.

“My house is in Midrand.”

“That's where you live with your wife and kids?”

Why does she insist on calling her my wife? I told her we are not there yet.

“Where's your mother?” I'm asking because I'm about to make another crazy decision.

“She only comes home on weekends. I thought you knew that; she lives at your brother's house mos—”

Nope, I didn't. Just like I have no idea where Thando is and what she's doing now. I don't track her; she tracks me with her unending phone calls and the constant chastising about this and that. My phone has been on flight mode since I got here. I know my brothers are calling because Sisekelo has probably arrived back home but...

“I'll drive you to Orange Farm; you can tell the driver not to bother.”

Orange Farm is far and I definitely don't want to drive all the way there, but I also don't want to leave her side. I just want to be in her presence all the time.

Something is not right...

“Qhayi, I need you to go outside, get back in the car, start it, and leave the gate open. If you hear anything, anything strange, drive out immediately and go home.”

“Huh? Why Mpande?”

We've just entered the house and we are still in the kitchen, but I know someone is here, I can feel it.

“Just do as I say.”

“But I left my jacket in the study and I haven’t even called the driver to cancel!”

Eyi! Women! Now I have to pull her by her arm back outside and make sure she’s inside the car, and that the gate is open. She doesn’t even look scared, just annoyed that I’m telling her what to do.

I go back inside the house and lock the door, so she doesn’t come back in here. I have a gun in my hand. My good man fantasies go down the drain. I search every room, even the indoor pool area. The study is the last place I go to, and here she sits, on his desk chair, staring at a picture of us from a long time ago.

Some random guy who walked around with a camera asking people if he could take pictures of them for R10 took the picture at Bree. It didn’t take a while before the rank managers told him to fuck off and stop bothering our passengers. He had already taken ours without us knowing. Strange enough, he captured a moment when we were all standing leaning on a taxi. Mqhele in his tracksuit and cap with a cigarette in his mouth. Nkosana in his Orlando Pirates jersey with his hand on Ntsika’s shoulder. Ntsika was in his school uniform. Mqoqi stood next to me, cigarette in his hand too and Nqoba looked down at his sneaker, which was pressing down a cigarette stompie he had just finished. Qhawe and Sambulo were sitting inside the taxi, their faces popped out. We were all laughing. Every time – even when Mqoqi was still alive – I would look at this picture and wish I remembered what we were laughing about. Mqoqi was the one who gave the man R10 and took the picture. He enlarged it, framed it and hung it on the wall. We were so young. I think I was 20 because it was before Hlomu came into our lives.

I’ve put the gun back on my waist because I’m certain I won’t need it. Besides, it’s Sthembile, a former soldier who can disassemble and assemble an AK-47. When Mqoqi told me she had spent two years on some peacekeeping mission in Sudan before she opened her own PI company, I knew we weren’t dealing with a delicate maternal soft individual. This one,

we would have taken on cash heists with us, but we are not about that life anymore. That being said...

“Sthembile? What are you doing here?”

I know for sure she doesn't have the house keys. Mqoqi had a thing for crazy women; they had a thing for him too. The problem is that he couldn't love them back, but he still kept them because they loved him.

“Why are you here, Sthembile? How did you get inside the house?”

She has his hoodie on, and she is pulling the strings together like he always did, wrinkling her face. This means one thing: she's been here for a while and that she's been going through his stuff. I don't say anything about the hoodie because she doesn't look like herself right now. Not that she's ever been normal, she's always done the weirdest things. Mqoqi loved her mind. It fascinated him how smart she was.

I asked him once why he didn't just make things work with her because one: he wouldn't let her go; two: they were fucking and three: she's always been useful to us. But Mqoqi loved one woman; the one woman he couldn't have. Sthembile could have destroyed us anytime if she wanted to, but we all knew she wasn't going to. No woman who has sat behind Mqoqi on a bike and wrapped her arms around his waist while laying her head on his back could ever live without him after that. There was something about my brother, something only he possessed, but he couldn't open himself up and share it with women who were desperate for it.

“Did he care more about Lale than he did about me?”

Ayi bafethu, I didn't see this one coming. I don't even know what to say. She looks angry, or sad. I'm not exactly sure what it is because trying to understand women has never been my priority in life.

“You know, I told him where Lale was, and all he was supposed to do was go there, talk to her and convince her to come with him to wherever they needed to go and do to fix his brother's marriage. The last time I saw him was that night, the night you came to the club, I left through the back door before you entered the room.”

So, Mhlaba was right, it did smell like a woman in that room.

“I don’t know much about him and Lale, he shut us all out and moved to that small town—”

“And then he ended up dead.”

Yes, but...

“You know he took his own life, Sthembile, he shot himself in the head.”

“That would not have happened if you, all of you, had been there for him.”

She must never! Ever! Speak like she knows who we are.

“It’s time for you to go. I have someone waiting for me outside.”

Qhayi must be worried to death outside in that car. I don’t want to freak her out so this thing of Sthembile must end quick. She needs to move on. Breaking into Mqoqi’s house just to wear his clothes and sit at his desk is not normal.

“You mean that maid? Let her wait. Besides, don’t you have a woman and children waiting for you at home?” She laughs.

I’m not going to tolerate this from her.

“What is wrong with you people? What happened to you? It’s not that you can’t love, it’s that you can’t allow yourselves to be loved. I waited for Mqoqi for years, but he killed himself for Lale! Lale? Of all people!”

She doesn’t know who my brother was, no matter how many times she opened her legs for him. He let no woman in, never fully. I’m angry now because she’s intentionally trying to dig out the anger I have suppressed for months – anger at everything and everyone, including her for not saving him. I watch her get up from the desk and walk to me. She places her hand on my cheek and looks into my eyes.

“He loved you. You were his best friend and more. You have never taken a life because he protected you. He spoke about you, a lot. He hated himself for failing to protect you from the things you have gone through.”

The one thing I don’t need is this – a person taking me back and awakening my guilt when I’m trying so hard to move on. I know I’ll never be able to move on from Mqoqi’s death. That would be impossible, but I’m

sure I'd learn to live with it if I didn't have the Sthembiles of this world doing weird shit.

“Make the right decisions about your life, for him. He never made the right decisions for himself. That's why he chose death; it was the only thing he could give himself.”

I hate hearing the reasons Mqoqi chose death. I hate that shit! I hate it even more because maybe it was the realisation that he had nothing. I had kids I didn't know existed until that bone digging and reburying shit; my elder brothers had families they had built. In the end, he was the only one floating with nothing to call his own or go back to, except money.

Up till today, I still don't understand what drew him to that Lale woman, besides the fact that she was crazy and still is. As far as I know, she's still in Hillbrow sniffing cocaine with that white girl. I will not touch Mqoqi's things – not his houses or cars or bikes, but I will find that little girl he loved so much. Truth is, the houses and bikes and cars mean nothing. They were just things he bought because he could. That little girl made him happy.

“Where is Lale's daughter?” I ask because I know she knows.

“She's living with her grandmother.”

“I want to raise her as mine.”

She widens her eyes at me.

“Do you even know who Lale is? Don't try her. She's mad as hell.”

And I'm mad as fuck; my whole family is.

“Get me that child, Sthembile, I know you can. If you do that for me, you can have all of Mqoqi's things, including this house. You can wear his clothes and read his books. In fact, you can live here and smell his stuff every day; just get me that child.”

She was obsessed with Mqoqi, that I know.

Mqhele won't be happy with this whole thing of me raising his wife's ex-boyfriend's child but, I'm doing it for Mqoqi. That should be a valid reason. There were always eight of us. From the night we ran from a burning home – our mother's screams loud until they weren't loud anymore

– there’s always been eight of us. After that we suffered, stole, killed and did everything to keep it that way – eight of us. I want that child.

“You can stay here, it’s my house now anyway,” I say and leave the study.

I’m more worried about Qhayi, who is sitting in a running car outside ready to drive off if she hears a strange sound.

Sthembile can stay here until she comes back to her senses. Whatever she does, I don’t even care. She can hump Mqoqi’s clothes or masturbate while looking at his pictures or sniffing his underwear.

I have bigger problems than her madness.

25

Why can't we be a normal family? Like... accuse each other of witchcraft; take Tupperware and never return it; have at least one child on nyaope; have at least two wives who hate each other for a reason nobody understands... you know, normal family stuff like that.

Just yesterday Gugu and Nqoba had to go to the children's school because Hlangu and Mabutho locked some 10-year-old boy in the gym locker for a whole hour. Apparently, he'd been following Niya around, asking her to be his girlfriend. Now Niya is mad at them because I think she actually likes the boy. I find it cute; it's not like they'll be kissing behind the toilets or having sex and getting pregnant. But knowing Niya, she'd make that boy her lapdog, make him carry all her bags and eat his lunch. The thing about her liking the boy is something I'd never mention to her father. This girl will never have a boyfriend, not with her brothers and fathers still here.

She is nothing like me; I keep observing this as she grows. She's also not as fascinated by my mother as the boys are. Sometimes I feel like she dreads going to KwaMashu, that she likes Mbuba better. It's strange because she should be the one closest to her grandmother; she's a girl – the only girl. But I feel like she doesn't see her as part of her life, or a part of who she is. I know this hurts my mom – a part of me feels bad about it – but also, I know how she raised me. So, I'm not going to try to fix it. Niya will

never hear the word ‘endurance’ from me, never in a positive context. I have no intention of raising her to be strong. She will be no matriarch and no saviour.

I want her to be whoever she chooses to be: no burdens and no responsibilities. She’s a Trust Fund child; she never has to work a day in her life. She can spend her life travelling the world instead of dodging bullets now and again.

She will be no Thembeke who stayed in a bad marriage for the sake of her kids, and she will be no Hlomu who stayed in a marriage because she understands she married not just the man she loves, but his whole family and their ancestors. I leave; they fall. That I know for sure. I’ve been in this family long enough to know the only way I’ll leave is in a coffin, and that if they get to bury me, it will be with the rest of them – near that tree in Mbuba with the rest of their bones.

In our culture, a divorce decree means nothing, it’s just a piece of paper stamped by some judge. It is the blood of a goat, the incense burnt to introduce you to the ancestors, the gall smeared on you and the things that are said while at it. You wear a white dress, put on make-up and say vows in front of a priest. But really, that’s just for pictures. It is the elderly women who tie isidwaba around your waist the next day, tell you the significance of everything they make you put on, push your hair inside isicholo and tell you what your responsibilities are going forward.

I’m a Zulu, and I can never go back to being a Dladla. Even if I leave Mqhele now and I die 20 years later, they will fetch my body, and bury it in Mbuba. Because I belong to them, to that soil where an animal’s blood was spilled to welcome me, to tie me to Nomafu and Sbopho and everyone that came before them.

“Men are not smart. Men are not strong. That’s why they need us, women. There will be challenges, MaDladla, and they will look at you for answers and solutions because they know.” That’s what Bab’Gumbi’s wife said to me as she pushed my hair inside isicholo.

I was only 23, but I had already seen too much. I had three children calling me ‘Mami’ and I had eight men whom I knew would die for me. I have never been young and free. I have never been anything except Mqhele’s wife and a saviour of damaged men whose mother chose her man over them. And then, I went as far as giving them a girl child, something they never thought they’d ever have in their lives. Yes, it was under dodgy and dangerous circumstances, but you know... we move... what they don’t know won’t hurt them. Niya is too young; she’d be confused if I even tried to explain this to her. She’s a princess. A gift. Her father would skin any man alive who would do the things he has done to me, to her.

But we aren’t here, at Xolie and Sambulo’s house, for that. We are here because Sisekelo is packed and ready to leave. Xolie called me in the morning, hysterical like somebody had died or something. I was there when the boys brought him home two days ago. When they walked in with him, I was still feeling kind of guilty for putting all that weight on their shoulders.

“So, you’re leaving today? Now? Where are you going to sleep? You said there’s no house there,” Phakeme asks.

I feel like Sisekelo explained things to him. But he still can’t understand. He still can’t let go of his brother, although he has always known his path was never going to be the same as his. Deep down, all of us have always known that Sisekelo was different, but what is happening now is painful and unfair. He is only 17, a child who should be looking forward to going to university and living a wild, independent life as all his elder brothers have done.

But no, he is standing here with his suitcase, and he is telling us he has to go. There are things we could have tried to stop this. By law, he is still a minor, so Xolie and Sambulo as his parents can try to stop this from happening. Which they won’t because we all know we aren’t a basic family. Normally I’d be sitting next to Xolie on that couch, my hand on her shoulder while she blinks through tears. But it’s Naledi doing that now, and there are no tears in Xolie’s eyes, just a blank stare. Sambulo called us all here, and Sisekelo explained that his life with us – in this house, he grew up

in – ends now. He spoke like a grown man, a bit too firm and intimidating for my liking.

“I came into this world to save you all. I have known this since I was a child. I don’t know why they chose me, but I need you all to accept that I am who I am. My whole life has been nothing but torture. I live amongst you, but I am not one of you. You named me Sisekelo,” he says, looking at Nkosana. “I’m ‘the foundation’. Tell them why, baba, explain to them why you gave me that name.”

I see Nkosana looking down at his feet, and I know he’s not about to answer that question.

“I have to leave. I’m sorry Mamiza, but I have to. My peace and happiness are where I’m destined to be. There is a reason the man from Margate told you to leave my great-grandfather Thulula’s bones in Ntsikeni. If I don’t go, I will suffer all my life. I’m going to build a house there, a home, just like you all did in Mbuba. It is my duty. If I don’t do that, nothing is going to change.”

I’m looking at Xolie, hoping for tears, but they aren’t there. I hate that she – like Zandile was when she came back from jail, and I – now can’t cry anymore. This isn’t just her teenage son leaving home, this is a sacrifice, a loss, a thing she has to give up for this family. Haven’t we given up enough? I don’t even want to look at his fathers right now. The thing is, men are physically strong but emotionally weak. Yeah, I know they’ve been through a lot, but after Mvelo and Mqoqi’s death, this is definitely the most painful thing they’ve ever experienced.

“At least we’ll know where you are, ntwana,” Lwandle says, with his hand placed on Sisekelo’s back.

He has to go; we all know that. But I feel like his brothers are not as worried as we are. I raised these boys; they are mine, and all I have to do is look into their eyes and movements to know they are up to some strange shit. The strange shit here is that they are the ones driving Sisekelo to Ntsikeni, and they seem prepared.

He has to go now. I'm not sure where Phakeme is, he left the room. But I can see Sambulo smoking outside through the glass sliding door. Xolie is still on that couch, staring into space, with Naledi next to her. We sit but don't watch as Sisekelo pulls his suitcase and leaves the house. Lwandle, Sbani and Ntsika are leaving with him. I look at Mqhele. My first instinct is to go to him and hold his hand through this, his jaws clenched and all. But he gets up and walks outside before I can. He goes straight to Sambulo, but he doesn't light his own cigarette; they share Sambulo's. They aren't talking, just smoking.

What I know for sure is that nobody in this room knows what to do next. There's no 'dealing with it' for the men and there's no 'fixing it' for the women. We all don't know where to start. Look, I don't know because I've never been in that position, but I think things are easier for women married to normal men, not cold-blooded killers who have been ticking time bombs since they were young boys. Sisekelo is gone, but at least he didn't go alone. What I know for sure is that Ntsika and our sons have a plan. But still, it's those three, so I'm worried as fuck. Peculiar, yet super smart as Sisekelo is, he's still just a boy. The same age Nkosana was when he was forced to become an adult, a father, and a leader.

I'm standing here looking at my husband smoking through the glass door, his back to me. All I want is to hold him, to press his head on my chest and tell him to cry like a baby. A little boy Nomafu spoiled and smothered, but in the end, abandoned by choosing to die when she could have lived for him – for all of them. Xolie still hasn't shed a tear; Naledi still hasn't left her side. Gugu is not here because the last thing we all want is for her to be stressed out. All the small kids are at her house with her, except, of course, Naledi's three infants.

Gugu is seven months pregnant and she's been eating food, meat and all. So, now her neck is grey and she doesn't care to trim her eyebrows. She looks horrible, but not as horrible as I looked during my first pregnancy. But she also looks free, like she's over trying to be perfect. I love seeing her being like that because if we had to be honest, Nqoba deserves nothing

good from her. He's a good husband now but forgiving has nothing to do with forgetting.

"Xolie."

She looks up at me. I don't expect her to speak, but she does.

"Why me, Hlomu? Why does it always have to be my children?"

I stopped counting how many times she's asked me this question. It hurts to see the pain in her eyes, but it baffles me that she refuses to acknowledge that all of us – all the women in this family – are here for a reason.

I came here to rebuild and restore, to take them back home. Xolie arrived after I had done all that. They chose her womb, and perhaps that's why it took me five years into this marriage to conceive. Zandile had to remind them who they were before they became who they are. She represents a time of their innocence and happiness, the joy of childhood. Gugu came to heal and change Nqobizitha, to prove to him he still had a heart that could love and live. Naledi is here for this, for what is happening now. It was the fruit of her womb that was supposed to be The End of it all. If her baby had been thrown in the fire just after birth, we would still have felt the same pain we are feeling now. We all know we are losing Sisekelo. It doesn't matter that we know where he is going and that he is alive. The truth we all know is that we are going to have to live without him. Of course, we can go there anytime we want to see him, but it won't be the same.

This is history repeating itself – a Nkosana story all over again. Zandile told me she tried the therapy thing with him and their sons, in the comfort of their home. It didn't go well. I chose to be honest with her.

"These men can never be fixed, stop trying. Accept Nkosana as he is and be his peace," I said.

That's what we are all trying to do now, and it's a lot because even us, we are not peaceful women. We came into their lives wearing invisible blindfolds that we didn't even know we were wearing.

"What's going on?"

Oh, it's Mpande standing behind me.

That question has become his thing because he's never around. He came here late at night after the boys came back with Sisekelo three days ago; none of us knew where he'd been all day. That whole time, Thando was calling everyone because she couldn't reach him. But not me; I blocked her everywhere. And again, today, Mpande arrives after everything.

Something about him is different, I just can't figure out what it is.

I point him outside to his brothers with my head.

Zulu

“I thought you’d come home with the boys. That’s why I didn’t fetch them,” she says, with her hands on her hips.

I think I’d have liked a “Sawubona, Mpande, are you okay? You look stressed.”

No, actually, now that I’m looking at her, I would have preferred coming home to an empty house.

“They’re fine at Nqoba’s house; I didn’t want to wake them. I’ll fetch them tomorrow.”

Hands still on her hips, she watches me as I walk to the fridge and pull out an ice tray. We don’t have a bar in this house, alcohol wasn’t my thing when I built it. Ndoni joked and said we should install a coffee stall inside the house because we didn’t need a bar. I knew that was her dissing me.

Everything about this house used to remind me of her because I built it for her and the family I planned we were going to have. But somehow, bit by bit, my thoughts are shifting from that to wondering if Qhayi will like it and if it won’t overwhelm her since she knows no better than a life of struggle in an RDP house. I grab one already opened bottle of whiskey from the corner cupboard and climb the stairs.

“Mpande?” I turn to look at her because I know she’s about to start.

“What’s going on with you?”

A lot. I’d tell her, but I’ve already had that conversation with someone else as I was driving here; someone who sees and tells me what’s going on with me without even asking.

“Your drinking is worrying me now. When you left in the morning, you had a beer, with our kids in the car. And then the next thing, I couldn’t get

hold of you all day.”

I was at a shooting range, releasing. But I’m not going to tell her that because I really just want to be alone at this moment.

“The kids are fine. We had a family issue that needed to be dealt with.”

I just need to go upstairs and sit on the balcony. Alone.

“Don’t you think this is the best time to talk about our future? Since it’s just the two of us here?”

Again, it would have been nice if she had asked me about what the family issue was, or looked concerned, at least. I know I got mad at Mami for sending her off, but I’m starting to believe that she had a valid reason. That she saw things I was too blind to see.

“Not tonight, Thando.”

As I climb what’s left of the stairs, I know I’m leaving turmoil behind me, but I choose my peace, and Thando has never been that for me.

The moon is out and full. I doubt I’ll sleep tonight, so this ice tray and whiskey are going to keep me company. I’m standing on the balcony of my bedroom which is bigger than the house Qhayi lives in. I’m looking down at the pool – big and blue. I’ve never been in it because I don’t do water, but my kids enjoy it, so at least it is useful. The Japanese garden surrounding it is still a thing I couldn’t care less about, but it’s here and my kids find joy in it.

I’m on my third glass of whiskey, and I haven’t even been sitting here for long. There’s nothing joyful or fulfilling about alcohol, but I find it to be loyal. It always does what it is supposed to do; it clouds your mind and takes away your ability to think straight. And I don’t want to think straight anymore. I want to make decisions, drunk decisions, brave decisions. We don’t steal anymore, because we have more than enough to keep our kids and grandkids and generations to come from stealing and killing to put food on the table.

I’m not just the ‘younger Zulu brother’ anymore. I need to have something to point at and be able to say: “I’m a man, a flawed and damaged

man, but my life belongs to me; not the things I've been through or the things I've done."

"Mpande."

I turn to look at her – tall with long legs and the most beautiful face. There was once a time when I believed I loved her. Now the sight of her makes me mad.

She sits next to me on the wooden bench that Ndoni insisted we put on our balcony. She called it 'your thinking bench'. How is it I'm stuck between three women? One dead, another the mother of my children and the one I believe I cannot live without because she is on my mind every single second. I cannot talk to my brothers about this, they would never understand. Mqoqi would have understood.

"Yes?"

I really want to say "What?" but I'm not drunk enough to be that frank, yet.

"You've changed. I know a lot has been happening, but you can't keep choosing your brothers and their families all the time when you have your own family to build and take care of. You are neglecting us, Mpande, you are neglecting me."

Why is it that women always think that everything is about them? They never ask why; they are just always ready to tell you what you are not doing right for them. I've been through so much shit in the past two days. All the things I thought I had pushed to the back of my head, or at least tried to, have been raining down on me. How do I even go ahead and marry Thando when I can't even talk to her about that stuff? To her, I'm a man – a strong and wealthy man – who represents everything a man should be, except vulnerability. All she wants from me is my surname and the benefits that come with it; her leverage is my children.

"Sometimes I feel like you haven't forgiven me for not telling you about our children. I did what I thought was best for them. Your brothers' wives forced me to leave you. I was young and naïve, and you know how Hlomu

and Zandile are, I was scared, especially of Zandile because she's a convicted murderer and—"

I don't know when and how I got here, but I throw the whiskey glass over the balcony rails and it lands in the pool. I'm also on my feet now.

"You took the money and left! It didn't take much to convince you, and I know for sure you didn't know you were pregnant."

I watch her coiling on the bench like she's scared I'm going to hit her or something. I don't do that; I don't hit women. It is below me and it also doesn't really make sense because I'd still have to face her the next day and apologise, and then continue living with her. Women don't leave men for beating them, at least not the first time. So, me doing that would be pointless. In fact, it would be yet another leverage over me because I'd definitely feel less of a man afterwards – guilty and desperate to make things right.

"I had no choice, Mpande. Yes, I didn't know I was pregnant but—"

"So, you're going to keep blaming Mami and Sis'Zah for this? Until when? You chose R200 000 over me – peanuts Thando! You know, I was over you. In fact, I had forgotten about you until you came back here with my children."

"Mpande, that hurts. You don't have to be mean to me. I struggled with our children alone because I was scared of what—"

I'm tired of this shit! I'm tired of this woman!

"Where are you going?"

I don't know. I can't even go to Mqoqi's house because crazy Sthembile is still there. What I need right now are my kids, but I can't go knocking on Nqoba's door at 1 am. They are sleeping, and I don't want to freak Gugu out. We are extra careful with her these days.

... ● ...

No fence, no gate, just a yard too small and almost filled with a vegetable garden. I squeeze the car into the small space, but I'm sure one wheel is sitting on tomatoes or cabbage or something. I'll deal with that criminal offence in the morning. I've just opened the car door when I hear a sound of a whistle. It's 2:17 am. Why is someone blowing a whistle? People are sleeping.

I don't get more time to be confused because more and more whistles start blowing, and the next thing I see are lights coming on next door, the house opposite and the house next to it. I haven't even reached the door when I realise the whole street is lighting up quickly. I've just started knocking on the door when I look back and see three men, two are carrying sticks and one is carrying a machete. The street has come alive and more people are coming. I raise my hands in the air when the man with the machete is standing right in front of me.

"Where are the others?" he asks.

People are surrounding my car, others walking to the backyard with all kinds of I-can't-afford-a-gun 'weapons'.

"Qhayi, it's me!" I shout.

I've been knocking and knocking, freaking out because I've realised I'm close to being a casualty of mob justice for whatever reason. I've been here before, well, not inside the yard or house but... is there a curfew in Orange Farm that I don't know about? Are outsiders not allowed to pop in at night?

"I'm here to see Qhayi," I say.

I don't remember ever being this scared in my life.

"Qhayi!!!" I shout again, louder this time, my arms still in the air.

She opens the door but doesn't switch the lights on. The moment she sees me, she grabs me by the arm and pushes me behind her.

"Bab'Kganyago, sorry, I know him. I didn't know he was coming, that's why I blew the whistle. I thought it was the four men," she says.

"Are you sure?" the machete guy asks.

"Yes," she says and pushes me inside the house.

I know more people are here now; I can hear things getting louder and louder outside.

“Is your mother here?” the machete man, Bab’Kganyago, as she called him, asks.

“No, she didn’t come home this weekend, but I’m fine, I assure you.”

I’m standing in the kitchen, which is also a sitting room with a TV. There’s a big photo hanging on the wall, a picture of her graduation. I feel the need to go out there and explain, but she pushes me back inside. I’m not sure if it’s because she thinks they still want to kill me or if it’s because she doesn’t want them to recognise me. Eventually, she convinces them I’m not a burglar of whatever it is they assumed I am.

The machete man shouts “comrades!” and says something to all of them. They start leaving. She closes the door and locks it.

“What are you doing here, Mpande? At this time?”

Important question but...

“Were they going to kill me?”

She takes a deep sigh.

“Most probably. We’ve had a lot of break-ins in this neighbourhood lately by four men. So, when I realised someone was in my yard, I blew the whistle. I’m a woman living alone in Orange Farm.”

The whistle?

“Why not call the police?”

“This is not the suburbs, Mpande. Police don’t come here to save you with sirens screaming. They come here to collect your dead body the next morning. So, we protect each other, we take the law into our own hands.”

I partly grew up in a squatter camp. I think I’ve been rich for too long that I’ve forgotten how a community that has nothing but each other operates. Also, I’m relieved her mother is not here. When I left Sambulo’s house, she had locked herself in her little flat outside, falling apart apparently. I was told that before they left, Sisekelo went to speak to her, and she lost it. They had to pull her off him because she was wailing and refusing to let him go.

All that drama aside, why am I here? I honestly do not know. Qhayi and I are not a couple. She's not my girlfriend that I can run to for a cuddle and comfort. But still, I want to run to her for the rest of my life.

"You can sleep in my bedroom; I'll sleep in my mother's bedroom," she says.

I don't want to sleep; I want to talk. And why is this house so small and so 'poverty-like'? I thought we paid our domestic workers more money than anyone pays a domestic worker in this country.

"I know this is below what you are used to, but... you came here, for whatever reason. So, here is a bed – sleep," she says, pointing me to an unmade bed.

I take it she was sleeping on it before all the whistle and mob justice drama happened.

"Can't we sit and talk instead? I don't think I can sleep now, it's almost morning."

She's standing at the door, pointing me to the bed.

"You've had an anxiety attack, watched your son leave his home, ended up here and almost got yourself killed. Just go to sleep. We'll talk in the morning," she says before she closes the door and leaves me alone in her bedroom.

It smells kind of mouldy, but the duvet and pillows smell of her. I close my eyes and imagine what our children will look like. They'll look exactly like me obviously. Their big sister Zothile will be the odd one out but she's a girl, so it will be understandable.

I hug the pillow. Not because I'm a pillow-hugging guy, but because it smells of Qhayi's cheap perfume. I imagine myself in this same bed with her, holding her throughout the night. It's weird because I don't hold women through the night. I don't cuddle. I take a shower to wash them off me after I ejaculate. But Qhayi... I can love her the way she deserves to be loved; I know I can. It's a new feeling for me, a feeling I like feeling.

As I lay here on my back looking up at planks instead of a ceiling board, I know exactly what I want.

Fuck doing the right thing for my children and my family; I'm going to do the right thing for myself.

Zulu

First of all, I don't even know this woman.

I know of her yes, but she shouldn't be here; she doesn't understand any of this.

When we left home yesterday, we went to her house in Centurion. Nobody had explained anything to me, but she had a lot of things stacked in her garage. They were all loaded in the twin-cab bakkie that she and Sbani drove in. It looked like it had not been driven in a long time. They had to tail us because only I knew where we were going.

The last time I was here, we had to park the Quantum we travelled in under a tree and cross on foot. This time, the same river was so shallow that we could actually drive across it. We found the same short man at the gate, with the same rubber boots and a stick. I'm the one who got out of the car to speak to him.

"The last time I saw you, you weren't this tall," he said.

I laughed, took off my cap, and shook his hand.

"I was just a kid then," I said.

"And we are still fighting to get our land back. We've been waiting for judgment for two years," he said.

I already knew because I had been keeping tabs on what has become the longest dragging land claim in the history of land claims. There are so many issues about this land of Ntsikeni, so many complications. Those who stole it were smart. They knew it was going to be claimed back, so they sold it to some unsuspecting foreign people, took the money, and left for Australia. Zamani got involved a few years ago.

“I have come back to rebuild my grandfather’s house,” I said to the short man.

He looked confused.

“But this whole land still belongs to the white man and—”

“This land belongs to us, baba, and I’m here to take it back,” I told him, locking eyes with him.

He touched my arm, looking up at me. I was expecting him to say something to discourage me, but his hand got firmer around my arm.

“We are a simple people; we don’t have much. Actually, we have nothing. But we do not fold. We never will. Almost everyone we started this fight with has died of old age. I’m old myself, I’m not sure how much time I have left but I’ve lived in two worlds for years: one where I guard what was stolen from us for a meagre salary and one where I am the only one who can roam around what was stolen from us freely, knowing it belongs to me. This fight will never stop, our children will continue, and if they don’t win, our great-grandchildren will continue. I will talk to the community. The story of your family is more like an urban legend now, but there are still a few people who remember. You are our hope now, Mageba.”

The first time I saw him, he was a scared little man, anxious and helpless because my fathers are not the ones to play with. But as I looked into his eyes yesterday afternoon, they were firm and fearless, and they were speaking louder than his mouth.

He opened the gate and let us drive onto the land where its rightful owners are forbidden. It was only when we arrived at what used to be Thulula’s house that I realised what it was exactly that was at the back of the twin-cab bakkie: three mobile tents, a gas stove, groceries and some other things I didn’t get to see being unpacked onto the ground. I had to take a five-minute walk to a place my mind was drawing me to, although I didn’t know why.

I found myself sitting under a tree, hugging my knees and resting my chin on them. Something within just couldn’t let me get up and go back to my brothers, even though I could hear them talking and shouting where I

left them. I was stuck because the spot I was sitting on felt so much like home, like it was what I had needed to find all my life. When I finally went back, they were erecting the third tent. Chloe stood there, giving them instructions on how to do it.

“I can’t believe you guys have never gone camping,” she was saying, looking rather frustrated.

I didn’t know how much she knew and if Ntsika had explained things to her that this was not a camping vacation. That this is deeper and more complex. We all shared the two tents while she and Ntsika slept in the third one. I think if he had explained all that to her, she wouldn’t be sitting here next to me, under this tree, now so early in the morning.

“I think someone is going to have to go to town every couple of days to get ice because we have meat and no fridge,” she says. “The water we have also won’t last us very long.”

I turn to look at her and wonder what she thinks this is – an adventure or something?

“Also, why do you like sitting under this tree? You did the same thing yesterday after we arrived.”

“My great-grandfather is buried here, under this tree. We are sitting on top of his bones.”

I was hesitant to tell her, but then decided maybe telling her the truth will freak her out and make her get in the car and leave. I don’t get the reaction I expect, I get a brush on my shoulder which feels like assurance.

“Don’t worry. It won’t take long to build. You don’t want a big house, right? Just simple shelter. We’ll be here with you until it’s all done. This is sad because you’re just a kid,” she says, brushing my head this time.

Here until it’s all done? Doesn’t she have a job or something? Who is this woman and how much does she know? I thought she was just one of Bab’Ntsika’s white girls.

“Come on, I’m sure breakfast is ready,” she says, standing up and reaching out for my hand.

Breakfast really *is* ready. Lwandle fried eggs on the gas stove but the baked beans are raw, straight from the can. The bread that comes with it is horrible and hard to chew. Chloe says it's called rye bread, and she chose it because it takes longer to expire. Honestly, I'd rather eat expired bread than this.

I want to pull Bab'Ntsika aside and ask questions, particularly about Chloe and all the other things I feel like they haven't told me. I'm not a little boy anymore, they must understand that. It is only us, the younger kids, who call him Bab'Ntsika. Lwandle and Sbani call him by his name. We only got to know him properly in the past few years, before that, he was living overseas and only came home for weddings and funerals. I end up not asking the questions because now there are cars approaching.

"I thought they were going to arrive in the afternoon," Lwandle says.

I recognise the Jeep Wrangler, but I'm not sure about the grey Nissan Navara behind it. Everyone seems to know what's going on except me. It's strange because I'm always the one who knows things, although it's always things no normal person alive should know.

The first thing Zamani does when he gets out of the car is light a cigarette. I haven't seen him in a long time; I see him on TV talking about analysing law things and human rights issues sometimes. Phakeme talks to him a lot – they are closer, although he calls him 'mfanaz' and treats him like a kid. It's my uncle, Mbulelo, who comes out of the front seat of the Jeep and comes rushing to me. It's interesting how he looks so much like my mother but doesn't blink as much as she does. He seems concerned and stressed. I guess that's why he hugs me so tightly.

"Xolie is not doing well; she's angry about all this."

I know they talk every day, despite the age gap between them and the fact that they have different mothers. They love each other as all siblings should, and they both look like my 'neighbourhood drunk' grandfather, who is the most good-hearted and loving person I know.

"I want to talk to her, but there's no network here," I tell him.

I want to tell her I'm okay here, that my brothers have a plan and I have so many people here with me – including a strange white girl.

The thing about Mamiza is that she's not the type that will sit quietly and harbour her anger, she is reactive. I saw it when she found out about Mabutho. I was looking forward to being driven to school in baba's BMW i8, but it went up in flames not even five days after he brought it home. She's probably raising hell back at home.

The thing about my fathers – I of all people know exactly who they are – is that they are scared of nothing except their wives.

“Mapholoba,” Sbani says to Mqhe, shaking his hand and giving him that ‘man hug’ that goes as far as a hand on the shoulder and nothing more.

Mqhe uses his mother, Aunt Nokthula's surname, Ngcobo because he was born outside marriage and his father, whoever he is, has never bothered. The Navara is his, which is understandable because, after working at the mines in that desert province called Northern Cape, he came back to Pietermaritzburg and now owns a construction company. He's built Aunt Nokthula a nice double story house back in Mbuba.

“Ntwana,” he says, slapping the back of my head.

That's what he always does whenever he sees me. I'm not a boy. I'm 17-years-old going on 18, and I'm far taller than he is, so one of these days I'll head-slap him back.

“Don't worry, we'll sort this whole thing out,” he says.

Zamani goes back to the car and comes back, pulling one of those leather lawyer suitcases. We aren't really related to him, but he's always been family – a friend of Lwandle's whom my family has financially taken care of since his father died when he had just started high school. I don't understand why he chose to be a human rights lawyer when he could have been a shrewd liar whose purpose in life is to fight for criminals to get away with their crimes, that's where the money is.

Chloe appears, I'm not sure where she's been, but she has changed clothes and her lips are now pink. Everyone looks at Bab'Ntsika with disapproval. I don't know what their problem is with her, I like her.

We have no house and no table here, so Mqhe unrolls the large paper and spreads it on the ground.

“This is the house plan – nothing big, just three bedrooms, a kitchen and a sitting room. It’s not like the kid is here to build a family. He will build his own big house when he becomes a man.”

I’m watching all this and trying to figure out when and how they could put this together in just a few days.

“The judgment has been written. The land claim was successful, it’s just a matter of a court date for the judgment to be read out and that’s all. The Land Claims Court has the biggest backlog of any court in this country. It’s like nobody understands how important the issue of land restitution is. If this country ever finds itself back at war, it will be over this.” Zamani is speaking like the human rights activist that he is.

This one time we watched him on TV speaking outside some court building after he won a case for an elderly black couple who were being evicted from a farm they were born in and whose fields they worked in all their lives. They were being evicted because they were too old to work, but they knew no other home; they had nowhere to go. I was impressed.

“This boy is not the type that can get you out of jail. He’d send you straight there if he believes you are guilty.” Baba had shaken his head and spoke.

“Bafo, there are lawyers, and then there are these little versions of George Bizos running around trying to save the world everywhere.” Baba’s disapproval of Zamani still shocked me when Bab’Mhlaba responded. That was shocking, even for them.

Zamani has all kinds of documents spread out on the ground and I wonder how long they’ve been working on this thing. I mean, it’s only been a few days since they learnt I had to come here. They brought a generator and a bar fridge, I guess that’s why they came in two cars.

“The builders will be here tomorrow,” Mqhe says.

“But guys, until the judgment is delivered, this land still belongs to the owners. You can’t start building—”

It's funny how everyone looks at Bab'Ntsika every time she speaks.

"Chloe, I explained things to you. This land belongs to us," Bab'Ntsika says.

One would expect her to protest or freak out, but I think she finds all this fascinating. She finds Bab'Ntsika's dark side attractive. It's a pity she won't have him all to herself tonight because we have three more new members at our campsite. So, there won't be an exclusive honeymoon tent for just the two of them.

"Congratulations, mshana," my uncle, Mbulelo says.

I'm not sure what he is congratulating me for.

"You got six distinctions, I'm proud of you," he says, tapping my shoulder and walking away to gather with my brothers outside one tent.

I take it the matric results came out today, I didn't even know.

Six As is a big thing, but not when you know they can't do anything for you. I have a responsibility, and that responsibility is giving up what my life could have been so that Mami doesn't burn alive, and my baby brother lives to say his first words and take his first steps.

I will live here for the rest of my life because *they* chose me, and I still don't know why, but I have accepted it.

The problem is, I'm not sure if my parents ever will.

... • ...

It's still early morning when we hear an excavator roaring.

I've been up since 4 am, but I think it wakes everyone else. The short man – with the same boots and his usual stick – is in it too, sitting next to the driver. Now we are all out of our tents watching the short man pointing the driver to where he should start. Mqhe is there with them, he's also talking and pointing, giving instructions. I think it's because he's the boss. A 'tenderpreneur', that's what my brothers call him, but he always reminds them he has a master's degree and would not slave for some European men

who don't even know he exists all his life. That's why he left the mining sector and came back to make his own money.

I'm 17, I do not have a cent to my name except the Trust Fund I know awaits me when I turn 21. But then again, it's tricky because none of my brothers has had access to that Trust Fund, and they are way over 21. In my family, once you become an adult, your first job is at the taxi rank. I didn't understand why my fathers are still in the taxi business until I realised it's the best place to launder money.

I'm not sure where the money for all this is coming from, but I'm glad I have all of them here – my brothers, my keepers. That's how we were raised and that's all we know because our fathers showed it to us.

“The Zulu land starts from here to there,” the short man says, pointing far. “After that tree, it's the Zubane land, and there—” he says pointing even further, “—is the Ngidi land.”

Zamani has all the documents stating that. He and the short man seem to understand each other; they clearly know more than we do. I don't know what Zamani says to the short man, but I watch him jump up with joy. His stick is still in his hand, uyagiya. I still don't know his surname because I've never asked.

The sun is now out, and I have to go. I hope Chloe doesn't follow me there again. I sit under the tree and hug my knees as I've done in the past two days. I'm not sure what it is exactly that makes me do this, but it is what it is. I feel lighter this morning, like my great-grandfather's spirit is not sitting heavy on my shoulders, instead, it is holding my hand and sitting next to me.

“Sisekelo! Wake up!” I hear him, but I hear the excavator even louder. He shouldn't be here.

“What are you doing here?” I ask.

He looks at me like I've just asked him a stupid question.

“They said I'd find you here. What are you sleeping under a tree for?”

He's just woken me from a hectic dream.

“It's 11 am, how long have you been sleeping here?”

I don't know; I don't have a watch. I wipe the dust and whatever was falling on me from the tree off my shorts and T-shirt, as I get up on my feet. It's hot here, and my armpits are dripping, but that's not important. What's important is—

“Is Mamiza okay?”

We do not lie to each other, that has always been our thing.

“No, she doesn't even speak anymore or leave the bedroom. We see her when we see her. Sometimes it's once in a day.”

I feel bad for Mabutho and Nsingi; they are just little boys. They need Mamiza, their mother, not an angry woman who stays in her bedroom and only comes out when she comes out. If I knew how I ended up falling into a deep sleep under a tree, I'd explain things to him, but I don't remember when and how.

“He was buried with his knees up to his face; his chin resting on them. He is lying on his side and he looks exactly like us,” I say.

That was the dream, and it was too real. I met him, Thulula, and we lay side by side. His presence was more comforting than scary, and he looked happy to see me.

“What are you talking about?”

“Our great-grandfather, Phakeme. I was lying here with him. He was happy that I'm here. I need to explain this to Mamiza and baba. They have no reason to worry. I'm where I'm supposed to be.”

He shakes his head in disapproval.

“You know that's never going to happen, Sisekelo. It's only a matter of time before baba comes here to get you. Mamiza won't let her child give away his life and live in some jungle, or whatever this is. You're gonna have to come back home, eventually. Build a house here, that's okay, but it will be yet another home we visit – just like Mbuba.”

Sigh.

He doesn't get it. But I'm happy to see him. I have my hand on his shoulder as we walk back to what is now a construction site.

“How did you get here?” I ask.

Oh. There is Malum’Ntuthuko over there. I take it he drove him here. It’s strange that he still has his job, even more strange because I was sure baba was going to kill him after that Mbazwana stunt.

“The white woman?”

I tap his shoulder and almost laugh.

“Don’t ask, you don’t want to know. How are Mabutho and Nsingi?”

I know they are too young to understand what is happening.

“They keep asking about you. Baba told them you went to university. But you know Mabutho, he asked him, with that voice of his, how, because schools are not open yet?”

I laugh. I don’t think I have laughed a genuine laugh in days.

“Mom is smashing wine glasses on that wall again. She’s been taking plates too. Our kitchen cupboards are almost empty; the plates are all gone. We now eat in bowls.”

They don’t know we know. Baba tries really hard to hide these things from us. But parents can be broken people too, we know that.

“And baba?”

“I have never seen him so helpless in my life. You know he’s not going to allow this, right? Not when it’s doing what it’s doing to mom. Your ghosts can fuck off, he’ll be here, soon.”

Unfortunately, my ghosts will never fuck off.

“Langa failed this year. He’s going to repeat Grade 9, it’s fucking insane!”

We look at each other, and we both laugh. Of course, he was going to fail. He knew that too, he didn’t submit half his projects and missed some of his exams.

26

A few years after my father died, I offered to buy my mother a house in Hillcrest, Salt Rock, or wherever her heart desired.

It was going to be a big one, with a swimming pool for summer and a fireplace for winter. Anything really, anything for her to grow old and comfortable in. It didn't make sense that I was living in a mansion in Joburg where I didn't even know my neighbours and my mother was still living in a neighbourhood where each time someone dies she had to leave her house and go sing church songs at someone's house, cook butternut in a red sack and dish out more meat for people she likes and less for people she despises at the funeral. That's what we are all supposed to do, right? Take your family up with you, get them out of the township because that has always been the goal, isn't it? Giving them a better life to make up for the sacrifices they made to get you where you are. My mother said NO. She said her life was content and complete in the house she and my father made a home for their children.

“Besides, ngizomshiya nobani uMaNtuli no MaKhumalo?” she asked.

Those are the neighbours – one next door and the other front opposite. They are members of ‘iketanga’ that hold the neighbourhood together and do weekly prayers at whoever's house needs to be prayed for.

“But Mah, their children can't afford to get them out of here; I can.”

“When you say ‘out of here’, where exactly are you referring to? And who said I want to leave my house? For what?”

My mother has always been a difficult person to me, to us inside these walls. But to this community, she is nothing like we know her to be. She was the nurse who brought pills from the clinic. No, actually stole pills from the clinic she worked at for people who had no money to go to a private doctor or the capacity to stand in a public clinic queue all day. In our kitchen, the cupboard over the fridge has been a ‘mini-dispensary’ for as long as I can remember.

I was still young when I made that offer to her. Money still meant something to me.

But as I grew older, I realised that my mother needed nothing more than what she already had – the people, the MaNtulis and MaKhumalos. The ones who did everything while she sat on the mattress on the days leading to my father’s funeral; the ones whom she laughs and gossips with. The ones who ululated as I left home to get married and wore big hats and Green-Cross shoes at my wedding. These are the women who come with buckets of scones and blankets every time we have a funeral in Mbuba, even though we don’t need more blankets. These are the people who gather at her house every time she needs prayer for one of her children. She still leaves the house keys at the front-opposite house whenever she goes somewhere, even though she lives alone now. It’s not like I, Langa or Lethu might show up during the day and want to get inside the house, but she still leaves the keys because maybe if her house burns while she’s away, MaKhumalo will know what to do.

I have come to understand her, and how much I am *her*, the good and the bad. They say when a girl becomes a woman, her mother becomes her best friend. That has never been the case with me and Thembeke, she knows absolutely nothing about my life, except what she has seen. But still, I come to her because I know that, like me, her good and bad decisions had everything to do with putting her children first. We do not talk about

Nonjiko. The decision she made regarding my half-sister was for nobody but her; Thembeke chose herself this time.

Naledi drove me to the airport yesterday, with Langa on his headphones as always and Niya sulking because she didn't want to go visit gogo. She never wants to.

"I found a place, Hlomu, vacant land."

We hadn't spoken about it in a while, but I knew exactly what she was referring to.

"Where?"

"In Ntsikeni."

I looked at her, shocked because I really didn't expect that. Besides, I know for sure that she's never been to Ntsikeni. I know what the boys are doing in Ntsikeni; we all know.

"Let them," Nkosana said.

I could sense that there was more to that statement than just two simple words. So, we are letting them. But I know it won't last, Sambulo will never sit back and watch Xolie drown.

Naledi has taken over the running of her NGO. Before every-thing – the Bhunganes, the coma, Sisekelo's disappearance – the two of them were talking about owning a hospital. We were all for it; it was the thing we women were all excited about.

"Naledi? That place? Why?"

Silence...

I feel like there is a lot she is still withholding from me.

"We will make it work." That's all she said.

I know she meant it with her whole heart.

How? Is she going to run that hospital from her house in Gauteng? Both her and Xolie? Worse, they have small children. I also have a string of restaurants to my name – most of my employees have never seen my face. But I know this is going to be different. Naledi and Xolie are doing this out of passion and their genuine feelings about healthcare. I was young when I

started Fruitcake Crumbs. To me, it was all about not wanting to be ‘just Mqhele’s wife’. I’m not passionate about any of it.

As we took our luggage out of the boot – three suitcases, one bag for me and a small suitcase for Niya – I hugged her and told her we’ll talk more about it when I come back. Niya was crying, begging Naledi to take her back home with her. I grabbed her by her dreadlocks and told her to stop with that nonsense. Her princess tendencies work on her fathers and brothers, not me.

My mom really tries shame, but Niya has been on her iPad almost all day while Langa, for a change, hasn’t been on his headphones since we arrived yesterday afternoon. He loves his gogo. This morning they went to Bridge City to buy groceries together. I was shocked to see Langa parking the car when they came back. Whoever taught him to drive at 14, I will deal with them. I wasn’t going to go off at my mother for letting him drive because, well, I’m here because I need her iron fist. Our flight back to Gauteng is at 8 pm and I haven’t broken the big news yet.

“Ncaneeee!!!” Niya screams and drops her iPad on the coffee table.

Now, this is the person she loves in this family, Lethu. Some-times I think more than she loves me.

“You’ve grown so tall since the last time I saw you,” Lethu says.

I think it’s only been two months since they saw each other, but that’s a thing you say to kids, isn’t it?

“I’m almost as tall as Mabutho now,” she says.

Well, not exactly, but I really hope she doesn’t turn into a giraffe like all her brothers when she turns 14. Now that would be a disaster! She already looks exactly like all of them. I’ve been growing her dreadlocks since she was eight because, at least, let there be something that tells her apart from the boys. That thing about her having my complexion didn’t last. By the time she turned three, she was a Zulu ‘brother’ and everything that comes with it. She’d probably make it big as a runway model, but we all know that will never happen. She was born in a mob family; her strutting in a bikini on runways is not what her fathers will allow the world to see.

Lethu and I are fine now. We had a massive fallout after everything that happened in Ghana. She blamed me; my whole family did. Langa hasn't been home after that. They are still in the US – yet another country that is not home to him. At least we speak more often now. Andy had blocked me everywhere until one day he video-called me to say Langa didn't leave the house at all. I spoke to him because despite everything that our lives have been, Langa is half of me, and I am half of him. We could be miles apart, but our souls are always connected. He's better now, but I can't say he will ever be the same.

Those Bhungane brothers may be dead now, but they did more damage than any of us thought they could. Wherever they are, they know they broke us because they took so much from us. They were smart; they knew exactly what revenge was. Because if you look at it, revenge is not killing the person who hurt you, it is making sure they live to suffer every day of their lives. Lethu and I have never spoken about what Langa and Andy told me, about her being their surrogate. Having a baby is probably the least of their priorities now, they have a healing process to go through.

There are so many things we don't speak about, but I guess that's just who we are. Our family, the Dladlas, is far from perfect. The Zulus are all things toxic and deadly, but the one thing they are not is superficial. That's the life I've known since I was 22, and I guess that's why I struggle with my own family in my adult life. We are also broken, but I've never made it my duty to fix *us*.

“You look good,” I say as she walks in.

Our bedroom still has two single beds. The least my mother could have done was agree for me to extend this house and add at least three more bedrooms.

Lethu throws herself on her bed and lies on her back, looking up at the ceiling with her red sole stilettos and black pencil dress still on. There really is no need for her to dress like a lawyer every day.

She shaved her head three years ago, and she's never grown her hair back after that. She looks so much like our mother. I'm embarrassed to

admit I don't know much about what's happening in her life.

I also lie on my back on my bed and look up at the ceiling.

"Hlomu, how is your relationship with Niya?"

I wonder why this is even a question she thinks she needs to ask. Niya is a child; I'm her mother. I make the rules and she has to adhere to them.

"I'm asking because I'm seeing a pattern," she says. I'm lost. "Your relationship with her..." she says and sighs.

I won't lie and say this conversation is not raising my blood pressure right now. But I keep quiet and decide to hear her out.

"I feel like your relationship with her is almost exactly like the relationship you and Mah have. Like... you are trying to raise her to be exactly like you – a woman who takes everything and anything in the name of being strong. You are too tough on her, Hlomu. You are doing the same things Mah did raising you. She wasn't like that with Langa and me—"

No, no, no!

"Lethu, Mah went through a lot, and we didn't even know it—"

"No, Hlomu, *you* didn't know it. I lived here with them, remember? Mah was a different person to you and Langa. With him, she decided he had to be protected, and with you, she decided you had to be toughened, that's why you became a version of her. A woman whose sole purpose in life is to build and hold a family together."

I don't like where she is going with this. Everything I have done has been my choice. My decisions have been conscious, and I have always owned up to them. It has always been about my love for Mqhele; my love for three little boys who were dumped on me with no explanation by my husband and his brothers while they went off to carry out a cash heist. It has always been my connection to Mbuba – the understanding that my life could have been different if I hadn't gotten in that Sprinter, and yet, my mind goes blank every time I try to imagine how my life would have been if I wasn't Hlomu Zulu.

"It's complicated, Lethu, and even if I tried to explain things to you, you wouldn't understand."

So many things are hard to explain about who I am. About who we all are as women in that family. Sometimes I think that's why my father left this earth soon after he gave me away to that family.

“You have to break the cycle, Hlomu. Niya cannot be who you and Mah are. It has to stop here and now, with you.”

Niya will never get married and be a matriarch of some family, that I am sure of. I will never let her be that. But I know my shortfalls, and I need to acknowledge them.

“I don't know how to raise a girl, Lethu. I'm trying my best. Niya is her own person, young as she is. She has no connection with us. Sometimes I feel like – although she was born here, in this room – nothing about her is connected to the Dladlas. She doesn't even like Mah.”

This is the first time ever that I am brave enough to say these words out loud.

“Mah is complicated, even I don't like her sometimes, just like I don't like you sometimes,” she says.

Jizas! Who says that to their own sister?

I always thought Lethu was a spoilt brat clouded by Model C school teachings and privilege. But look... she had it worse. She lived in this house with our parents and saw things we never got to see. She knows Mah's pain, and she's known who exactly our father was since she was a child. I can't do anything to fix that, just like I can't do anything to correct what my father did to Langa, and I can't do anything to change what my mother raised me to be.

It's 5 pm, and our flight back home is in three hours. We have to start moving. Lethu will have to drive us to the airport because I'm in no mood to be sitting in the backseat of a tinted window bullet-proofed car driven by some man I don't even know. We found it waiting for us at the airport when we arrived at King Shaka. And I know it will be here by 6 pm, ready to take us back to the airport. I don't have the energy for that shit anymore.

“Please drive us to the airport, now,” I say to Lethu.

Mah and Langa are sitting on the two-seater sofa, watching one of those Indian soapies and laughing. Niya is still on her iPad.

“We’re leaving now, Niya. Get your toothbrush and towel from the bathroom. We’re going back home.”

I don’t have to say it twice, she jumps and runs to the bathroom. Langa doesn’t look excited, but he gets up from the couch begrudgingly before my mom grabs his arm and pulls him back to sit down.

“No, you’re not going anywhere. Sit down. You failed Grade 9, right? For what reason? You have everything any child could ever ask for. The problem is that your parents are too soft on you. You are staying here with me.”

My mom is many things, but one thing about her, she will do the Lord’s work with a straight face.

“See that school over there?” she asks, pointing at nowhere specifically, but the direction of her finger makes it obvious.

“VM?” Langa asks. He looks horrified.

“Yes, that’s where you are going to repeat Grade 9. It’s a no-fee school so, nobody has to worry about all those hundreds of thousands paid at a private school for you to fail at the end of the year. You are staying here with me. I hope your mother packed your church clothes.”

I packed all his clothes – three suitcases, to be exact.

When I told my mother that he had failed, she said: “Bring him to me.” And I’m doing exactly that.

“Mami,” he says, looking at me, horrified.

I thought he liked his grandmother. I know living with her full time is a different vibe altogether, but... they are good for each other.

“Mah, his new uniform is in the black suitcase. Everything else is in the blue one, including his transfer letter. We have to go,” I say.

“Mami!”

I booked two flight tickets – mine and Niya’s. Boy must stay here and understand that no bad deed goes unpunished. By the time my mother is done with him, he will be straight as a ruler.

“Mami!”

Voetsek! That “Mami” thing won’t work, not today. I’m leaving him in the hands of a dragon, and she will fix him one trip to church at a time. It’s going to be 365 days of finding the gate locked if he dares come back home after 6 pm and, well... having 40 classmates and teachers who have no time to pamper him. Sometimes all you have to do is take away the privileges since it’s now a crime to beat the shit out of them.

“Niya, let’s go.”

“She’s already waiting for us at the gate with her suitcase,” Lethu responds.

We’re out.

Zulu

It's like I blinked once and boom!

I had everything I wanted and more.

It's not that I've become that man who doesn't cut his hair and shave his beard, it's that I do not have the time. Where on earth would I get the time to go to Legends when I have three toddlers crawling all over this house? Who knew Naledi and I would have five children running around making our lives hell? We both fought for our love, fought each other. Yes, because she wouldn't let me love her the way she deserves, and I wouldn't stop loving her the way my heart told me to.

We have to keep them away from the stairs, keep all doors leading outside locked all the time, decide which one to pick up first when they all cry at the same time and still make sure Mathongo doesn't kill himself. He's just turned three, and the one ability he lacks is a sense of danger. Sometimes he is Spiderman crawling up the curtains, most times he is Superman, flying from the coffee table to the couches.

Sbopho is a different story altogether, that's why we put him in creche when he was three years old, yet still, when he comes home, it's nothing but havoc. He has Nqoba's voice, just like Msebe and Mabutho. But the voice is not the only thing he inherited – Nqoba's energy and persona came with it. I was 10 when our father died, but my memory of him has never faded. I guess that's why I personally asked Nkosana to name my first son after him.

“I don't like it when you're this silent.”

I thought she was fast asleep. She raises her face and looks up at me when I don't say anything.

I haven't told her this yet, but I've been struggling to sleep since the day she slipped into a coma. I know she's back now and I should be relaxed, but we've never really sat down and spoken about how those two months were for me, just like she doesn't want to talk to me about her father. She says she needs time. She touches my face, and then my head.

"You really need to go cut this hair and beard. I want my sexy, handsome man back," she says and kisses me on the lips.

I'm not sure how she can find my lips in the dark. It must be because she sleeps with her head on my shoulder every night. It's not her, it's me; I need to feel her or I'll lose my mind, so I hold her through the night – every night.

"I thought women found grey hair sexy."

"I'm not *women*, Chawe. Of course, you are sexy, but I don't want you looking like some old man," she says and kisses me again.

This time, it's not just her lips tapping mine, it's deeper. I know when her hand caresses my back and moves down that she's really up, and that this is not about my greying hair, she wants her man – me.

Her skin still feels the same way it did the first time I caressed it at the cinema in the glass house. The fullness and softness of her still drive me crazy. I love her. I love many things about my wife. In fact, every single thing, including her crazy arse, but more than anything, I love how she owns me. She knows I'm hers, and when she wants me, she doesn't hold back.

She grabs my hand and pushes it between her thighs. She still has her fingers knotted in mine when I push my index finger inside her. How is she already wet? I haven't even done anything to her. She grabs my wrist and pulls my finger out.

"I want you inside me, Zulu," she whispers in my ear.

No foreplay? Okay. I want to be inside her all the time. She puts her hands on my cheeks as I insert all of me inside of her.

"Don't get me pregnant again," she whispers in my ear before she moans.

I find that funny, but how does a man even get a chance to laugh at what's funny when he's experiencing pleasure he cannot even explain in words? When I'm inside Naledi, I'm totally emasculated. She is a place I never knew could exist until I experienced it for the first time. There's loving a woman, and there's loving Naledi.

"I want it rough," she whispers.

After all these years, she doesn't know how rough I can be outside this house. But I never bring that home to her. Her body is a place that deserves my gentleness.

"You're moving too slow, I want my thug – give him to me."

I grab her by the neck, look her in the eye and ask her to repeat that. She doesn't, but her eyes are asking me to ravage her. So, I pull out and drag her by her ankles from the bed to the floor. She crash-lands on her stomach but still has the ability to look back at me, raise her knees and lower her torso, then demands me to fuck her.

"I love you, Zulu," she whispers when she's done catching her breath, her thigh hooked on mine.

Her thighs are wide open, and I can feel her vagina dripping on my upper thigh. I'm trying so hard to fight the urge to roll her over and fuck her brains out again. But I know it's not my penis she wants now, her body has already vibrated, and her toes curled as she called my name and dug her nails into my back.

Now all she wants is the feel of my skin. That's because she's wrapped herself all over me and is kissing my chest and every part of my body her lips can reach. There's nothing more beautiful than having your arms around a woman you know loves every single piece of you. I'd say I love her back, but those three words do not even describe how I feel about her. I find comfort in knowing that she knows I don't have to say it back. She knows. So, I'll let her lie here, curling herself on me until she's done, even if it takes all night.

I watch her as she walks to the bathroom, leaving me naked still and lying on my back on the floor. Yeah, she's going to pee my sperms out, if

that's even a possibility. Her thighs are thicker now, her tummy is not as flat as it used to be and there are stretch marks here and there. Is it sick that I'm happy to notice that? And that I find it attractive? I did that! Everything about her body changing has been my doing. I've gained so much from those stretch marks and almost sagging belly: five mini-me's and Sbopho's legacy. I should thank her for it all and while at it, tell her I had a vasectomy without telling her three months ago. After everything that happened when she gave birth to the triplets, I decided I would never put her through anything like that again. Also, the five children we already have are showing us flames.

I can't remember the last time I went to eat inhloko kwaMai Mai with my brothers or went to the hostel to watch ingoma. I watch her naked body again as she walks out of the bathroom: those big thighs rubbing on each other, her big, beautiful and full breasts, and her stomach, the carrier of my legacy. I doubt there will ever be a time in my life where I look at my wife and see nothing but perfection.

"Come back to bed," she says.

I was hoping she'd come back to lie on the floor with me. I do as she says. It's 4:30 am, so we both know that going back to sleep is not an option. Nyanda will be up and screaming at 5 am, waking up all his brothers.

"We have 30 minutes," she says.

Yes, we do, before this house breaks into the havoc that it is every morning.

"We've decided that we are going to build the hospital in Ntsikeni," she says.

I'm quiet because I don't understand how we moved from being where we were a minute ago, to her building a hospital in Ntsikeni.

"Ntsikeni?"

I know about her plans with Xolie and I have no problem with that because I know the women of this family, they want their own things. Being just our wives is not enough for them. But why Ntsikeni? Of all places? As

is, we are letting the boys do whatever they are doing there because they think they are men now. When they are done, they are all coming back home. They can bring the white girl with them if they want since it looks like she is deep within.

“That place is not our home, Naledi. We shouldn’t be making any connections with it. Our home is Mbuba, that’s where you were smeared with gall.”

I did everything right. She is Naledi Zulu, nothing could ever change that. Even if she decides to leave me one day – which I will never allow – Mbuba is her home. There is space for her grave next to mine.

“Chawe, I did not sleep for two months just for the sake of sleeping. You have to understand that in this family, it is us, the women, who hold power. Your grandmother...”

My grandmother? Mthaniya? I don’t even know her face.

“She wants what she wants from me; just like your mother wanted what she wanted from Hlomu. I have my own duties.”

Duties? What does she mean? I’ve been a criminal all my life so that my own family doesn’t have to have ‘duties’. Her duty is just to say what she wants and get it.

I’ve worked hard all my life to be able to take my children to the best schools and have a wife who will wake up one morning and say, “I don’t like the Maserati anymore, the new Porsche is cuter.” Simple like that.

So now, how are we at a place where she is talking about my grandmother and building a hospital at some place we had to dig up bones from begrudgingly in the middle of the night? We only went there twice, and that was supposed to be the last time we set foot in that place. Yes, our kids are camping there now doing whatever it is that they are doing, but we’ll fetch them when we need to fetch them.

“Naledi, you have no duties that have nothing to do with us – you, me, and our five children. You are *my* family.”

She cups my face in her hands and looks into my eyes.

“Chawe, there is no *my, I or mine* in this family. We, women, understand that better. We know there are things we need to do so that our children never have to know about them. You are men, just men. Just like your grandfather and father were just men,” she says.

“Just men, Naledi?”

“Yes, sthandwa sami, just men.”

I smile because this is the one thing she can say in proper Zulu.

“You provide, we rebuild. All the material things you afford us, we appreciate, but we are not here to live in mansions and drive big cars, Chawe. We are here to rebuild what was destroyed. I need you to sit down and think about why – of all women in the world – I’m the one you would die for. And that goes for all of us. It’s not like you and your brothers are capable of loving. You are damaged human beings. Now, ask yourself why you can love us the way you do, to a point of insanity. We keep giving birth to you, your grandfather, and your father.”

Whatever that coma did to my wife is starting to scare me.

Her phone rings, but she doesn’t move. It’s in the charger, on the little round table she brought home one day. I love that about her, that she can easily and intentionally ignore her phone for me. But then again, a phone ringing at 5 am is not something to be ignored. I’m about to tell her that when we hear the crying.

“Your son is up,” she says, raising her eyebrows.

She’s the mother! Isn’t she the one who is supposed to handle the troubling toddler? I want to go back to sleep.

“Chawe, Nyanda is up,” she says.

Yes, we both know that, but what am I supposed to do with—

“He is Nyanda who?” she asks.

“Nyanda Zulu, uMageba, uSthuli Sikandaba.”

She smiles, and I know what the smile means, she’s about to talk nonsense.

“Yep! All I did was provide a womb, and if we are, to be honest, I’m not even related to you or your messy children.”

I know my wife is cray-cray, but this is one of the craziest things I've heard her say. But still, my son crying gets to me, so I get up to go to the nursery. Her phone rings just as I open our bedroom door. I glance at it, and I see Hlomu's name flashing.

"I think you should answer this."

Nyanda is still crying and trying to break out of his cot bed. Is it Thulula, Sbopho or Nqobizitha? I don't know for sure, but I know my wife gave birth to one of them. I pick him up and he stops crying.

"I have to go," Naledi says behind me, she looks freaked out. She's wearing a dress now, but everything about her is still as it was when I left her on the bed.

“I think she’s dead.”

That’s what she said when I answered the phone. I didn’t ask who, instead I asked where Sambulo was, and she said she didn’t know. I asked where the little kids were, and she said one of their fathers had them.

“Who is dead?”

That was my third question.

“She’s lying at the bottom of the stairs. She rolled all the way down.”

It’s funny that the first thing I thought of was that day many years ago at Nqoba’s house; the day Mandisa pulled the duvet and showed me why I can never go back to being Mahlomu Dladla.

I left my children sleeping and drove like a maniac to Houghton. The house was dark except for the passage leading to the stairs. I saw her lying there at the bottom of the stairs, with no blood. I looked up and saw Xolie sitting still at the top of the stairs with her hands on her cheeks. She looked unfazed. She was wearing nothing but bum shorts and a bra. I thought about touching what I believed was a dead body, but I didn’t because I’ve learned.

“What happened, Xolie?” I shouted from the bottom of the stairs.

She didn’t answer me. I crouched and looked closely at MaSbisi’s face. I couldn’t tell if she was still breathing or not. I raced up the stairs and grabbed Xolie’s shoulders.

“What happened, Xolie?”

“She said Sisekelo would still be home if I wasn’t such a bad mother. ‘*Wazi ukunamathela indoda nje kuphela, you don’t even know what your own child has been going through for years.*’ That’s what she said.”

Okay, that was harsh!

I pressed my hands harder on her shoulders.

“And then what?”

“I swore at her and told her she was fired. And then she tried to put her hands on me; nobody puts their hands on me, Hlomu. Not me!”

I got the picture immediately. Xolie can snap; we all know that about her.

“She fell,” I said.

I had already decided on that.

“Xolie, look at me. She fell,” I emphasised.

My eyes widened at her. She nodded. Great, now we had to come up with a solid story.

“She checks up on Nsingizi before she goes to sleep, every night,” she said.

We had a story. She came up to check on Nsingizi and she slipped and fell down the stairs on her way back. I ran down the stairs again, took one of MaSbisi’s shoes and put it on the third step from the top.

When you have lived most of your life facing death, you learn to think fast. You make impulsive decisions, and you make them with only one goal in mind – to fix. Personally, at this present moment, I have no plan, so I’ve been sitting down next to her, and we are both staring at the body lying at the bottom of the stairs. We could – I’m not sure if Xolie is thinking the same thing – call our husbands to come here and do with this body whatever they do with their other dead bodies.

“Have you called Sambulo?”

She shakes her head. I don’t ask why because I also haven’t called Mqhele crying as I did at Nqoba’s house all those years ago. I called Naledi though, she is on her way. Zandile didn’t answer her phone, so I sent her a WhatsApp to come to Xolie’s house immediately. Gugu was not an option

this time. We can't call her, not for this kind of stuff. The kids must already be on their way to school because Sambulo was doing the pickups this morning. I guess that's why he left so early. I'm praying that it's not him pulling up on the driveway.

"Xolie?"

Nope, it's Naledi, that was fast. We don't respond, but we can hear her footsteps in the passage.

"Modimo!" she says, putting her hands over her head.

When I called, I didn't explain much to her, I just asked her to come to Xolie's house and not say anything about it to Qhawe. She probably thought Xolie was having another meltdown, and I'm sure that's what she told Qhawe because he wasn't going to let her leave that house without telling him where she was going.

"What happened?" she shouts from the bottom of the stairs, kneeling next to the body, turning it around and touching the neck. "Call an ambulance!" she shouts.

We don't move or speak.

"She's alive. Call an ambulance!"

I grab my phone fast, but then I remember...

"Xolie, *you* should call an ambulance with your cellphone."

She doesn't seem keen or happy that MaSbisi is not dead. I grab her phone, dial Netcare 911 and press it on her ear.

"MaSbisi fell down the stairs... my housekeeper... she's just lying there, and I don't know what to do! Please come! Please!"

She gives whoever is on the other side of the phone the address in what I'm sure they believe is between tears. But her eyes are as dry as the leggings I'm wearing. She hands her phone back to me and folds her arms.

Naledi is down there being a doctor, performing CPR and talking about how there's no blood and that's worrying because if she hit her head that means there's internal bleeding and... and... and... I'm just here thinking, *how the heck are we going to get out of this one?* We hear the ambulance sirens.

It's almost 7 am now; I've been here since 5:30 am.

I run to Xolie's bedroom and grab her a night robe to put on. Even after that, I still have to pull her by her wrist and force her to walk down the stairs. We are now watching Naledi doing what she's doing but we still don't touch 'the body'. When I left my house at 5 am, I told Mqhele I was going to pick up Xolie and we were going to drive to Harties for breakfast, just to get her mind off things. He said okay and went back to sleep because now he can sleep until the sun comes out. There is no Mahlubi and all the other freckle face people trying to kill him anymore.

"Mam."

"I'm a doctor," she says to the paramedic.

It must be liberating for her to say these words. It must remind her of who she once was. There are three paramedics in total.

"She fell down the stairs; I'm worried because she's not bleeding at all. Take her! Now! She needs to be checked for internal injuries."

They move fast.

"Her name is Thandekile Sibisi. She's 59 and takes chronic medication for high blood pressure. She has medical aid," Xolie says as MaSbisi is put on the stretcher and wheeled out.

"Aren't you coming with us?" one paramedic asks.

"We'll follow you in our car; we have to fetch her daughter first," I lie because I needed to think fast. But the fact of the matter is we have to call her daughter now.

"What's happening? Who is in the ambulance? It was going out when I was driving in."

Nice of her to show up finally.

"MaSbisi fell down the stairs," Naledi says with a deep sigh.

"Oh wow! Is she okay? Is she alive?"

"Yes, for now," Naledi responds.

At this point, I'm not sure if her survival will be a good thing for us or not. But I'm not going to say that out loud because... what the fuck have we become? Especially Xolie and me.

I'm the one who calls the daughter. I tell her no... it was just a fall... they took her to a hospital just to check if she didn't hit her head. I don't know much about her except that they hired her to clean our unoccupied properties. It was a favour to her mother from Sambulo. I give her the name of the hospital and tell her we'll be there soon. I'm not even sure if I'm telling her the truth because none of us here should think about going to sit by MaSbisi's bedside in the hospital. What Xolie and I are worried about is the first thing she will say when she opens her eyes. Now, what does a Zulu wife do in normal situations like this one?

"Hlomu, it's not even 8 am yet."

"I know that, Zandile. Do you want a cup or a glass?"

"Hhaybo, I don't drink!"

"I know. Trust me, it's time for you to start."

There are no wine glasses in these cupboards. Oh well, coffee cups it is.

Two wine bottles under my arms, they follow me outside to the porch with coffee cups.

... • ...

The news of MaSbisi's falling has already reached our husbands, and now they won't stop calling.

Apparently, Mpande told them, but they say he is not at the office today. I know all about him tracking us, but I didn't know he was tracking our housekeepers too. We need to sort this shit, now, between us women.

"Xolie, how much money do you have hidden?"

This was something we women sat and discussed a few years ago.

"A lot," she says.

Zandile was not there, and maybe we excluded her on purpose because look... with Zandile – yes, the convicted murderer who spent 17 years in jail – she doesn't have a single criminal bone in her body. Can the woman be dodgy, at least? I mean, she knows nothing in this family is obtained

legally. But no... she chooses to be Cinderella, in a family where life and death are a 50/50 chance every day.

Believe it or not, it wasn't my idea to exclude her from the conversation; it was Gugu's. She reasoned that our husbands were dodgy liars who have done hurtful things to us, but Nkosana has never hurt Zandile. So, in her mind, he is prince charming, and she might just tell him everything during pillow talk. That was before their wedding day when she found out about the Buhle thing.

But even now, none of us can trust Zandile to see her life beyond Nkosana. If we had involved her, she would have had so many questions... like... why we have to stash money away when we have unlimited access to it?

Imagine!

What woman doesn't have a "fuck off" account? It's a Capitec account and only you and the bank consultant sitting across the desk telling you to put your thumb on the fingerprint thing know about it. When we sat and discussed hiding money those years ago, Gugu had been doing it for years. She even said she needed to start another 'fuck-off' account with another bank because Capitec was starting to ask questions about the amount.

"Naledi?"

"Mine is in cash," she says.

I wonder where she stashes it. I have a lot too. Now we are all looking at Zandile. We know we don't have to worry about Gugu; we just have to say how much.

"I can just ask Nkosana for—"

"Nooooo," Naledi says.

Yes, we are all drunk now – four empty wine bottles are on the floor. Only Zandile is still drinking water, and that's probably why she's still in the dark.

"The way I found her lying down, that was not from a fall," Naledi says.

I look at Xolie – she is neither scared nor remorseful. Naledi knows. We didn't tell her, but she knows because she knows Xolie. Her real first-hand

experience with her was a car burning and our husbands ducking vases and ornaments. Some of them walked out of that house bleeding. Zandile and I knew she was going to break and go berserk; it was just a matter of when. Naledi was still new shem... throwing tantrums over newspaper articles talking about her being fat and all that. She hadn't ducked bullets yet and somewhere in her princess mind, she still thought she had the option to leave.

“Okay, so if she survives, we will all chip in and pay her off. I hear she lives in Orange Farm, so a house in the suburbs and enough cash to make her and her daughter comfortable will be enough. She wouldn't say no to that, would she? Let's just call it compensation for injury at work and a retirement fund. What really happened stays between us,” she says.

I like how much she has evolved. Zandile picks up the half-empty bottle of wine from the table and drinks straight from it. Clearly, she spent all that time in jail crayoning Jungle Boy sketches instead of learning to be street smart.

“I need to go by the pharmacy and get baby formula; my days of breastfeeding are over,” Naledi says, staggering up.

Not exactly. I had a glass of wine here and there when I was still breastfeeding all three of my kids, and they turned out fine. Okay, maybe not *fine* because they cause 90 percent of my stress but, they didn't die, did they? Mqhele doesn't know I touched alcohol while breastfeeding; he would have freaked out.

“Mpande says MaSbisi is in ICU: head injury, internal bleeding and all that,” Zandile says, looking up from her phone.

She must not die on us. We don't kill; our husbands do that.

“I thought so. How bad?” Naledi asks.

“He didn't say, just that she is in ICU.”

Looking at Xolie, I know she isn't worried about shit, she wants her dead. We were so young when we arrived in this family. We went through so much – just the two of us – it turned us into monsters. For me it was always imminent, I know that now, but the realisation that Xolie could

possibly be worse leaves me with an overwhelming feeling of guilt. I should have shielded her. Naledi is well on her way to where we are. Zandile, on the other hand, her life seems to be in reverse gear. She's moving towards lightness while Xolie and Naledi are sinking into darkness. As for me, I don't even know where I am anymore. It's 10 am, and we are drunk.

“Nkangala is outside; he will drop all of you at home.”

I know I've been here almost two decades, and I was the first woman that had no problem telling them apart, but for a moment there I wasn't sure if it was Sambulo or Qhawe talking. We didn't even see him standing behind us until he spoke.

It's Sambulo.

I guess I didn't immediately catch his slow-motion talking because my mind is also in slow-motion. We get up and leave because we know he needs to talk to his wife.

Zulu

I know my wife.

I knew it was only a matter of time before she snapped.

“She fell down the stairs, Sambulo. I couldn’t sleep after you left, so I went downstairs to the kitchen, and there she was, lying at the bottom of the stairs, one shoe missing.”

This conversation would be easier if she wasn’t so drunk.

“And the first person you called was Hlomu?”

She staggers into the bedroom and throws herself on the bed.

“Yes, because she’s the only person I can trust in this family now. You took my child to that place, Sambulo. I will never forgive you for that, and now he’s gone back there...”

I thought we were past that, I thought she forgave me for that. It was years ago. We spoke about it and I thought we had moved on. My wife has had to forgive me for a lot of things. I’m not a perfect man and she understands that, but that doesn’t mean it hurts her any less. I have to live with that guilt every single day, and every day I walk into this house and find her still here, still committed to being Xolie Zulu. I know I have to fight harder to keep her here because she has more than enough reasons to pack and go. Me and my brothers, we are shit people. Without these women in our lives, we’d probably be dead by now. In fact, we’d still be low-life criminals with no direction and no purpose. I know MaSbisi didn’t fall from the stairs. Of course, I wasn’t here, and I didn’t see what happened, but if there wasn’t more to this than what she’s telling me, I would have been the first person she called, not Hlomu. Hlomu is a fixer, a fast thinker.

I was very young when our parents died, and as much as she held and cuddled Mqhele more than all of us, her energy towards me was unique. Her favourite thing was brushing my head with her hand, and she'd be quiet while doing it, but still with a smile on her face. I noticed very early that Hlomu enjoyed doing the same thing to Sbani, Lwandle and Mvelo when they were kids. I can't say it made me happy because every time I saw her doing that; it felt like my mother was in the room.

Xolie knows I'm a killer, and although we've never sat down and talked about it, she knows it is *our* children who aren't normal. The problem with her is that she refuses to accept her place in this family, that she brought me back to life for a reason, and that me finding her at Natalspruit Hospital on that stupid day over a year after I recovered was not just a coincidence. *They* denied Hlomu children for five years because it was Xolie's womb that they chose. I can't tell her this though because she'd lose it, but deep down she knows. She just doesn't want to accept it.

"Mkami—"

"No, no, no, don't call me that! Don't try to charm me, I want my child back home, Sambulo. Go get him, bring him back home."

The good thing is that she doesn't know that Phakeme is also at Ntsikeni, and I won't mention it, not now.

"He is safe, he has his brothers with him there. The thing about this family is that we—"

"The thing about this family, Sambulo, *your* family, is that I'm the only one who keeps having to sacrifice. I'm the one whose children are tormented by whatever the heck your parents or forefathers did. I just want my boys to have a normal life: be educated, start their own families and live their lives without burdens and responsibilities that shouldn't even be theirs. Why are you allowing this, Sambulo? You are supposed to protect us."

"Xolie..."

"No, don't touch me! Stay far away from me. You have never protected me and our children, Sambulo. As it is, I'm raising a child that isn't even mine because you went out and decided your penis and orgasm were more

important than the family you have created. I'm the one that does all the compromising here, Sambulo! I'm the one who keeps forgiving. You have never had to forgive me for anything because I have stayed true to my vows, through and through..."

Her words are hurting me; they are cutting deep into me. I'm just a man, I make mistakes, but I would never intentionally hurt my wife.

"Xolie, I love you, please—"

"I know. But why does your love keep hurting me, Sambulo?"

The last time I cried was when I watched Mqoqi's coffin going down to the ground with a shovel in my hand, waiting to pile up soil over him and accept that I'll never see him again. But this... this... has me trying with every vein in my body to suppress the lump in my throat.

"I'm sorry..." These are the only words I'm able to get out of my mouth.

"How many times have you had to say those three words to me? They don't mean anything anymore."

"But mkami I've made mistakes, I admit that. But you know I'd never —"

"Get my child back home, Sambulo, or I'll roll you down the stairs of this house like I did MaSbisi, and unlike her, I'll make sure you die," she says and pulls the duvet over her head.

It's not the alcohol talking, I know this for sure. Just like I knew when I walked into this house and looked in her eyes that MaSbisi didn't fall, she pushed her. I don't know why, but fond as I am of MaSbisi, I'd rather her die than my wife go to prison.

She's fallen asleep, it's the alcohol. How do I fix this? My duty here is to protect my wife and what's left of my family.

My phone rings. I'd ignore it if it wasn't Mpande because talking is the last thing I want to do right now.

"Ntwana."

"Bafo, I thought Xolie was coming here. Where is she?"

"Sleeping. This whole thing freaked her out. What's going on?"

“MaSbisi woke up for a few seconds and screamed her name the whole time. They had to sedate her because she was rattling and screaming. She’s gone back to sleep now.”

“That’s all she did, scream her name?”

“Yes.”

My wife is not going to that hospital, not now, not ever. I look at her, fast asleep, drunk as fuck. This hurts me because I made her this way. I pull the duvet down to cover her feet and hope she’ll be asleep all day.

I need to speak to Hlomu.

Zulu

I was sitting in the car, parked at the petrol garage five minutes away from my house when she called.

Sambulo had already taken Madlozi and Bayede and, as usual, complained about having to push traffic from my house in Midrand to the school in Parktown. They are always complaining about me living too far, but we can't all live in the south. Besides, when it's my turn to take the kids to school, I never complain about driving all the way from Glen Austin to Houghton to Saxonwold and Winchester Hills. This was Qhawe's idea, that we all get one week in a month to drive all the kids to school so that they all get to spend time with each of us. We have more than enough drivers to do that, but I can't deny that he had a point. I enjoy the mayhem from the little ones and I have accepted that on good days I might get two or three words from the teenagers if they decide to take their headphones off for a minute.

I left my house soon after Sambulo left with my kids. I didn't know where I was going, but I told Thando that I had an early meeting. When the kids are at school and I am at work, I wonder what she does all day. I parked at the garage and slid the driver's seat back. I wasn't trying to fall asleep; I just needed time to think because that's all I do these days. Think about my dilemma and how it won't end well.

It was 7 am when I saw Qhayi's name flashing on my phone screen. She was hysterical; something about her mother falling and hospital. I didn't wait to hear what she was trying to explain. I started the car and drove to the highway. I was anxious the whole time. Mad at the N1 traffic for snailing and haunted by the tears and panic I heard in her voice when she called. I found her standing on the street outside her home, still in tears.

“What happened to my mom, Mpande?” she asked as she sat in the passenger seat.

I didn’t know. The typical thing for me to do would have been to gather all the information about the whole thing before I got to her, but with Qhayi, I’m not typical.

“Hlomu called me and said she fell, and now she is in hospital, but she wouldn’t tell me anything else. What happened to my mom, Mpande?” She was crying.

I swerved to the side of the road and stopped the car. I pulled her to my chest and wrapped my arms around her.

“Your mom is fine; they are taking care of her at the hospital,” I said in her ear.

I was lying. I didn’t know if MaSbisi was fine or not. I didn’t know anything about her mom. All I knew was that holding a woman in my arms had never felt like it felt at the moment.

I wanted to hold on to that feeling for much longer, but we had to get to the hospital.

... • ...

“And then?”

Where did she come from?

“Sis Zah?”

I’m as shocked seeing her as she is seeing me here – in the hospital corridor, on my way from the canteen. I’m not sure if Qhayi will eat the sandwich because she didn’t say anything about being hungry, but I got two because I’m hungry.

“What are you doing here?” she asks.

I know what I’m doing here, but somehow, I have trouble explaining it to her. Also, she doesn’t look or sound like herself. There’s something strange about her.

“MaSbisi is here,” I say.

She frowns, and I know it is because she doesn't understand what that has to do with me and the two sandwiches and cans of Sprite in my hands.

“I know; that's why I'm here. Xolie couldn't come so I had to come and check on her, and her daughter. Is she here? We sent a driver to pick her up, but when he got there, the house was empty.”

I still don't know where to start explaining, so I walk and she follows me down the passage, around the corner and to the bench where I left Qhayi. I sit next to her and offer her the sandwich. She shakes her head but takes the can of Sprite and fiddles with opening it. I take it and open it for her.

“Sawubona Sis'Zandile,” she says after taking two gulps.

I'm sitting between them. Sis'Zah looks at me, and then at her, and then at me again. I nod.

“How is your mom, nana?”

That's a question for the doctors, but let me...

“In ICU. They'll take her to theatre just now.”

“Oh my gosh!” she says, with one hand on her cheek.

She sounds shocked or concerned... I don't know... because her eyes can barely communicate.

“I'll go get you chocolates. Do you like chocolates?” she asks, and before Qhayi can answer, she's up on her feet walking back down the passage.

I didn't notice she was wearing fluffy purple night slippers until now as I watch her walk away. And I know those slippers belong to Xolie.

“She doesn't even know my name,” Qhayi says.

I'm sure she does...

“And she's drunk...”

Sis'Zah doesn't drink.

“She's not drunk, Qhayi, she doesn't—”

“She is! And where is the rest of your family? All they did was call an ambulance to come and dump my mom here. They haven't even called me

to check how she is doing—”

“But I’m here—”

“Yes, and your wife has been calling since we got here. Why are you here, Mpande? Your family doesn’t care about the maid who fell down their stairs and could possibly die because—”

No, no, no!

She’s looking up at me, I’m looking down at her... It takes about 10 seconds before she presses her hands on my chest and pushes me off.

“Don’t ever do that again. Just leave. Nobody cares anyway. Not you or your family,” she says and storms off.

I’m not sure where she is going but I watch her angrily walk away until she turns the corner and disappears. But I do care...

I know that what I just did – pulling her into my arms and kissing her – is not what she expected. I didn’t expect it too, it just happened. I followed my heart and did something I’d wanted to do for a while, and she kissed me back. So why is she so angry? And where did she go? Should I follow her? Try to find her and figure out what I did wrong? I don’t know. I’ve been with many women in my life, but I still don’t know how they think. What is it exactly that they want and why do they get angry and cry so easily?

I find Sis’Zah sitting on one chair at the canteen, looking up at the ceiling, two slabs of chocolate on the table in front of her. What’s wrong with her?

“Are you with her?” the woman I ordered sandwiches from earlier asks me.

She’s dark, straight hair with blue eyes and a coloured accent. Mqoqi would have found this interesting. He would have asked her many questions and after that, he would have gone and looked for a book that explains how one human can be three races.

I miss him.

“Yes, I came to check on her.”

“She’s fast asleep.”

She is. I thought she was staring up at the ceiling, trying to process all our problems.

“Also, she bought all the chocolate slabs in this shop. I gave her only two because I thought she was going to eat them, but then she looked up and fell asleep. Here are the rest of them,” she says, offering me two brown paper bags.

I don’t take them.

“She paid for all of it, and the manager has knocked off so I can’t void them,” she says and places the two paper bags on the table.

They are filled to the top with chocolates. I know my brothers have fucked up every woman in their lives, but please, not Sis’Zah. She was already fucked up before us, but alcohol was never her thing.

“Sis’Zah...”

I’m pulling her up by her arms. She opens her eyes, looks at me and asks where the chocolates are. She spots the two paper bags on the table before I can answer. It’s interesting that she just gets up and walks without my help, carrying both paper bags. The bench is empty, Qhayi is still not back.

“Where is she? What’s her name again?”

Qhayi was right; she doesn’t even know her name.

“Qhayiya. She went to the bathroom.” I lie.

I don’t know where she went.

This has to be one of the most disturbing days of my life, seeing Sis’Zah drunk? She has no reason to turn to alcohol. Of all of us in this family, she is the one who has survived the most hectic stuff. I don’t know who, between Hlomu and Xolie made her drink, but I know it’s one of them.

“Boy-boy.”

She hasn’t called me that in a long time.

“Do you have money hidden somewhere? I’m the only one who has no money hidden, everyone does, and I need to contribute to this...” she says, waving her hand in the air.

“Contribute to what Sis’Zah?”

“I will never let another woman in this family go to prison, boy-boy. That place is not made for humans, let alone these women your brothers married. They’ll die in there. It is survival of the fittest there. How much can you lend me?”

I’m lost, completely lost. It doesn’t help that Qhayi suddenly shows up and Sis’Zah, with a wide smile on her face, hands her a whole paper bag filled with chocolates and calls her Qhamukile while at it.

She looks at me. I’m embarrassed, but not enough to look away. Yes, my family is a wealthy-toxic-bunch-with-drunkard-women-and-murderous-men-and-strange-children and this and that... but we are still human, you know. It’s just that—

“Mama!”

She leaves us and rushes to the people wheeling the bed out of the ward. They tell her that her mother is going to theatre, now. She wants to go with them and I want to go with her, but they look at me and ask if I’m family. I don’t even know MaSbisi’s first name. They let Qhayi go with them, but I know she’ll be back soon because if there’s one thing my family knows about the ins and outs of, it is hospitals.

“What’s your story with this girl, Mpande?”

I thought she was too drunk to notice. I don’t say anything, but I know she knows now.

“Do you know how fucked up Thando is?”

Thando is not fucked up, she’s just desperate.

“I don’t love her, Sis’Zah.”

“Who?”

“Thando.”

She hooks her arm around my neck and pulls my head to her shoulder.

“You’re gonna have to love her boy-boy; you’re gonna have to try your best to. That girl is the queen on a chessboard.”

Thando? She’s just a girl I got pregnant.

“Who do you love? That Qha-qha-what girl? Well then, pray that her mother dies on that operating table. How much can you lend me? In case

she survives. It's gonna have to be in hard cash," she says.
What the fuck is going on?

28

I remember how she looked at me that day.

I sat her down, baby on her breast, and told her that Qhawe will not always be the Qhawe she knew then.

I could see how she was judging me. She did not believe that I – the woman who lives for this family – could think like that. And now we are at her house and she understands what I meant, even though Qhawe is still the Qhawe he was when they met.

Xolie and Naledi aren't very close. Naledi came at a hectic time, almost at the same time as Mabutho, and she never got to know the Xolie she was before all that mess. She knows the crazy Xolie – the one who burns things down and was damaged enough to hate a child. They say first impressions last. That's why Naledi and I see her differently. I know the naïve young girl who wanted so much to be part of this family and Naledi knows a crazy violent woman who was second in charge of holding power in this family.

I'm about to lay out the plan when Zandile walks in with a black bag over her shoulder. We assigned her to represent us at the showing care for MaSbisi thing because Zandile has no criminal bone in her. It is strange. Me – if I had gone through all the things she has gone through in her life – I'd be a Wikipedia certified serial killer. She drops the bag on the floor and tells us MaSbisi went to theatre yesterday and it looks like she'll be fine. Of

course, we already know that. What we don't know is what's in this bag she just dropped.

"It's my contribution, that makes it a million. I don't see how they can turn down a million. They live in an RDP house, for crying out loud."

It is interesting because out of all of us, only Naledi came from money and comfort. I come from average, Zandile comes from brutality. And yet here we are, capitalising on two women's poverty because if we are honest, anything and anyone can be bought with money. Conscience? We lost that along the way.

"So, what's next?" she asks. "And Hlomu, please don't ever make me drink alcohol again, ever."

I didn't pour her a glass, she grabbed the bottle on her own, but I have no time for this. We need to come up with a plan.

Gugu is not here; she doesn't leave her house anymore and I'm glad because she could give birth anytime now and I don't want it to happen in my presence. That jail cell experience still haunts me up to today. Her stash was dropped off here in an Enhle Flora box. I didn't know R300 000 could fit into a flower box. Nkangala delivered it. I remember the first time we all realised that no... we know this guy.

Naledi said, "Wait, I know this guy; he is one of the taxi drivers. He once gave me R30 when I was buying food for Qhawe and the taxi association..."

I too recognised Nkangala; he was our waiter at that club in Ballito. I remembered because he was the one who helped Thobi look for me.

Gugu said he was Tony, *thee* Tony whom she met in Madagascar and thought was on her side. First of all, a black man, a Zulu man named Tony? How on earth would anyone who grew up in KwaZulu-Natal believe that? But she's good now, she gets it. We don't meet people because we always have people guarding us against meeting people. It's a pity she isn't here because out of all of us, she's the most streetwise, although she grew up in that little rural town in the middle of nowhere. I'm from KwaMashu, the

most ghetto of all ghettos in Kwazulu-Natal, but I have no street cred. I'm more snobbish than her.

These amounts we are all contributing are really just a few cents compared to what we have hidden. I'd ask Zandile where she got this cash, but there is no time for that. Gugu and I contributed R300 000 each. I had to launder money from the Fruitcake Crumbs business account which, by the way, Mqhele has never bothered to know anything about. To him, my restaurant business is a hobby. He has never taken it seriously because he is *the* provider, and he will never let that be taken away from him by my bagels and organic jams. Truth is, I have shit loads of money, and so does Gugu.

We decided not to include Xolie in this evil stokvel plan because as much as I know she has money and would have chipped in, she doesn't need to be here planning moves. She has too much to deal with.

Naledi grabs the bag from the floor and I signal to Zandile that we should follow Naledi. We've hidden the rest of the money in the pool house cupboard in a box with *birth videos and placentas* written in a black marking pen. Naledi said this was the perfect place because Qhawe would never open this box.

We place Zandile's cash in it. It is all in R200 notes. I'm still curious, but... does it even matter? The goal is to buy Xolie's freedom, and that's all that matters. Deep down I don't want MaSbisi to die, but can she at least wake up with amnesia or something?

We agree that we all should go to the hospital tomorrow, Xolie included.

We are walking to our cars when the gate opens and what do you know? Qhawe! Why would he come home at noon? That's not what they do.

"You're home early," Naledi says.

I still need to teach her to act normal in situations like this because that's not what you say to a man who has just almost caught you doing something you shouldn't be doing. You don't say 'You're home early', you say stuff like 'I see you missed me so much you had to bunk work?' And then smile

a seductive smile. He didn't know Zandile, and I were here. That's why he has this look on his face.

"Is everything okay, Qhawe? We are so worried. I was updating them about MaSbisi. I spent almost all of yesterday at the hospital. Tomorrow, we are all going to see her," Zandile says.

Now, this is a girl who knows these things. Forget that this has the potential to land her in jail again.

"Okay," he says. "Let's go inside," he says, putting his arm around Naledi's shoulders.

We know he is talking to her only, so we say our goodbyes and proceed to our cars.

29

Coming home to an empty quiet house is one of my favourite things in this life.

I have at least three hours before those rascals I gave birth to come home.

It's only been two weeks since schools reopened and the bad mother in me wishes there were no holidays in between. Just 365 days of school and beds for when I don't want them to come home. The same goes for their father. That couch in his office is big enough for him to sleep on. I'm not saying I don't love my family, but chile... I could do without all of them for at least two days.

"Let's take a drive."

Oh shit! After all these years, he still has that thing of his where I don't know he's here until he speaks. I had planned to take a nap while peace prevailed, but he is here, so I might as well forget about peace and quiet.

Mqhele is needy, he's always been. But my gut tells me that something weird is happening because he should be at work, not here.

"To where?"

"You'll see," he says and pulls me to his chest, kisses the top of my head and smiles that smile of his that makes me say yes to anything he asks for.

I don't look my best; I've spent the past two days working on evil deeds.

"Okay, let me go change—"

“No, you are perfect the way you are.”

I don't even have lipstick on. I'm wearing a simple dress and my braids need to be undone and redone. I'm Hlomu. I'm either dragged for being a plain Jane or adored for being flawless. And yet, after all these years, Mqhele still doesn't give a shit about all that and what the media says about me.

I say okay, let's go, but my mind is still stuck on the problem at hand. They don't know what we women are up to, and they don't need to know.

We stop outside that same gate. The paint is different but everything, even the garage door, is still the same as we left it on the day we packed everything and moved to a higher life.

“What about the people who live here, Mqhele? Did you even tell them we were coming?”

I'm just asking this, but clearly, nobody lives here anymore. This house was sold to that boy for next to nothing, and when he and his mother decided to move to Rustenburg, I know he put it up for sale. Turned out Mqhele bought it back without even telling me. I thought it was being rented out until now. I haven't seen or spoken to that boy in years; I'm not even sure if his mother is still alive.

“I'm only doing it because you claim he saved your life. Otherwise, I don't like his attitude,” Mqhele said, those years ago when I demanded that we help the boy.

But that boy didn't save my life, he tried to, but I didn't listen. I drove back to Joburg in my slippers and robe and destroyed two cars. And when things settled down, instead of helping myself, I decided to help him.

“You have the keys?”

He looks proud of himself, and I still don't get why we are here – in Naturena.

“Your blinds are still here,” he says.

Yep! So are the wooden floors and the air-conditioner and every other thing I changed to ‘make this house a home’. But there's no furniture, nothing except a white mat on the main bedroom floor, two bottles of wine

and two glasses, two takeaway food containers and lit candles all over the floor.

“Surprise!” He opens his arms.

I laugh because it’s cute, and it’s the last thing I expected.

“You did all this?” He nods.

That explains the tall red candles. Yes, those that people use for iladi. I know they are sold in China city, but I think he got them kwaMai Mai, somewhere behind impepho and some concoctions.

“I’m trying to be romantic. Sit, let’s have lunch.”

Yah neh! On the floor.

Mine is seafood pasta he obviously bought somewhere. His pap and liver were clearly bought from some woman in the street. I’ve made peace with that you can take a man out of the taxi rank, but you can never take the taxi rank out of him. It’s all cold.

“We don’t have a microwave,” he says and laughs.

I understand why he’d find that funny. The no microwave situation will remain part of us forever.

“This is nice, Mqhele. Thank you.”

Cold pasta, sangoma candles and all.

“Why do you still have access to this house? I thought...”

His smile is gone, and it’s only now that I notice he’s wearing tracksuits, which he stopped wearing a long time ago.

“You know, Hlomu, when I went to see Mkhize—”

No, no, no! Not that, we are past that... And he calls him Mkhize now? He used to call him Model-C donkey.

“Mqhele please—”

“No, listen to me. He asked me a question...”

Sigh.

I might as well pour myself some wine.

“He asked me: ‘Who does Hlomu go to?’”

We shouldn’t be talking about Sandile, not after everything he tried to destroy us. Why wouldn’t he just die in peace?

“What does that even mean, Mqhele? Who do I go to for what?”

He puts his food on the floor and looks at me.

“It all started here, in this house...”

No, it started at Bree, and I’ve lost my appetite, so I put my container next to his and look at the wall in front of me.

“Remember when you found money in this wardrobe here?”

That was an unforgettable moment. I nod.

“It was stolen money, but I know you know that.”

I knew even then.

“Did you tell anyone about it?”

I shake my head.

“I told Nkosana. He said if you weren’t someone to be trusted, you would not have confronted me about it,” he says.

Okay.

“Did you tell anyone about the first beating?”

I didn’t.

“I told Qhawe and he came here. I cried. He said I still deserved you, that I wasn’t the piece of shit I thought I was.”

Good for him.

Nobody comforted or assured me I wasn’t a dumb girl who let a man beat her and cried herself to sleep instead of calling the police. Maybe someone would have if I had told.

“Who did you talk to when we were struggling to have children?”

Doctors. Fertility clinics and church once, but that didn’t really work because I kept thinking about all the sins committed in my name that I had no problem looking away from.

“I ran to another woman’s arms—” he says.

The fuck?

“Hlomu, please! We went past this. It wasn’t about you, you know that. We’re not here for that.”

“Yes, but that doesn’t mean I want to hear it!”

Fuck this! I'm getting out of here. He grabs my arm and pulls me back down to the floor.

"It still hurts, Mqhele."

"I know, sthandwa sami. I know."

No! He must not hug me; his chest is not where I want to be right now.

"Who did you speak to about the Mandisa thing?"

Nobody. Not even him.

"You were supposed to go through this life without ever seeing a dead body, Hlomu, that was my plan."

I'm going to cry now.

"We buried that body and built a house on top of it."

"A house? Where Mqhele?" I sense he didn't mean to blurt that out.

"In Muldesdrift."

Jizas!

I looked past the fact that they have a house I didn't know about, because I thought it was just a house, not a graveyard.

"We gathered at that house and talked about it, all seven of us, and then we moved on from it. It was tough because it was a woman, and there was no reason for her to die. The last time we had had to bury a woman, it was Nqobile, and that was tough. But we talked, and we helped each other through it."

I'd always thought they do these things and get over them immediately.

"Did you talk to anyone about the second..."

He can't even say the word 'beating' as if his feeling guilty will change anything. Anyway, I didn't, not until he tried to kill himself.

"If I had told anyone, my family would have found out and Gaba would have killed you."

He nods because he knows it's true. Even Langa would have thought about killing him. So, who would I have told? Did I even have a choice? I tried to convince even myself that it wasn't as bad as people on the outside would think it was if they knew.

"Our child would be around 12 now."

It would have been a boy obviously.

“Please don’t say that, Hlomu, please...”

Maybe I’m trying to hurt him. I don’t know, that’s why I’m crying.

“I spoke to Dr Masetla about it, but only after you told me it happened. He said you were a strong woman; that you wouldn’t still be with me if you didn’t love me anymore,” he says.

Love – that fucking word!

“I cried in your arms after Mvelo’s funeral, you told me to cry and I did. I remember how you wouldn’t stop looking back at his grave as we drove away, but we had to go. There was nothing I could do for you. I had handled it the only way I knew how. Those who killed him were dead, so on my side, I was ready to move on. I didn’t know, I still don’t know what your way is...” he says.

I pour what’s left of the first bottle of wine and pick up my food. The sauce has thickened, but as long as I can still chew and swallow, I’ll eat it all.

“I know there are many things you’ll never forgive me for...”

“Why did you go out and fuck other women, Mqhele?”

Silence...

It’s funny because, after everything, that’s the one thing I’ll always struggle to forgive him for.

“It was never about you—”

“Who was it about?”

Silence...

I’ll wait for the answer; I’m not in a rush to go anywhere.

“I regret it, Hlomu.”

I regret a lot of things too.

“I’ve never told anyone about your affairs, and do you know why? Because nobody will blame you for them. Whoever I tell will never see anything wrong with what you did, it will be about me, about how despite my pretty face and perfect wife charade, I still couldn’t keep you at home. You had to go outside to find what I lack and—”

“You don’t lack anything—”

Shut up!!

“And you know what, Mqhele? It’s not even about the people, it’s about me, about what this whole thing says about me – to me. It’s degrading! It’s humiliating! It makes me question myself and what I am to you. I can’t walk in the street without wondering if the woman greeting me isn’t one of your fuck buddies...”

I stop because I’m done with this. I can’t still be talking about this all these years later. I have bigger problems and he is the biggest of them all. I’m done talking, I think he’s done too because he’s still quiet. I want to go, but not home. We both live in that house and I want to go anywhere except there.

He provided a house, agreed to everything I wanted it to be and paid for every big and little thing I wanted in it with no questions asked. When it was all done, I made it a home. The thing is, we could be in a mansion or a shack, but as long as I am there, Mqhele will feel at home.

I think that’s why he can’t let go of this Naturena house; it was his first home.

“Mkhize said you talked to him about Mvelo’s death.”

Mkhize is dead, and ya’ll had the audacity to bring his psycho wife here.

“Why did you go to see him, Mqhele? Without telling me?”

He’s quiet. I’ll wait.

“Because he told me you’ll kill me one day. He said I’ve turned you into a monster.”

But monsters are beautiful creatures. I married one and I love him. He’s sitting here in front of me, and I know I’ll never kill him. I’ll love him even if he grows horns and a hunched back or a lion’s mane.

I’ll love him even if he woke up tomorrow morning with vampire teeth and started sucking blood from my neck for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Because this is my husband; the father of my children, the man who would walk on fire for me – the same fire he has thrown me in many times.

Sometimes you gotta burn so you can look at the scars later and say I survived, that's what they say.

That's why I'm still here, drinking and eating my ass to fatness and pimples while wondering who I was before I learned to love and sacrifice and compromise and nurture and sin like my mama never forced me to go to Sunday school and learn the 10 commandments off by heart.

But mama was once just like me. She's tough now, but I know she was once just like me. She burned for her children. But she never went insane, not like the weak-ass me who stays awake at night fantasising about pressing a pillow to my husband's face.

Mama let his monster live until it was time for it to go.

"I'm not a monster, Mqhele."

"You are not and you never will be. I'm sorry about everything."

I know.

"I'm sorry for changing you, Hlomu."

This was supposed to be a romantic thing but well, we're here... I reach out for a hug because I want to get out of here. I want this to be over because I don't like him when he's vulnerable and sincere like this. I want the Mqhele I know.

Toxic – that's the word. He wouldn't be my Mqhele if he wasn't dark and dangerous and troubled. He'd be a stranger to me. I wouldn't love him like I do if I didn't know all corners of him; all the things buried within him. The corners only I can reach.

It's funny how... my body is always the first to reach out to him. It betrays me all the time. It has, after all, been his solace since, since... He hasn't bruised or violated it in a long time.

I slip his warm hand under my dress, and it slides up to my breasts. He kisses the back of my neck and wraps himself around me tightly. His one hand slides down to my belly, and further down. He touches me, and my body tingles. He turns me around to face the wall. I want to turn around and face him, but he holds me tighter. I lay my head back on his chest and wrap

one arm around his neck, tilt my head back, and kiss him. He is on top of me while I am on the mat in a swift.

“Don’t ever leave me, Hlomu,” he whispers as he enters me, slowly and gently.

My arms are wrapped around him too tightly. I want the whole of him inside me. It’s like I’m feeling him for the first time.

“Did you miss me?” he whispers.

He knows he kills me when he does that.

I whisper a yes. I don’t know if it comes out right, he holds me tighter. I feel his fingers dig deep; he moans. I just hold on; all my joints are weak. He pulls out, I try to push him back in, but he slides down, opens my legs wide and pushes his tongue inside me. I scream and try to reach for his shoulders. I find his head instead and I hold on to it. I can’t hold back any longer. He stops and waits for my body to stop trembling. He slides up and is inside me again. His arms are behind my neck and he is looking me in the eye.

“I love you,” he says, still moving inside me.

He keeps my head still with his hand as I try to turn away from his gaze. I can’t speak; I try, but I mumble. He pulls out again and turns me to lie on my stomach. His whole body is covering mine from behind and he slips in again. I haven’t participated in this at all; he’s just having me however he wants. He slips his one hand under my tummy and all the way down then rubs his finger on my clit; I’m trembling again. I’ve stopped screaming. I’m just mumbling and groaning now. He is breathing behind my ear, his lips on my neck.

“Did you miss me?” he whispers again.

I can’t speak.

“Did you miss me, Hlomu?” he asks again.

“Yes,” I mutter.

I can’t hold myself; he waits again until my body calms down. He moves again. I feel his grip tightening and his scream getting louder, his knees shaking. He collapses on top of me.

We lie like this for a while.

This is us: the Hlomu and Mqhele we've always been. No matter what shit we are in the middle of, we can always fuck each other's brains out. It feels like that long time ago again when all we had was our love and this house and a presumed happily ever after. We hadn't lost much then. We were still building. For me, it was a home and warmth that would make him realise his worth and for him, it was the wealth that assured me he was a man who knew and was committed to his duties.

I have my head on his chest; it used to make me fall asleep quickly, and I knew he'd stay awake watching me sleep because he never could sleep.

"Do you still get nose bleeds?"

I'm shocked by this question because I hid them from him. I don't get them anymore, and I have never told him about Charity and at that time I was convinced I was dying. But that's all in the past now; I don't even talk to Charity anymore. He rolls one of my braids around his finger. The thing about me and Mqhele is that I don't even have to look at him to know that something is coming, I can always feel it.

"So, it's been two weeks since schools opened, when is my child coming back home?"

Huh?

"Do you remember when I would leave you in this bedroom at 4 am to go to work, and how you'd wake up with me, prepare two skhaftins with breakfast and lunch?"

Of course, I remember that.

"That's where we come from, Hlomu. Now, taking that to mind, does it make sense to you that our child is at some school in KwaMashu? A school with no swimming pool and no basketball court?"

Of all men in the world, why did I have to love Mqhele Zulu?

"He failed, Mqhele. He needs to understand that for all actions there are consequences. My mother will teach him that—"

"Your mother is a crazy church-obsessed-Bible-bashing-dictator."

What?

I leave his chest and get up on my feet. He doesn't even flinch, he's still lying on his back looking up at me like I'm crazy.

"I want my child back home, Hlomu, back at his school. Or do you want me to go fetch him myself?"

Jizas! He looks serious.

Does he even care that my mother still hates him for what happened with Langa? This whole time I've been thinking his worst fear is coming face to face with my mother. But then again, I know my husband and that the one thing he has, is audacity.

"So Langa can fail at school and go unpunished? Is that how we are going to raise our children, Mqhele?"

I'm angry now.

"I didn't drive taxis, do cash heists, and kill people for my children to end up in some under-resourced township school, living under your mother's roof and her crazy rules. I want Langa back home by Sunday. If you are too busy to make that happen, I'll go fetch him," he says, getting up and putting his clothes back on.

I'm just here looking at him and wondering why I love him. He picks up his phone from the floor and checks his messages.

"Mpande says MaSbisi is up. Also, when is MaMnguni retiring? She can't even climb our stairs anymore, let alone fall from them like this one."

I know women have been threatening to burn all men for years; when it finally happens, I'll gladly drive this one to the fire pit. I'm more concerned about the MaSbisi situation than his madness about our unruly son. He can go get him. All I can do is wish him luck because my mother is no child's play. I have bigger problems.

She's up. We have to go to the hospital tonight.

I text Naledi.

30

It's not visiting hours, but we are who we are.

We are allowed in the ward.

They say her daughter has just left. That she had been here since yesterday morning, but the man she was with finally convinced her to eat something and go home to get some sleep for a few hours. I hear that man is Mpande. I'm assuming that his brothers assigned him to this.

Mpande has always been a complicated case for me from the beginning. I just could never get through to him. It's like he drew a line between us for a reason I could not understand until Zandile came back and I understood how deep their relationship was before she went away. Zandile was to him what I am to Ntsika. Mpande held on to Zandile because he wanted to hold on to Mbuba. Ntsika did not remember Mbuba at all. So, he embraced what was new to him – a mother's love he had never experienced, a home, a soft love that came with touch and assurance.

I know now that I could not suck out Nomafo and Sbopho's blood out of him, but at least for a while, I felt like I had. It's just that... *sigh*... Thando happened, and he had to come back home. And home is not a peaceful place.

Naledi told us in the car that it was too early. That MaSbisi may be awake and recovering, but she's just had a head operation. So if we are lucky, she won't immediately remember what happened. If that is the case,

then it will give us more time to decide how we are going to bring up the ‘take the money and shut up’ thing to her. We had to drag Xolie here, and all she’s been doing is staring at MaSbisi with no emotion and no remorse.

“How are you doing, Mah? The operation went well; you’re going to be fine and you’ll be out of here soon,” Zandile says, placing her hand over hers.

She sounds very sincere, and that’s adorable but, in this situation, there are sides, and we are on one. The mandate is to save Xolie, not to pamper MaSbisi. With bandages covering her whole head, her eyes go through all of us, and when they reach Xolie’s, she frowns.

Jizas!

“I forgot to check on Nsingizi tonight; did you check on him? You know how he falls from the bed all the time,” she says.

We all look at each other because we are confused. Another thing about MaSbisi is her obsession with Xolie’s children. Yes, she practically raised them while Xolie was busy smashing Champagne flutes on a wall to release her anger, but they are still her children, and MaSbisi is too attached. She needs to go.

“Yes, Nsingi is fine. He has been crying and asking for you. He was the one who saw you falling down the stairs and ran to call his mother. What happened? Have you been drinking your low blood pressure pills as required?” Naledi intervened.

Low blood pressure makes one faint. I’m not a doctor, but I know that. Let’s just say... in a “Goldilocks and the Three Bears” type of annoying fairytale. That’s what happened, MaSbisi got dizzy and fell down the stairs.

We are generally bad women. That’s all I have to say about this.

“I fell?”

“Yes, down the stairs. We’ve been so worried,” I say.

Zandile is still holding her hand. I’m crossing fingers she doesn’t ask us to close our eyes so she can pray because that would be worse than Naledi lying with a straight face.

A nurse walks in and tells us it's time to go because the doctor is here, and he wants to see MaSbisi. Personally, I'm relieved, this hasn't been nice to watch. We bump into Dr Masetla at the door. He doesn't say anything to us, and we are shocked because normally he greets us with a smile. Again, he doesn't work at this hospital, and that has all of us confused.

"I told Sambulo the truth," Xolie says.

I'm shocked and a bit upset, if I'm to be honest. Some truths should not be told to men.

Now I wonder what Dr Masetla is here for. Is it to save MaSbisi or to save Sambulo's wife? We all know the reason he was let in and allowed to see her is that he is the Zulu family doctor, and all it takes is one phone call from the Zulu brothers to make such things happen. Masetla is no different from Peter – both are stuck with us. They are both our family tokoloshes. They know our secrets and how fucked up we are, but they also know how deadly we are so they are in too deep, and they can never get out even if they wanted to. Whatever oaths they took or ethics they are required to adhere to in their jobs don't apply to us. Knowing Sambulo, Masetla's mandate is to do what's in Xolie's best interest, and that makes me uncomfortable.

"Do you think they'll take the money and go?" I ask because, at this point, I'm really worried.

This was supposed to be our thing as women, just like Zandile and I did with Thando. Yes, it backfired, but we aren't sitting here regretting doing what we had to do to keep the brotherhood of Sbopho's sons intact.

Why Xolie had to tell her husband the truth, beats me. She, of all people, should know better. But then again, she's at a difficult place, a vulnerable place where she feels more is being taken away from her than all of us. I will always have Xolie's back, that's a promise I made to her stepmother on her wedding day. But at some point, she is going to have to understand that we are all here to give something. I don't know why she keeps fighting.

"They have to, why wouldn't they? It will change their lives. I'm sure they are ambitious enough not to be our maids forever. Besides, Qhayi can

use it to start her practice as a psychologist wherever they came from because Lord knows black communities could use one,” Naledi says.

Yeah, but gurl... we have dismally failed to convince our husbands to do that, so I mean...

“Zandile, what’s happening?” I ask as I watch Mpande and MaSbisi’s daughter walking toward us.

I thought his brothers assigned him to be here, so why do they look like they are closer than I thought? She greets us and rushes inside the ward.

I’m here waiting for Mpande to explain, but he follows her inside without saying a word. I look at Zandile. Of all these men in this family, I know her weak spot for Mpande is insane.

“What’s going on?”

She was here yesterday; she should be able to explain this shit.

“I think Mpande has caught feelings,” she says.

Sigh.

It’s Mpande; he is always catching feelings – temporary feelings. He caught feelings for Gwen for crying out loud.

“I think it’s real this time,” Zandile says.

Well... okay... but this is the one woman he shouldn’t be catching feelings for. Besides, she’s definitely not his type, just like Ndoni wasn’t his type. The whole point is that we are all here to make this girl and her mother go away.

“Mpande can’t be catching feeling when there’s Thando in the picture,” Xolie says.

Yep! Zandile and I have been ignoring Thando’s calls and texts about Mpande not coming home two days in a row. And some of them had threatening undertones.

Sometimes you have to push annoying people down the stairs, just like Xolie did with MaSbisi, but I know Zandile won’t agree to that. How do you spend 17 years in prison and still come out with a conscience? She really does annoy me sometimes.

We have to go. We've been gathering outside this ward's door for too long now. What we need is a way forward, not some girl chat outside a hospital ward like we are normal people.

My phone beeps and the only reason I open the text is that it's from Ntsika, whom I haven't spoken to in a while. All I know is that he is with Sisekelo and the rest of the boys in Ntsikeni.

**Ntsika is here, spending time with his children.
Wherever you all are with Mpande, keep him there.
I'm tired of begging him for his attention. He doesn't
care, Ntsika does.**

This text is clearly from Thando. So now Ntsika gives her his phone to text me? Yes, I blocked her, but her texting me with Ntsika's phone is the highest form of passive aggression.

I blue-tick her and tell the ladies that we have to go home to our designated husbands and children. I'm not really sure where mine is, but if you've been married for as long as I have been, you care less about where he is during the day because you know he'll come back home.

I grab Naledi's arm just as she's about to get inside her car and ask her how she is doing. She says she's doing great. But our 'great' is nothing like normal women's 'great'. I'm tempted to tell her about Thando and her shit, but I decide not to because she has changed and something about her commitment to this family and its darkness is unsettling to me. We haven't discussed the hospital project at all since the day she told me Ntsikeni was the place. I'm afraid to raise the subject because I feel like her decision had everything to do with what happened while she was in a coma.

I'd really like to deal with one problem at a time, and right now, the problem is Mpande. When it comes to women, he is weak as fuck. He's out here following MaSbisi's daughter like a love-sick puppy. Who knows what he'll do if he finds out we are planning to make her disappear?

And making her disappear is what we will do...

He's going to have to forgive us for that, again.

Zulu

It's been five minutes of me sitting on this couch, watching her peeling potatoes.

When I walked in and sat down, I greeted her.

She didn't respond; she just pulled another potato from the bag lying on the floor and continued humming some church song.

I drove all the way here, alone because Hlomu clearly didn't take me seriously. She's very busy these days and whatever she is busy with, I'm the least of her worries. I asked each of my brothers to come with me, but they all said no.

Nqoba responded to my message with laughing faces and said,

qina Mageba, angiyi lapho

Mqoqi would have come with me.

"How can I help you?" She finally speaks.

I've been her son-in-law for years. I've been in this house many times and yet she is asking me this question like she's sitting behind a Home Affairs counter and I'm the 125th person she's seeing from the queue. I notice the portrait of Hlomu and I that we took on our day wedding is no longer hanging on the sitting room wall.

"I'm here to fetch my son."

That's when she looks up at me, and I realise this isn't going to be an easy one. What I know though, is that I'm not leaving KwaMashu without my child.

"MaDladla!" she shouts.

Yerrrr, I know who she is calling in; this is going to be worse than I expected.

“Woza la uzongizwisa bo!”

Maybe I should have asked Gaba to be here too, but our relationship has never been the same since he found out I beat Hlomu, twice.

And so, enter the dragon, with a half-empty bottle of Savanna in her hand. I’ve always found the way she dresses fascinating, especially the shoes. Sambulo said they were Andreoli shoes, and that whenever you see a woman her age wearing those, know that they’ve had an interesting life and that they can pull an okapi out from their breasts and stab you. I know she hates me too; they all do.

“Your son-in-law is here. He says he is here to fetch his son,” Hlomu’s mother says, passing her a potato.

She pulls a knife. Yes, an okapi out of her breasts and starts peeling the potato. She didn’t even greet me; she just placed the bottle of Savanna on the coffee table and sat down. I know I have bigger problems here, but I can’t stop myself from wondering what they are going to do with all the potatoes they are peeling.

I mean, Hlomu’s mother lives alone now and as far as I know gangstago here has her own house in the suburbs, which she inherited in mysterious ways from a boyfriend who died eight years ago.

“You are here to fetch your son?”

I nod.

They look at each other. I don’t know what I should make of this. I have two women sitting across from me with knives in their hands, and I am the man who has hurt their daughter and destroyed their son’s life. Where is my son anyway? It’s Saturday, so he’s not at school.

“That’s all you are here for?” the aunt asks.

Honestly, yes. I’d be lying if I said I was here to apologise to them for the Langa and Andy thing. Those two are the only people I owe an apology to. I failed to protect them from my past.

“Yes, Mah.”

Hlomu's mother laughs out loud and throws the potato she's just finished peeling in the bucket placed between them.

I miss the times when I got VIP treatment whenever I came to this house. By now I'd have been offered something to drink while waiting for food on one of the precious plates that are kept in the sideboard and nobody is allowed to use.

MaDladla picks up the Savanna and drinks all that is left of it in one go. She and I were great buddies once – we drank together. I always bought her a 24 whenever I came to KwaMashu. We'd sit outside, me with my beer and her with her Savanna and she'd tell me about stories of her youth. We'd laugh together. But our drunken fun always ended with her threatening me, with death even, if I ever fucked up with her brother's daughter.

"I love Hlomu. She looks like me; I love all of my brothers' children. They are the only children I have since I couldn't bear my own. The thing about Hlomu is that her father spoiled her a lot and her mother did the opposite. The problem with girls who grow up being loved like that by their fathers is that they grow to trust men, and so they are bound to make bad choices when it comes to men they love. I knew Hlomu was going to make bad choices when it came to men, but of all things, the one thing I did not foresee was her marrying isgebengu," she said to me once, four empty bottles of Savanna rolling at our feet.

I was a bit offended. Yes, Hlomu is way out of my league but for her aunt to call me a bad choice and 'isgebengu' while at it was not a nice thing. She saw that I was offended.

"Uyis'gebengu Mqhele, I know that. I knew it the first time I saw you. But you know... she loves you, and she wants to heal you and save you and fix you because she loves you. Do not ever take that for granted, and do not ever harm her because if you ever... I will stab you, and you won't be the first person I stab, but you'll be the first person I kill."

I have never forgotten that conversation between us and at this moment, I feel like she's ready to execute those threats.

She was right; Hlomu does look like her, but Hlomu is still beautiful, and it's not even about age, it's about how she's had a life where she never has to hustle or grind like her aunt. MaDladla's face is an exhibit of struggle and alcohol. I'm a 'sgebengu', yes, and I know my wife drinks too much wine but it's expensive wine – not Savanna, so she won't look like her aunt when she gets to her age.

MaDladla probably doesn't remember that conversation because she was drunk, but me, I will never forget it; that's why I'm shit scared right now.

I know I've been a hardcore criminal all my adult life but the truth is, right now I'm scared as fuck of these two women sitting in front of me peeling potatoes – one of them with an okapi.

“I welcomed you into my home, Mqhele; I treated you like my own son – all of you; you and your brothers. I've always known that there was something amiss about you all but I know how I raised my daughter. Do you understand me?”

I don't, but I nod because although she looks nothing like Hlomu, she has the same aura as her.

“You beat up my child, Mqhele.”

I look down at my feet because if there is one thing I will always regret, it is that. It doesn't only emasculate me, makes me question myself as a man, it embarrasses and makes me feel small.

I will never ever lay a hand on Hlomu again. I don't know why I ever did in the first place and it haunts me. It will haunt me all my life. How do I keep harming the one thing that means everything to me? I don't understand it myself.

Hlomu forgave me, but I can never forgive myself.

I want to ask where my son is but I know I have no power here, anything I say or do can trigger them into going crazy.

I'm sitting here with all my sins loud and clear, heavy on my shoulders. It's funny how I'm not scared of men; I kill them if they dare mess with me... but women, they scare the shit out of me. They have things, things I

don't understand. Me – I'm a man, I have violence, that's all I know. But violence isn't power, it is weakness, especially if one uses it on someone who can't return it on the same scale.

“Where is Langa?” I ask.

The potatoes they've been peeling this whole time are almost filling up the bucket sitting between them.

“He went to the shops to get mayonnaise for the potato salad. We have two hours before the stokvel gathering starts; the charcoal and braai stand are outside and the meat must be ready by 2 pm,” the aunt says, looking at me in the eye.

For a moment I'm confused because yes, I'm their son-in-law, but I'm also Mqhele Zulu. The least they can do is give me the same respect other people give me – people in high places.

Hlomu's mother hums that church song again. I don't think Hlomu's aunt knows church songs, or that she goes to church at all, but I look at her and I know she's confused as to why I'm still sitting when I should be outside lighting up the braai stand. They don't give a shit about who I am, do they? I have a feeling that they'll send my grey-haired wealthy ass to buy ice after I braai the meat.

“2 pm, you have two hours,” the aunt says, widening her eyes at me, and strange enough, I see the Hlomu misdemeanour in her eyes and I know she's not joking.

At this point, I'm not sure if this is my main punishment or if there's more coming. I get up and make my way to the kitchen, but I stop when I see Hlomu's picture hanging on the wall in the dining room. She's wearing a school blazer, smiling, her chubby cheeks and perfect teeth staring back at me. She looks so innocent, so carefree and so beautiful. She must have been 17 or so – five years before I met her. She still has the cheeks and smile, but not the innocence.

I have always believed that Hlomu and I were always going to end up together, that we were meant to be because too many things are

unexplainable about *us*. Who the fuck loves a woman like I love Hlomu? What man?

“You are going to stab him, right?”

I overhear Hlomu’s mother asking her aunt. They think I’m already outside; they don’t know that I’m here staring at the picture of my wife.

“Yes, I will, but when he’s done braai-ing the meat.”

“Just make sure it’s nowhere near his spine; I don’t want my daughter to be pushing him on a wheelchair all her life. We both know she’ll never leave him.”

What the fuck?

“I’ll stab him in the buttocks.”

“Good.”

I thought my family was fucked up, but no, Hlomu’s family is downright insane. I’ll light up the braai stand, but as soon as my son gets here, we are out! I won’t even give him time to pack his stuff. We will leave, actually, we will run away.

I don’t understand why Hlomu always gets mad at me when I tell her that her mother is crazy. The woman has just given her aunt approval to stab my buttocks, and I know for sure that she’s capable of doing that.

I know all her stories; she told me all of them.

... • ...

I’m done with the brisket and I have just placed lamb chops on the braai stand when I feel his presence behind me.

I’ve been out here for an hour and those women have not come outside once. It’s either their stokvel members really like potato salad or the two of them are somewhere inside the house planning my demise.

He doesn’t speak; he just hands me a dumpy of Castle Lite. His aunts must have told him I’m here. I haven’t seen or spoken to him in a long time. Him going to the house in Ladybrand was not my idea; it was Nqoba’s.

They are closer, they always have been. I know he is angry at me; angry for things I did years ago, that he didn't know about until recently. We've done many things with Gaba; things Hlomu shouldn't and will never know about. But I've always known that one day we'd get here – to a place where none of the atrocities we have done together outweighs what I have done to Hlomu.

“Mgabadelì,” I say.

I'm in the wrong, so I should be the one to start this conversation. I can't get myself to look him in the eye, so I flip the lamb chops on the braai-stand, even though I know they're not ready to be flipped yet.

He doesn't say anything.

Look... Gaba and I – Gaba and my family – we are the same. But we don't have the same story. He grew up with family, in a home with people who could have easily kept him away from our world, but he chose our world. And when we met him, it was like fate had brought us together. He was there at our last cash heist those many years ago. That's how he got all this money he has now. Breaking into houses in the suburbs and hijackings was enough to feed his many children, but not enough to make him a township millionaire that he is now.

Our relationship with him has always been *our* relationship with *him* – his skills and his connections. He helped us with many things, and we helped him with many things; things Hlomu knows nothing about.

But now it's gotten personal, and that's a problem.

Him and I have always been able to talk and get along. We shared Dladla family secrets for a while, and now here we are, standing over a braai-stand poking lamb chops in silence – all the toxic masculinity thick between us... me knowing he wants to get violent with me and me also knowing he is trying his best to suppress it.

“Mgabadelì, it happened twice, only twice. I'm sorry.”

Silence.

I know my apology will never mean anything to him; what we had before this is gone forever. And I understand fully. I do not have a blood

sister but I know that if any man ever harms Niya, I'd kill them.

"We talked about this, Mqhele," he says.

We did.

On the day I paid lobola for Hlomu, he called me to the side and we had a conversation. He didn't know that I had already beaten her, and I didn't tell him. A few months later, he was sitting with us at a warehouse counting cash notes before we helped him stash them inside the spare tyre of his car and waved goodbye as he left for Durban.

"I will never forgive you," he says.

"I know."

We are done with the meat. Now, all that is left is the boerewors and it's always the last thing. I'm getting anxious. I've already figured that Gaba is not going to slit my throat, but I know my buttocks are yet to be stabbed.

My son is still not here and I'm not leaving this place without him. I can actually see the school he's been going to for the past two weeks from where I'm standing. It's right across from us. Hlomu must be crazy to think I'll let our son go to a school with peeling paint and a bush instead of a playground. Does she even know how many times I escaped death just to give my children what I never had? This school looks exactly like the one I went to in Ngundwini. Yes, Langa failed a Grade, but Hlomu doesn't know half of it. That's why she thinks bringing him here and taking him to that school will fix him. I didn't kill people and escape being killed for my children to suffer.

Nkosana and I took a vow to never tell her what happened in Margate. I didn't realise how scared of Hlomu Nkosana was until that day in Sambulo's house when he told me what happened in Margate. He locked himself in the bathroom and I had to get Hlomu out of that house. He said he couldn't face her and at that point, I didn't know who I was protecting, my brother or my wife.

Gaba leaves me and goes inside the house. I know this is not over.

"Baba."

Damn! I haven't seen my son in a long time! Did he just park this car in this yard? He's 14; I didn't even know he could drive. Hlomu's mother makes him drive?

"Langa."

I look into his eyes and I know something is lost; he isn't my little boy anymore.

"Let's go home," I say.

He looks confused, scared even. What has Hlomu's mother done to my child?

"You're going back to your old school; let's go."

"But Mami and Gogo..."

Eyi! I don't care less about gogo right now. Mami I will deal with when we get home. The one thing that will not happen is me being stabbed on the buttocks.

"Do you have your phone and headphones?" I ask.

That's the only thing their generation cares about, that I know. His mother will fetch his clothes and every other thing later. Right now, we have to go.

"Let's go."

He follows me out of the gate and to the car without hesitation. I know he loves his gogo but that woman is crazy and I will not let her channel her craziness to my children. By the time she comes out to get the mayonnaise from the car, me and my son will be long gone. Gaba will have to explain.

"Does Mami know I'm coming home?"

We have just joined the highway from Nandi Drive when he asks. Mami is my wife; I'll handle her. He has no business worrying about that. I figure he understands when I don't answer him.

"Baba, we must make a U-turn to Stanger. We have to go to Ntsikeni before I go back home."

I look into his eyes and I realise that the boy I came to fetch from my mother-in-law is no longer there. Once a boy takes a life, he loses his boyhood. I know because I lost my boyhood at 14, and Qhawe thought he

could give it back to me, but he also lost his boyhood trying to give me back mine.

I take the Parlock offramp, wait for the robot to turn green and make the U-turn and join the N2 South. I don't know why he wants to go there, but it's time I go there to see what these boys are doing.

Zulu

Sisekelo told me everything about Ntsikeni.

But he said the river was always full, and that's why our grandfather's twin brother drowned in it. But he later told me that no, actually, he didn't drown; that's why there is Bab'Mhlaba.

A lot of things started to make sense to me when I woke up one morning and found Bab'Mhlaba in our guest bedroom. I felt like I had always known him, but a young him, my age maybe.

The river is almost dry, which is strange because it's not winter. We've stopped and I can see that baba is hesitating to drive through it. I've never been here, he has, so I don't know if his sudden discomfort is because he fears this place or that he is worried about his car driving over water and rocks.

"Let's go, this water is too shallow. I'm sure it doesn't even come up to the ankles," I say.

He turns to look at me, brushes my head with his hand and drives in.

We have never spoken about what happened in Margate, but I know Bab'Nkosana told him everything. That whole thing doesn't keep me up at night because that man wanted me to do it. He wanted to go, and I don't know how I knew, but I knew that he'd been waiting for me for a long time. I can't talk to anyone about that stuff except Sisekelo. He's the only one that understands.

We drive a few metres before we reach an old rusting gate that is wide open.

All the way from Durban, baba and I were chatting and I was telling him everything about living with gogo and how I've had the most confusing two

weeks of my life in that school. They carry exercise books and they write in them. On my first day, the only thing I brought to school was my iPad. I was wearing grey pants, a white shirt and a blue tie, no blazer. The school doesn't have its own blazers, apparently because most kids there can't afford that stuff and the school doesn't want to put pressure on them.

I had to sit at a desk with someone; not my own cubicle with a desktop computer full of folders of digital books for each lesson. My desk-mate looked at my iPad and told me not to be surprised if it disappears before the first break. That was another shock for me because why would anyone steal an iPad? Every kid has an iPad. Except in my class, I was the only one who had it.

The teacher walked in and everyone immediately got quiet, but I knew I was the elephant in the room. He didn't even introduce me as the 'new student', he just asked everyone to open their books and go to a certain page. I had to Google the book and luckily there was a free PDF of it available. Everyone was writing notes as he spoke and wrote stuff on the blackboard. I was recording him with my iPad. We didn't have blackboards in my old school; we had overhead projectors.

My desk-mate, Amahle – weird name for a boy – walked me back to gogo's house after school. It's 10 minutes away anyway and it was the same walk I had taken in the morning because no kid gets driven to school there.

Amahle had a list of things he thought I needed to know:

- Everybody knows who you are, so choose your friends carefully.
- Girls will throw themselves at you, and that will get you stabbed.
- Leave that iPad at home, even our teachers don't have iPads.

- There are two things: you will either be popular or hated for being who you are, expect anything.
- You said you played basketball? There's none of that here; most students smoke weed or cigarettes behind the classrooms during lunch.
- Lastly, don't expect the teachers to call you by your name even though we all know they know it. There's about 50 of us in one class, so they don't have the time.

I had never been in a classroom that had more than 20 students, and teachers knew all of us by name and they knew our parents. I found out during our walk that teachers at my new school do not call your parents if you've done something wrong. They move right along and focus on the well-behaved kids. The parent-teacher meeting was something Amahle told me was non-existent.

I found all that to be good news because imagine what Gogo would do to me if she had to be called to the school for me being unruly. I decided there and then that Amahle was going to be my only friend. When we got home, Gogo asked him to stay and gave him food to eat. Afterwards, I offered to drive him home in Gogo's car but he refused, said his home wasn't that far; that L-Section was just minutes away.

The next day, I went to school with a backpack – no badge or school emblem on it but at least there was stationery which Malum'Gaba only came with that morning. He drove me to school, and when I came out of the car and walked to the crowd of my new schoolmates standing there waiting for the bell to ring so we could all go to assembly, Amahle appeared, a smile on his face.

“Don't worry; nobody will touch you now. They all know who Gaba is.”

To be honest, I wasn't worried at all about what my new school-mates might do to me. The one thing I was struggling with was being alone, being without my brothers. And Aluta. It was painful that I couldn't stare at her every school day.

I told baba all that on our way here, except for the part about Aluta because it's quite embarrassing. Besides, he still thinks I'm a little kid. He laughed at most of the things I told him.

I don't fully understand how he let Mami dump me with Gogo and why it took him a whole two weeks to come and kidnap me after schools opened, but then again, something tells me he let it happen because he wanted me to be away – to feel like a kid again because if there's one thing my grandmother is capable of, it is putting anyone and everyone in their place.

Gogo doesn't give a shit; Gog'MaDladla is worse. She came; it was a Saturday. I think it was four days after I started at that school. The first thing she asked me was if I was being bullied at the school and if I needed her to go with me and deal with "people's children,".

But she didn't wait for me to answer, she just looked up at me and said: "*Urgh*, but nobody would bully a tall boy like you. I'm sure they'd regret it if they even tried. You have your father's violent energy all over you. Here..." she said, pulling R300 out of her breasts. "Go to esteshini and buy me a 24 of Savanna."

I wanted to explain to her that I'm 14 and they won't allow me in at Tops, but instead I grabbed the car keys and drove out. I needed to get out of that of that yard. I called Amahle and asked him to go with me. I offered to fetch him at his home and surprisingly he agreed and sent me the location. I found myself parked outside a small house that looked like it had not been painted in years with a lot of kids running around the yard. There were three shacks behind the house. When he got in the car, I explained to him that I had been sent to buy alcohol; he didn't look worried.

"Do all the kids in your neighbourhood play at your house?" I asked, out of curiosity really.

“What kids? The ones you saw in our yard? Those are my cousins and siblings – three of them are my nephews. We are a family of 13, including our mothers and three uncles. But my uncles live in the outside buildings.” That explained the shacks, but still the main house looked too small for 10 people.

My family is big, yes, but everyone has their own bedroom. He must have noticed the shock on my face because he laughed and called me a cheese-boy. I hate being called that. I’d have told him because I now considered him my friend, but his face had suddenly turned serious.

“I’m going to get out of there, Langa. I swear I will; that’s my life goal. And when I’m settled, I’ll make sure to get my family out too. There’s nothing glamorous about township life; you need to understand that. White people threw us here, and we need to get out...”

I have white friends, some of them poorer than me.

“I hate it when my uncles and everyone glorify township life, that *‘kasi lami’* thing – I hate it. I sleep on the kitchen floor with three of my nephews. I have never slept on a bed in my whole life. Nobody in my family is employed; we live on social grants for all those kids you saw running around the yard. My mother gets social grants for me and my two little sisters. When I turn 18, the system will kick me out, and that will be it for me,” he said.

I could not relate to what he was talking about; I was born in wealth. I know there’s something called “imali yeqolo” but all I’ve ever heard about it are jokes. I’m not even sure how much it is.

“I don’t want to end up like your uncle Gaba. Yes, he is moneyed and respected around here, but everyone knows how he got to where he is. And one day, someone will kill him – whether it is cops or someone he stole from. They all die like that, amagintsa. They all die a violent, painful death.”

But Malum’Gaba is a businessman. He owns shisanyamas and taverns. Also, I didn’t like that he was saying such things about my family. We aren’t perfect and someone is always trying to kill us for some reason but I

know my fathers came from nothing and had to work their arses off to get to where they are.

“How did you get that scar on your leg?” he asked.

I do not remember ever not having this scar in my life. My parents have never explained to me how I got it, but I did find an article on Google once that said I was shot, along with my brother called Mvelo, whom I do not remember because he died. The story made sense because the scar is round. There was also a woman called Oleta, she also died.

“I don’t know; I probably fell,” I lied.

When I parked outside some crowded place, I told him to stay in the car, at least I’m tall so I had a chance of marching in without security at the door noticing I was just a kid in Grade 9, for the second time. But he didn’t listen; he opened the passenger door and followed me. We weren’t at esteshini where Gog’Madladla had told me to go; we were at another place at D-section called Rooftop.

We didn’t even have to enter the bottle store. He called some random guy ‘malume’ and asked him if he could go inside the bottle store and buy us a 24 of Savanna. The ‘malume’ didn’t have a problem as long as the 24 came with a quart of Black Label beer for him.

“Umshana ka Gaba lo?” the random malume asked as he handed us the 24, opened his quart with his teeth and said nothing about our change.

Being easily recognisable is not a good thing; I can tell you that now. There’s nothing nice about looking exactly like people who are known by everyone and anyone. Amahle didn’t answer him. He just told me to walk and not look at anyone, both of us carrying two six-packs each.

“Awuthi itawu phela, mfana wakwaZulu,” the ‘malume’ shouted as we rushed off.

I realised there and then that I’d always been surrounded by rich people throughout my life; nobody had ever asked me for a thousand rand like the random malume had just done. Nobody had ever looked at me and saw money.

I knew Amahle was poor, but he had never asked me for anything. Yes, I had known him for a few days but all he had done was make me try to understand that I was in a different world now; a world that wasn't going to be kind to someone like me.

When we got home, Gog'MaDladla was happy to see her 24. She opened the first bottle with her teeth, but Gogo was not impressed. She said something to her about sending kids to get alcohol being wrong and MaDladla wasn't even bothered, instead, she said something about waiting for the right time to kill my father.

"My brother will not rest in peace until I do what needs to be done to that big-eyed shlama."

Her brother was my grandfather; he died before Msebe and I were born.

I've always wondered what he was like, but I know Mami and Malum'Langa looked like him.

It feels like everyone has forgotten he ever existed. There aren't pictures of him at gogo's house, but there were two at home; they've since disappeared.

... • ...

As we drive up the hill I start seeing people and cars. I see four tents and a lot of people. As we get closer, I see my brothers, Mqhe, Mbulelo and Zamani.

"These boys," baba says, shaking his head as he parks the car next to Zamani's Jeep Wrangler that looks like it's been parked here for a while, dust all over it.

The house being built here is high up; there are men installing tiles on the roof. Baba is still shaking his head in disbelief when I jump out of the car and run to my brothers.

Phakeme left Gauteng to go to KwaMashu to come and get me. He told me he wasn't scared of Gogo. I laughed because I knew he was lying. I told

him to go to Ntsikeni instead, that Sisekelo needed him more than I did.

I'm happy to see my brothers, but I tell them I can't stay long because baba is taking me back home. Bab'Ntsika is not here. There's a white woman here; I don't even ask. I'm told Sisekelo is somewhere under that tree I can see from here.

"He goes there every day. Are you okay, boy? Are you the twin that was taken to a township school?" she asks.

Baba has gotten out of the car and is walking toward us. I need to talk to Sisekelo. I have not seen him since he left home to come here. If he wasn't older than me, I'd slap him for making me go through what I went through in Mbazwane, making me think he was dead.

I'm not sure what hell baba is raising right now, but I make my way to the tree. I find him sitting under it with his knees up and his chin resting on them. I sit next to him and I know deep down that he will never leave this place because I have never felt this much peace around him before. Me – I'm going back to my world, and I haven't even told Amahle. On Monday, he will be sitting alone on our desk. I'm going back to what I know and had no appreciation for until the past two weeks.

"Sisekelo, are you good?" I ask.

He doesn't even turn to look at me.

"I'm free. This is the end of it all. It's always been my responsibility to end it. I was born for that," he says.

I understand him, fully. But... how is he going to live here? Alone? He doesn't even know how to cook his own food.

"You're going to live in that little house? Alone?"

"I haven't had the dreams since I arrived here. I sleep now, peacefully, for the first time in a long time," he says.

That's good to hear, but still, how is he going to survive here? That little house I'm talking about is still bigger than Amahle's home. He doesn't even have a car; how is he going to go anywhere? Where will he buy food?

"No, I will never be alone. They are both here?"

"Who? Who is here, Sisekelo?"

I don't see anyone, it's just us here. I don't get an answer, but I turn around to see baba standing behind us.

"Langa, go to your brothers, I need to talk to Sisekelo."

I'm ready to go, but Sisekelo pulls me back down to sit. I'm not sure who I should listen to between the two of them. Baba seems to give up easily, so he moves to stand in front of both of us. There's always been a thing between baba and Sisekelo. Baba plays the guitar and Sisekelo plays the piano; nobody taught them how to, they just can.

"You can't stay here, Sisekelo; you're a child."

"I have never been a child, baba. Not once in my life."

I understand what Sisekelo means. He and I have always shared things that we swore would stay between us forever. They weren't things about our fathers – those Sisekelo chose not to tell me. But what Amahle said about my uncle has left me with many questions.

"I'm happy here, and free. Let me be what I was born to be."

I know my father; he would rather die than let any of us have a life worse than he had. His jaw is clenched now, and that means he is in distress.

"You are my son and I would rather die than—"

Sisekelo stops him before he finishes talking.

"And Niya is my sister, baba. I would rather die than have her taken away from us. Bab'Nkosana asked; in fact, he begged for her. She was born a day before I turned five. And when I woke up the next morning, I wasn't a child anymore."

Niya? What does Niya have to do with all of this? I thought this was about Mami and Nyanda. Nobody is going to touch Niya – not as long as I'm alive.

"What does Niya have to do with all of this, Sisekelo?" I ask, and he'd better give me a straight answer because if he doesn't...

"Langa! Sit back down!"

"No baba!"

"I said sit down!"

Sisekelo is still calm, still sitting in the same position I found him in when I arrived here.

“Now you see why I’m here? Why I’m doing this? For everything given, something is taken...”

Baba opens his mouth to speak, but Sisekelo raises his hand to stop him. We don’t do that; we don’t cut our fathers when they are speaking and raise our hand while at it!

“It’s not like I’m going to die, baba. I’m just going to be here. I understand the dead more than I do the living.”

I know all that about Sisekelo but where does our sister come into this? When it comes to Niya, I have no time for theatrics; they’d better tell me what’s going on, now.

“Sisekelo, one thing we will never do is choose one of our children over the other...”

He raises his hand to stop baba, again...

“It’s not your choice to make, baba. You have your brothers whom you’d die for; I have my brothers and my only sister whom I’d die for. Besides, it’s not like I’m here to die; I’m here to fix what Thulula did. It is what I came to this earth to do.”

Ten years ago, soon to be 11, Mami came home with a baby girl. Msebe and I – we still just little boys, yes, but we knew something big had happened. Everyone looked happy, yet scared. It was a girl, and girls didn’t exist in our family until Niya. The only girls we knew were our mothers and they looked nothing like us. And there she was, big eyes and all. Bab’Nkosana was at our house every day. He and baba were the only people who picked her up and cradled her; the rest of our fathers were scared. All they did was stare at her lying in the cot bed. They were happy; that I knew and could see. Bab’Ntsika even flew back home from overseas to see it for himself.

I was still just a little boy then but I know how much Niya’s arrival changed my family. Bab’Nkosana gave her our great-grandmother’s name because maybe she was the one who gave her to us; I’m not really sure.

“Niya is safe,” baba says.

Niya will always be safe, as long as I’m alive; as long as we are all alive.

“Baba, I did what I had to do for Mami and Nyanda. Now, I’m doing what I need to do for my sister and myself. I belong here. I’m 17-years-old; I’m a man now. Bab’Nkosana was 17 when he became a father to all of you. He had his duties and he was rewarded for it. I have my duties too.”

I look at baba and I know there is no way he is going to accept all of this.

I wish Mami was here because she is the only person who always knows what to do with my father when he is like this. There’s pain in his eyes, but then again, there’s peace in Sisekelo’s eyes.

Maybe if we were a family that goes to church and believes in Jesus like Gogo, instead of being dictated to by our ancestors, our lives would be simpler... but also, Gogo’s life is not simple, Jesus seems to have made her darker and angrier. Apparently, Jesus is for everyone, and ancestors are for their bloodline. I had never set foot in church all my life until Mami exiled me to KwaMashu.

Gog’MaDladla doesn’t go to church; she told me people who go to church do evil things for six days and then go gather on the seventh day to sing and judge people who do evil things for seven full days. She says the strangest things most times. Gogo said I mustn’t listen to her, especially when she drinks, and she drinks all the time. She never stops talking when she drinks, but the thing about her is that she always makes sense. There are so many things she has said to me that made me understand things better.

Of course, I’m excited to go home, back to my easy and privileged life but most of all, to Msebe. He took this whole thing of me being away harder than I did. He even got sick and didn’t go to school for three days. This was the first time we had ever been separated.

Who the heck is this now? She looks older than anyone I’ve ever seen in my life. Sisekelo doesn’t look shocked; baba looks extremely shocked. I’m confused. She stops for a second, looks at Sisekelo and carries on walking.

“Is this the deaf woman we saw when...”

Sisekelo is already up on his feet; he doesn't wait for baba to finish his question. We follow him back to my brothers, where the construction of Sisekelo's new home is happening.

These men work fast, they are almost done with the roof.

“How far did you say our land stretches again?” Sisekelo asks some short man wearing plastic boots and carrying a stick.

The man points to the left and then to the right; I look at where he is pointing but I still don't get it.

“I spoke to the Ngidis. They settled eMnyameni leeeee KwaMaphumulo and they said they are not interested in coming back here,” the short man says.

I think baba knows him and looking at the way the short man is avoiding eye contact with him and is focused on Sisekelo instead, I conclude he doesn't like baba.

“The hospital will be built on their land then,” Sisekelo says.

“Yes, I told them that, and they were happy with it,” the short man says.

What hospital?

I look at baba and I know he is as lost as I am. Lwandle said earlier that Bab'Ntsika was not here because he went to buy furniture for this house. I don't understand why baba is so stressed about all this. I mean, we know where Sisekelo will be, we can come here anytime.

I pull Sisekelo to the side because I have a question.

“That old woman? Who was she?”

“I don't know, but I've known her since I was six. She just shows up. She's deaf and mute. That's all I know.”

It's interesting how Sisekelo never flinches over these things; they seem normal to him.

“Is she dead or alive?” I ask.

He shrugs and says, “Honestly, I'm not sure.”

Sisekelo lives between the living and the dead. How is he not sure about this one? I want him to explain this to me but we are all disrupted by the

crowd we see approaching – walking. It's men, a lot of men.

I look to my left and I see the short man smiling.

“This house will be finished by tomorrow afternoon. They are here to help. After that, it's the hospital. We will lay every brick with our own hands, all of us,” the short man says.

He looks happy like this is the thing he has been looking forward to all his life. The many men crowd the yard. Mqhe, who for some reason has the same name as my father, seems to be the boss here. He addresses the men who are now gathered around him. I'm standing far so I can't hear what he is saying to them, but I see him pointing to the left, and they are all looking at where he is pointing. I'm disrupted by a slap on the back of my head.

“Do you kids grow taller every day? Just yesterday you had no front teeth and now I have to look up at you. How are you? I heard you were banished to Gogo's house. There's crazy shit, and then there's living with Gogo. I know, I've been there.”

Mbulelo is my uncle, yes, but at some point, he's going to have to stop treating me like a kid because I'm taller than him now. Slapping my head is not fun anymore, and if I slap him back, he'd end up on the ground. But I was raised to respect those older than me, so I will never, under any circumstances, slap him to the ground. He looks so much like Mamiza but I'm glad he doesn't blink as much as she does because her rapid blinking is one of the weirdest things I have had to endure in my life.

“Yeah, I'm going back home. My punishment is over, I guess.”

“Did she make you go to church all the time too? And lock the gate if you weren't inside by 6 pm?” he asks, laughing.

Yep! She did all that, but she never had to lock me out because I was always inside the gate. I'm 14; when he and Lwandle lived in Gogo's house they were far older.

I know Mbulelo has a varsity degree in something, but I don't remember ever hearing about him having a job. I know he parties a lot and got two women pregnant in one year, both of them are well known Instagram celebrities who used to be friends. This one time, they were swearing at

each other on Instagram. I heard all of this at school because Mami doesn't allow us to be on social media.

Chloe has already introduced herself to baba. I'm not sure as what because I once heard Lwandle begging Bab'Ntsika to break up with her, but that was a long time ago.

It's almost 6 pm and baba says we have to go; that we have a long way to drive.

"Go get your things, we're going home," he says to Phakeme.

I'm not sure when he decided this because when we left KwaMashu, he wasn't coming here. I made us come here.

"Yeyi wena, ngithe go get your things," he says when Phakeme frowns at him.

But he knows it's no use trying to defy baba's order. He goes to one of the tents and comes out carrying his backpack. I have never seen my brothers looking like this; do they even bathe? Even Chloe, whom I was told is very pretty – that's why Bab'Ntsika is obsessed with her. Right now, she looks like those white people from Brakpan.

Phakeme sits in the back seat. He doesn't smell good and it reminds me of me and my teammates when we fill up the locker rooms after a basketball match – some armpits smell worse than others.

I miss it all – my team, my home, my brothers and sister. I'm looking forward to sleeping on my bed instead of Malum'Langa's old bedroom. But most of all, I miss my Mami – harsh punishments and all.

We have not reached the gate when we see a group of women walking towards where we came from, four balancing those big pots on their heads; the others carrying other things. They wave at us; baba hoots at them and keeps driving. Those women are definitely walking to our construction site, with food to feed everyone there.

I look at him and wonder how he feels. What his real feelings about all this are.

What I know for sure is that this is not the life they envisioned for us.

We were supposed to be everything they could not be.

Zulu

She hasn't cried today.

It's only 9 am, so anything can still happen.

I slept at my house last night. When I parked the car, I expected Thando's usual drama and nagging, but instead, I was greeted by a smell of home-cooked food. She was in the kitchen dressed up like she was going somewhere, makeup and all. Thando is not exactly the dressing up type. She always looks the way she feels. Besides the five piercings in each ear, everything about her is average and normal.

I remember the first time we met; it was at a cigar lounge in Bedfordview. She was sitting in a corner alone, looking out of place. She also looked too young to be at a cigar lounge filled with old rich men. At that time, Mqoqi and I were going to those types of clubs a lot, to do research as he was trying to get into the business. I didn't touch alcohol then, so a long-legged girl with dark skin and big eyes was definitely going to be my focus. When I stood in front of her, she looked up at me once and went back to scrolling her phone. She looked angry for some reason.

"Would you like a bottle of Champagne?"

Girls at those places drank expensive Champagne, which they never had to worry about paying for.

"No. I want to go home," she said.

I sat down next to her. I had already decided she was going to be my next fling, and no, I did not have a pick-up line; I never had those.

"Why?"

"Do I look like I want to be here?" she asked.

I almost stood up and left because if there is one thing I try to avoid, it is feisty women. I'm easy to control; I have always known that about myself when it comes to women.

"My friends brought me here. I don't know why I agreed to it because now I've had to spend the night dodging bum spansks from drunk sugar-daddies who think I'm part of 'istoko'."

I laughed. She seemed offended by that.

"Can you take me home, please?"

The conversation wasn't going the way I had planned but I found her interesting. Especially the fact she was asking a stranger to drive her home when she couldn't handle something as simple as drunk old men who are basically harmless – perverts, yes, but to them, the girls come with the club, the booze and the cigars. The girls are paid to be there. At the end of the night, the old men go home to their wives who make sure they take their blood pressure pills and carry healthy lunch boxes to their corner offices.

I, on the other hand, could have done anything to her.

"Okay, I'll take you home. Where do you stay?"

"Mamelodi."

I immediately thought about withdrawing my offer, but she was already up on her feet, pulling her very short dress down and putting her cell phone in her handbag.

"Let's go," she said.

I didn't want to, but as I said, women can effortlessly control me; that's why my relationships never lasted when I was younger. Yes, I stood up and followed her. Just as we were walking past one table, she stopped and grabbed one girl by the arm. The girl was sitting on Kganyago's lap, the then Director-General at the Department of Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities. He died two years ago, something about a heart attack in a hotel room. The hotel staff had to clean him discreetly up before his wife arrived to see his body. The old man came too hard; his heart couldn't handle it.

“Sbahle, I’m going home. He is taking me home,” she said, pulling me so that Sbahle could see me clearly.

“Hhaybo friend,” Sbahle said, trying to get up but Kganyago pulled her back to his lap and kissed her arm.

“I’m going; he’s taking me home. You see him, right? He hasn’t told me his name but he’s one of those Zulu brothers. I’m not sure which one. So if something happens to me, you’ll know it’s one of them. I’ll wash your dress and bring it back to you tomorrow.”

She was wearing a borrowed dress. The one thing I knew as we left that club was that I wasn’t driving to Mamelodi in the middle of the night. I didn’t even tell Mqoqi I was leaving; he was busy with the barman tasting different whiskeys.

“Nice car,” she said, taking off the high heels she was comfortably walking in as we made our way to my car.

It was just a BMW M5. I’m not as obsessed with cars as Nkosana and Sambulo are. At that time, Sambulo was waiting for his BMW i8 to be imported; it was all he spoke about for three months he was waiting for it. Pity, it went up in flames a few days after it arrived. We laugh at him whenever we see an i8.

“Which one are you?”

I hate that question, but I almost laughed because she was asking me a dangerous question. I could have said I was Sambulo or Mqoqi, and even Ntsika, who was far away across the seas. But I decided to be honest.

“I’m Mpande.”

“Oh, the party animal. You are always on tabloids for the wrong reasons.”

The media was obsessed with me, that was all.

“So now that you know which one I am, do you feel safe? Because the one thing I will not do is drive to Mamelodi at this time.”

She frowned at me; I frowned back.

“I will not be hijacked and killed in Mamelodi, not tonight. I have four bedrooms in my house; you can sleep in any of them. I’ll drive you home in

the morning. Unless you want to go back to your friends at the club.”

She pushed the passenger seat back and sighed.

“You’re not going to rape me, are you?”

The moment she said that my stomach turned. I tightened my hands around the steering wheel to stop them from shaking. I could feel my chest tightening and my left leg shaking. The word ‘rape’ triggers me. But still, with all of that happening to me at once, I turned to look at her and smiled.

“I’m celibate,” I said.

She laughed.

I was living at a penthouse in Melrose Arch then, and of course, I was lying about being celibate. But I don’t force myself on women – a woman once forced herself on me.

“Nice house,” she said as we came out of the lift that led us straight to my apartment.

She chose a bedroom, and it was my bedroom. I explained to her that there were three more she could sleep in, but she wanted to sleep in my bed. I found comfort in knowing she wasn’t drunk.

“The celibacy ends now,” she said, locking the bedroom door.

In the morning, I stood next to the bed and watched her sleeping. There were so many things going through my mind, but the one thing I knew was that I was waiting for her to wake up so we could go for breakfast, have many children and live happily ever after.

It wasn’t long before I introduced her to my family. Even to Hlomu, who has this strange ability to see through people, women we bring to the family in particular. She seemed to like her; she even suggested that Thando join them on the vacation they were taking. And the next thing I knew she was gone. And years later, I found out she chose money over me and deprived me of the opportunity to know my children from birth.

So last night, there we were.

When she saw me approaching, she smiled and rushed to hug me. I don’t remember if I returned the hug because I was in shock, but after a kiss, on my lips, she walked back to the kitchen, opened the oven and

pulled out a square bowl thing covered with a foil. I stood there and watched, but really, all I wanted to do was go upstairs to see my kids and take a long, hot shower. I assumed the twins were upstairs because otherwise they'd be running around the house breaking things.

"They're at Zandile's house; Ntsika took them there," she said before I could ask.

The last time I checked, Ntsika was at Ntsikeni.

"Oh, he came here last night looking for you, and he told me everything. How are you doing?" she explained, giving me yet another hug which I did not return.

"I know your brothers put you in charge of the MaSbisi thing; I just wish you'd have told me instead of ignoring my calls. I was here worried Mpande, thinking you were busy with some woman or something..."

I opened the fridge and noticed there were only two beers left...

"No, no, no, leave the beer, my love," she said, caressing my shoulder and pointing me to the patio at the back.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"Dinner under the stars. There's an outfit for you on the bed upstairs. I need you to look handsome. These chinos and golf T-shirts you always wear are not it," she said and kissed me again.

I know this sounds crazy, but at that moment I wished for the Thando I had come to know since she came back with my kids. The angry and entitled Thando; the one who used my kids as bait, not the "dinner under the stars woman" who makes me wear suits and cooks meals for me.

We sat at the table outside, under the stars in the middle of the Japanese garden. She asked me about my family troubles and apologised for not being supportive. She even said we could put the lobola thing on hold until I was in a good space. When we were done, we went back to our bedroom, and we made love. I tried; I really did try but the whole time I wished it was Qhayiya instead of her.

I left my house very early in the morning. There was already breakfast on the table. I said it was too early for me to eat, so she packed it in a bowl

and wrapped it with foil. It's still there in the backseat.

The plan was to go past Nkosana's house to see my kids, but he told me they were fine and still sleeping. So I drove straight to Orange Farm and by 7 am I was knocking on Qhayiya's door. She was still in her nightdress that had a face of a bear or something that looks like it. "Sleep tight" was written under the bear's face.

She didn't ask why I was at her door so early in the morning. I guess she's learned. I think she can see through me. She made me tea and bread with peanut butter and margarine. I ate it and tried not to think about the omelette, bacon and mushrooms sitting in the backseat of my car. I liked the peanut butter and bread more anyway. She cleaned the house first before telling me she was going to take a bath and get ready to go to the hospital.

So I've been sitting here on the sofa waiting.

She doesn't have long legs and chocolate skin; she has my heart.

"I'm ready to go," she says.

She looks happier than she's ever been since her mother landed in hospital. I think it's because she's getting better. Yesterday morning, they had a long talk. Yes, MaSbisi is still a bit out of it but her face lights up when she sees her daughter. Hospital visiting hours don't apply to Qhayi, just like they don't apply to me because I'm always by her side.

"You look beautiful."

She looks startled. I guess that's because that is something you say to your girlfriend, even if she doesn't look beautiful. It's just something you have to say as a man so that you can have a good day, especially if you are going to be spending the whole day with her.

She puts her handbag down on the sofa and sits next to it. I thought we were leaving.

"Why are you here, Mpande? Why are you always here? Why are you doing this?"

Because I think I love you. But I don't say that out loud.

"Your mother is like family to us, Qhayi."

I don't know what more to say, and that's because I've just lied to her. Her mother is lying in hospital, yes, but she's the least of my concerns. Also, there's something suspicious about the story of her falling from the stairs, but then again, I got her boyfriend deported so...

Her phone rings. She answers it on the second ring and I'm relieved to see her smiling.

"That's great, mama. Okay, I'll bring you food from home," she says and laughs. "But it's too late for me to cook now. I'll get you samp and inhloko from MaMkhize – your favourite... Discharged? When? Okay, I'll see you later."

She presses the phone to her chest after she hangs up and has the widest smile on her face.

"Thank you, Mpande. Thank you for everything," she says, throwing herself at me.

I assume all she wanted was to hug me and let go, and I do hug her back, but somehow, I can't let go, so I tighten my arms around her waist. Trouble starts when our eyes get locked on each other. She doesn't look away; she can't. I also don't look away because I can't, and I don't want to.

"How deep is it?" I ask her.

I don't give her a chance to respond.

"What you feel for me; how deep is it, Qhayi? Because what I feel for you is nothing I have ever felt for any woman in my life."

Her eyes move; I follow them.

"You have a wife and children, Mpande."

I have no such! Okay, children, yes, but I have no wife.

"I can't fight it anymore. You know, don't you?"

I want her to say yes; she knows. And I want her to tell me that she feels it too. Although I know she does, I want her to say it out loud.

But she doesn't, instead, she wraps her arms around my neck and presses her forehead on mine before her lips touch mine. They are soft and gentle on my lips, on my neck and on my cheek. It feels like it's the first time I've been kissed. The only thing on my mind is her. Her hands are just

as soft and gentle. I want her to touch me – everywhere and anywhere she wants.

I run my hands up her thighs and I feel her – not Carol’s big heavy thighs – the picture on my mind is of what I have seen each time I’ve seen Qhayi wearing a short skirt. They are what I saw this morning when she opened the door in a nightdress.

She’s here; it’s her – just her. No foreign smell and no thoughts from the past.

I gently push her off me and make her stand because I want to undress her. And when I unzip her long dress and watch it drop to her feet, I see her. I see her breasts, her torso, her hips and her thighs. I have never seen a woman like I’m seeing Qhayi right now.

She caresses my face before she pulls my T-shirt over my head. I feel comfortable when she runs her hands on my chest and all the way down to my pants.

Her unbuttoning and unzipping my chinos doesn’t make me flinch, and her slipping her hand inside my underwear doesn’t make my chest tight.

We don’t make it to the bed.

I make love to a woman, and it feels like making love – not a marathon for me to ejaculate and go take a shower. And afterwards, I hold her in my arms and kiss her forehead a thousand times while my fingers are hooked on hers. I want to stay here, in this moment with her skin on mine and her head on my chest.

But it’s almost noon and we have to go to the hospital.

I don’t shower.

... ● ...

She tells me in the car that her mother will be discharged soon.

I’m happy because I don’t have to see her cry anymore. I take her hand and kiss it, again and again. I can still smell her on me. I have flashbacks of

her touch and her moans under me, on top of me, of me behind her, even though it all happened just two hours ago.

I've ignored three of Thando's calls. My children are not with her, so there really is nothing I should answer her calls for. She knows I'm busy; I have a big responsibility. She acknowledged it herself last night.

I have found my love, my soulmate, my wife. I will leave Thando like she left me and only came back when she had no choice. She will think it is Qhayi's fault because that's what women always think; that it is the other woman's fault. But no, there is no fault here.

I've fallen in love, and for the first time in my life, I see and feel the woman I love – just her.

I'm holding her hand as we enter the hospital. She looks happy, and I'm not sure if it's because she's about to see her mother or if it is because of me. There are people outside her ward – it's a private ward. I made sure she got one. These people aren't doctors and they are just standing there with a stretcher. We are about to ask when a doctor and a nurse come out of the ward and close the door behind them. It's not Dr Masetla.

“Miss Qhayiya Gumede?” the doctor asks, looking at her.

She uses her father's surname because... although she says he's a useless bum neighbourhood drunk, back there in the rurals, he did pay damages for her.

“Yes, can I go in? I want to see my mom.”

Something is not right; I can feel it. Something is not right.

“We did everything we could. I'm sorry. She didn't make it,” the doctor says.

I know what he is saying, but what does he mean? This cannot happen – not now. Qhayi looks at me, and then at the doctor standing in front of us.

“Who are you talking about? I got food for my mom – her favourite. She hates the food here, by the way. So I got her istambu and inhloko... can you move aside? I want to go in and give it to her; she must be hungry.”

But the doctor blocks her way. I know exactly what is happening.

“Miss Gumede, we did everything we could; she didn't make it.”

She turns to look at me again. My eyes are telling, I know they are.

“I spoke to her three hours ago, Mpande; she was fine.”

I don't know what to say.

“She died two hours ago. We were waiting for you to arrive before they take her body away to the mortuary,” the doctor says pointing with his head at the two men with the stretcher.

I'm not exactly an empath but I feel like this doctor is worse than me. He's just saying things like he has to get this over with and go somewhere. This is not how you tell someone that their mother is dead, even I know that.

“You can go in, but you don't have much time. The corpse has to be taken away. It's been two hours.”

I don't know what to say or do.

I don't know if I'm losing my mind or having a panic attack.

This is MaSbisi.

We have lost MaSbisi.

MaSbisi is dead.

Qhayiya

“Those two doors, that one and that one are the guest bedrooms; that one over there is the boys’ bedroom. The one down the passage is my daughter’s and this one here is Ntsika’s.”

I nodded, just like I had been nodding throughout the tour as if I was interested in knowing anything about his house.

“This one here is our bedroom; don’t go in here,” he said, went inside and closed the door to my face.

Such disrespect! And my mother said he was the nicest. I still don’t know how she convinced me to do it. No actually, I know how she did it, she threw the famous line at me.

“You have to start somewhere; everybody has to,” she claimed when she was done begging, pleading and trying to manipulate me with stories of how much she had worked to get to where she was and how she didn’t belong in Orange Farm.

It was that and the guilt I had been living with for four years after my graduation, and still no job. Not that this one was going to upgrade us from

our RDP house in Orange Farm to a mansion in Waterfall, but the amount she said I was going to be paid was shocking, and so I agreed to be a maid.

“Even your first job with that degree of yours won’t pay you this much,” she said, smiling that smile I knew too well.

The same smile she had the morning she left to start her new job in Houghton – to serve the famous Zulus and raise their children. Before that, she had been selling food at kwaMaiMai for years and would come home only on weekends.

She told me the day she got her first salary how she got Sambulo to employ her.

“I told him my husband was a taxi driver, and that he was shot dead during taxi violence in Newcastle years ago.”

My father is very much alive and drinking himself into a village vagabond here at KwaCeza where we came from. There’s a name they call him here, ‘Magic Touch’ because when he’s drunk, he has this particular dance that he does where he looks like he is touching things in the air.

I laughed when mama told me about her lying ways, not because wishing death upon my father was funny, but because I’d always admired her hustling ways. Mama would do anything to get ahead; she’d always been like that. How she put me through school and all the way to tertiary through selling plates of food, is still a mystery to me.

That’s who she was. They didn’t call her ‘Mabhilita’ for nothing. But that was in Orange Farm. There in the big houses of people with money they called her MaSbisi and they loved her; they trusted her, and they paid her big money. She even had a payslip – imagine, a domestic worker who gets a payslip and has medical aid!

She put all that money into my education and continued being a maid even after she ululated at my graduation. Our lives were supposed to change after that. I was the one who was supposed to take care of her going forward, but that didn’t happen. She had to continue being the breadwinner.

I was at Nqoba’s house for that same thing: to clean the house and wash the clothes of a man who lived alone and didn’t even smile. My mother had

briefed me about him. He said his wife left him for a reason she does not know.

“Don’t do anything that will get me fired,” she warned when we left home that morning, right after she ordered me to wear a long dress so that I “don’t look like I’m there for other reasons”.

I’m not sure if my being there was discussed with Nqoba’s wife, wherever she was, but I knew that it was temporary. I just needed to be doing something while I applied for jobs and that was it.

“You can eat whatever you want to eat. And if you want to sleep over, you can use that – there’s a bed and everything.” He was pointing to a smaller building outside, the maid’s quarters. He left before I could ask him if his child was going to be my responsibility too.

He was going through it shem; I could see it on his face. Normally I would have tried to use my skills to pull it out of him, but I knew he was a man who needed time; a man who was dealing with a loss of something. His case didn’t strike me as grief – just guilt and some degree of defeat. There was something he had lost and still had a chance of getting back, but it wanted nothing to do with him. That was what my analysis of him gave me as a conclusion. Dealing with those types of cases is difficult; that’s what they taught us at varsity, that the ‘in betweens’ are the hardest ones because they are in two places, and it is your responsibility as their therapist to understand and be with them in both places. It was either he took charge and went to get his wife back, or he accepted that she was gone and he needed to let her go.

Mama gossiped a lot about her employers – the Zulus. Whatever was happening with them, I knew, but the one thing she never did was tell me the reasons for their troubles. I didn’t know why Nqoba’s wife had left him.

I watched him drive off, leaving me alone in his unbelievable house. As far as I knew, I was there for orientation, so I was not going to start doing any work. I opened every door of every room. There was one with many single beds; the one which he had shown me already and said it was for all the boys. The one with pink things belonged to a daughter, whom I

concluded was the girl – the only one in the family. There was also one with a bed with wheels. The duvet had pictures of cars, the same as the curtains. I figured it was his son's room. Hlangu, his only child. I couldn't help thinking: *This man is too old to have only one child and a child this young for that matter.*

When I reached 'their bedroom', the one I was told never to enter, I threw myself on the bed and looked up at the ceiling with my hands behind my head. This bathroom alone was bigger than our house back in Orange Farm. Look, I knew he said I mustn't go in there but he was the one who left me alone in his house so...

Clearly he thought his wife was coming back because her clothes were still all over the closet. There were half-full bottles of perfume on the dressing table; they smelled nice. There were shoes, from the floor to the roof, just shoes. That was stuff I'd only ever seen on TV because that was all I did with my life: watch TV all day and list down all the things I was going to have when my education finally paid off and gave me the comfortable life I deserved.

She was cute, too skinny and far shorter than him but they made a cute couple. That's what I thought when I looked at the picture of them together on the dressing table. The fact that he still had their wedding picture there, meant he was still waiting for her.

It was funny how things had changed; it used to be our mothers who waited for our fathers to come back from wherever they went gallivanting for years.

Moghel had expensive taste, I could see. She had fur coats and those high heels with red bottoms all over the place. The fur felt nice as I ran my hand through it.

Don't do it Qhayi... mama said don't...

Urgh, it looked good on me, I thought as I spun around in front of the mirror. I *fah-fah-ed* some perfume too and grabbed one of the wigs hanging from a "head". Yeah, she had mannequin heads to put her wigs on. I looked

good. The only thing missing was a face-beat and I'd be a complete slay-queen.

I needed a mirror selfie; my varsity friends were going to be shocked when I showed them. They were going to want to see more and maybe – when I was alone in the house again – I would take them on a tour through a video call. I hadn't told any of them that I was now a maid because I thought they'd laugh at me. Most of them already had jobs, good jobs. A few had even opened their own practices.

But I wasn't a maid to just anyone, I was a maid in a mansion that belongs to Nqoba Zulu, and I found him to be mean. But then again, his meanness didn't offend me, instead, it made him a case study for me. He had layers, and I was going to use my invasion of his space to peel them off one by one.

“And you are?”

I threw the fur coat on the floor first. Maria! I hadn't even started working and I was about to get fired.

“You are?” he asked again.

I'd have answered him if my biggest wish wasn't to die right at that moment.

“Should I call the police?”

Yoh, hhayi!

“I'm Qhayiya, bhuti, I was just looking for clothes to wash and iron and...”

I started rearranging the shoes and wiping off invisible dust and he was just there, still asking the same question with his eyes. I gave up and stood still, with my eyes looking everywhere except at him.

“I'm the new maid,” I said finally.

Even saying it felt weird; I had never ever in my life thought I'd have to say those words about myself – not with my University of Pretoria degree.

“Nice weave, please get out of this room,” he said and left me standing, hoping for anything even if it's a tsunami to appear and sweep me away to my death.

I knew he wasn't Nqoba because his head was shaved and he looked far younger than him. I rushed out of that bedroom and closed the door behind me. Whether he was still in the house or not, I had no clue, but I knew I needed to start doing something so that at least he'd believe I didn't break into this house to steal fur coats and wigs, of all things.

I bumped into him again just as I turned the corner from the stairs. Great! As if being caught ravaging through wardrobes was not enough!

"I'm trying to find the mop, and a bucket, do you know where they are?" I asked, and I immediately knew by the way he looked at me that I sounded stupid.

"I thought you worked here," he said.

Yeah but...

"I started today."

He looked at me from head to toe and I thought that was rude but I figured it out before I said something in my defence... It was because the wig was gone and now my razor cut was staring up at him.

"Who hired you?" he asked.

"Nqoba; my mom spoke to him."

I felt like he didn't believe me or trust me.

"I don't know where the mop or whatever you want is," he said and left me standing again.

I wondered if this was how maids were treated in rich people's houses? Or if it was me these people had a problem with. Oh well... he left too and even if I was interested in cleaning the house, I wouldn't know where to start. The kitchen was clean and I knew that red gas stove hadn't been switched on in a long time. There weren't even dishes in the sink, and I wondered what that man ate every day.

The house didn't look like somebody lived in it, although I knew Nqoba slept there every night. It was beautiful though with high walls and too many paintings hanging on them. There were long passages and dark corners and multiple bathrooms with ancient tiles. It looked like it was built

decades ago but I realised his wife tried to modernise it with blinds and modern furniture. As to why she would leave all this? I did not understand.

Mama told me once that I should only ever leave a man if he beats me; anything other than that can be resolved. But she didn't know the type of men I'm attracted to, that's why she thought she could tell me who to love.

I called her when I was ready to leave and we met at Bree that afternoon. I was still amazed at how big the house was and how rude those people were. Yes, Nqoba and the other one. I wanted to tell mama immediately but I wasn't going to do that in a taxi to Orange farm full of people.

"So? How was it?" she asked. She nudged me when I looked away.

Mama though! Did she really expect me to tell her all about it? In a taxi? with all those people listening?

"The house is big and he wasn't very nice. Can we talk about this when we get home?"

She gave me a side-eye, looked ahead and folded her arms. I knew we were going to be talking about it all weekend. I had decided that I was going to pack my things and move into that maid's quarters. It was not much, just a bedroom, bathroom, a kitchen and a small open space to fit one couch. Whoever lived there before must have not taken good care of it because the carpet smelled like mould.

"Mama, did they have a housekeeper before me?"

"No, Gugu didn't want any woman she doesn't know in her house; that time she doesn't know the difference between a mop and a feather duster." I laughed.

The things she said about those women!

"She used those 'cleaner-on-call' things – the ones where you make one phone call and someone shows up to clean your house and leaves. She once had one from here in Orange Farm, Mathapelo, do you know Mathapelo?"

No, I didn't know Mathapelo.

"You wouldn't, she's in jail now for stealing earrings and some little cash from one of the houses. Can you believe it? Sending a person to jail

for earrings? *Gharr!* This job!”

Huh?

“Anyway, she told me – I was in a taxi with her – she told me she once mopped the sitting-room floor with Gugu sitting on the sofa eating carrots and leaves. Do you know what she did? That skinny woman? She just lifted up her feet as Mathapelo cleaned the part where she was sitting; didn’t even bother to move. What kind of thing is that?”

Actually, it was the kind of thing I thought I’d have when I was studying hard believing I’d have my own house and car by now. A life where I’d pay people to do the things I hate doing, things like cleaning and cooking.

I was relieved when we reached our stop and jumped off the taxi because my mother could go on and on running her mouth about other people’s business with no care in the world. Who knew? That could have been one of the Zulu taxis.

The moment we got home, I pulled my suitcase from under the bed and started packing the things I was sure I was taking with me. It was still Friday, but I was getting ready for Monday morning when I was going to start a new life at a job I know was below me.

The last time I had opened that suitcase was when I unpacked on the day I came back home from res four years ago, and I was sure I’d be packing it again soon to start my life in a townhouse somewhere.

“You know what, Qhayi? I’m glad I have only one child.”

We had just started eating and seeing that it was Friday, I thought she was going to go next door to sit on the porch with the neighbour and catch up on Orange Farm gossip, as usual. But not on that day; she made fried chicken – fried chicken always meant we were celebrating something.

“Didn’t you want more children?”

“More children? Even *you* were a mistake,” she said.

I was a little bit offended, but I knew her, and I always joked that her honesty would get her killed one day.

“Your father was a hopeless case from the beginning, my child. He found me in a moment of weakness; I could have done far better.”

My father was definitely one of her biggest regrets, that I knew, and maybe that's why we never came to KwaCeza.

"But you love children mama; you love Sambulo's children, don't you?"

"I do but one day that family will kill me. I will just drop and die or turn into a salt statue like that woman from the Bible. Don't laugh; I'm serious."

I remember when there was drama about a child in that family, some years ago, she said, "First it's mfanyana and his dreams. The eldest one I don't even want to talk about. And then there's their mother; she doesn't even look at her husband or talk to him. Seriously Qhayi, why would any woman be so angry at a man who does everything for her? Anything she wants, she gets. Such a good man he is; a great honest man."

She always had something negative to say about Xolie.

"Isn't this the same husband who just came home with a child from another woman?"

She looked at me like I was talking nonsense.

"What man doesn't cheat? Is he with that other woman now? No, he is with her; so what's her problem?"

Me trying to convince her otherwise would have been pointless. Mama believed that women are engineered to swallow pain, spit it out and move on. That's what she always said to me, that the world revolves around everyone except women.

Sometimes I argued with her about it, but most times I didn't because I could never win against Mabhilita. She had fought and won many wars in the 58 years she had lived.

"I'm going to tell you something... don't tell anyone; not even your friends or that useless Zimbabwean short man you bring to my house when I'm not here."

It shocked me that she knew about Nkosi.

"Don't act surprised; people have been talking. I don't want him in my house."

I couldn't even deny it because I knew how fast news travelled in Orange Farm.

“You wanted to tell me something?”

“Yes, but don’t tell anyone. She’s planning to kill him.”

Huh?

“That woman; she’s planning to kill Sambulo.”

“Xolie?”

“Yes.”

That couldn’t be true. Mother’s dislike for Xolie was getting out of hand and it was worrying me.

“Mabhilita!”

I knew that voice. It was my aunt, the one who claims to have a calling and yet the way she likes men! Mama always said if she did really have a calling, it was definitely from their long-dead aunt Sebenzile who gave meaning to the word hoe.

“I can’t even eat my fried chicken in peace in my house because people can’t stay in their houses. What she wants, I do not know,” she whined and got up to open the door.

I stood in the kitchen and hoped she didn’t plan to tell her the same nonsense she had just told me about Xolie.

I never went back to Nqoba’s house. His wife came back and that was the end of my new job. But a year later, mama came home one Friday and told me I had other houses to clean – multiple houses and that I’d be paid even more money than I was offered for Nqoba’s house.

I didn’t know how she could pull such things off but she was, after all, who she was.

“One day I will die, but before I do, I will make sure to get you out of here. You don’t belong in Orange Farm, Qhayi. I did not come to Gauteng for nothing. I hustled so you never have to hustle in your life. I got this house, but it is mine, it is as far as I could go. It is not yours and I’ll be damned if you spend the rest of your life here, calling this a home. The little that I have is my success, not yours. You don’t belong here. You are bigger than what I have given you,” she said.

She put so much pressure on me, and it made me more guilty than it made me angry. I was trying my best to get a decent job. On some days I'd get so frustrated I felt like pulling my graduation pictures off our home walls. But they were her pride, her success, so I couldn't do that to her.

I knew she wanted me to be independent – to be the woman that achieves things on her own. Perhaps – and I'm not really sure – that's why she despised Xolie so much. The same Xolie I personally know had a career before her husband and is probably smarter than him if we are, to be honest. The same Xolie who has been here since my mother's body was moved from Johannesburg to KwaCeza.

I wanted to bury my mom in Orange Farm; the place where she was known and loved. But my uncles showed up at our house on the morning after she died and took over. Mama never married, so culture dictates that she be buried where she was born. It doesn't matter that she went and built her own home somewhere. The point is that she never left her father's house with a kist, so her coffin will come from her place of birth.

The Zulus paid for everything, from her body being transported, to the luxury casket and every other thing that needed to be paid for. Mpande told me not to worry about anything, that my mother was their employee but more than anything, she was family, and that everything was covered.

There has never been a time where he has left my side since that doctor told me they had done everything they could on that day at the hospital – the most painful day of my life.

I don't remember much about the six days leading to mama's funeral because my mind wasn't functioning properly; it still isn't.

I'm alone in this world; it's just me. It was always mama and me, and now it's just me and I don't even know where to start moving on.

I don't know my family here too well. I've just always known they existed. My father's family – which is two houses away from here, by the way – are really just strangers to me. I found it overwhelming that they were all over me, coming here every day with buckets of cakes and blankets during the funeral. My father also came, but he sat behind the house with all

the men who drank traditional beer and ate meat and dombolo. We do not have a relationship; I hadn't seen him since I was eight years old.

Mpande's wife was also here during the funeral yesterday. She didn't seem bothered by me, or that her husband had not been home in days. I could have felt guilty about sleeping with her husband that other day, but I've just buried my mother, and the only thing I feel guilty about is not going straight to the hospital after I spoke to her on the phone. Instead, I had sex. Maybe my presence would have saved her; she would have looked at me and decided I mattered more than death.

Grief and loss... I know all about those; I'm trained to understand and help people through them. But I do not remember one lecture at UP where I was taught to help myself through it.

Thando, that's her name. She came in the morning and left in the afternoon with Naledi for some reason. Naledi is a doctor. She'd been here throughout, with Xolie, Hlomu and that perfect combination of body parts called Zandile. On some days, when I couldn't cope, Naledi made me take pills that made me sleep until I woke up to face the reality of my mother being gone.

They kept Zandile away from the kitchen or anything that had to do with food; I think that's why she was always visible to me – either welcoming people into the house or asking me if I needed anything. Her presence was comforting, but it was also stressful because people stare at her. They always look desperate to touch her, just to make sure she's a real human being. I saw her more than I did the other Zulu wives who spent most of the time in the kitchen making sure there was food for all the people who came to help me mourn.

Mama once told me Zandile is the most harmless of the Zulu wives. But mama wasn't exactly fond of these women, so it made sense why she would claim the one who is known as the violent maniac – who once threw a salad bowl on a man in a restaurant and spent years in jail for killing her own mother – was 'harmless'.

I'm supposed to stay here at my mother's home until we do the ceremony of ukugeza amafosholo after 14 days. That requires a slaughtering of a goat, and I'm not sure how much a goat costs but I know I have no money for it.

Nkosi tried to come to the funeral, but he found out he's been banned from South Africa for five years. We talked constantly on WhatsApp until my uncle decided to take my phone, saying it was disrespectful of me to be constantly on the phone during this time. I only got my phone back this morning after I demanded it back, only to find Nkosi had blocked me. I will never forgive him for that.

The Orange Farm Community came to the funeral, in six taxis. Mama wasn't a church person but there were women in different church uniforms, from ama Zion to Lutherans to red and white Wesley uniforms. Wild as she was, MaBhilita mattered to the community she lived in and I will always love and respect her for that. She mattered to the children of the family she worked for too, especially the boy she held close, too close to her heart, Sisekelo. He read the eulogy, but he broke down before he could finish it. His brother had to take over.

I watched them – the Zulu kids – shovel soil with tears in their eyes over mama's coffin after it went to the ground, and I wondered who she was to them. It looked to me – especially with Xolie's children judging by how Phakeme and Sisekelo cried, how Mabutho and Nsingi cried and screamed 'gogo' like crazy – that she was more than just a maid. Sambulo was somehow missing at the gravesite, but I knew he was in the yard.

If my plans to bury mama in Orange Farm had passed, she would have been buried at a graveyard with strangers, but here, she rests within the boundaries of the home she grew up in, next to her parents and two of her siblings. The graves are outside the yard but you can see them behind the kraal. She is home. I'm not sure if this is what she would have wanted because she had made Orange Farm home, but she died an untimely and unexpected death so whatever I agreed to, I'm sure she'll forgive me for it.

I have no idea what my life will be like when I go back home two weeks from now. My mother had always been my compass. She was all I knew; the only person who raised and shaped me.

Who am I without her?

Those Zulu family people will probably hire a new maid to replace her. I'm not sure about Mpande though... he's still here. Hlomu, Zandile and Xolie are still here; I'm not sure when they are leaving. They've been really nice and helpful.

I did not spend a single cent towards my mother's burial – not that I had any money for it – but the Zulu family really came through for me, even though mama always talked bad about them, especially the wives. She loved Sambulo like the son she never had, and she loved his children like the grandchildren she never had. Most times I felt like she understood that family she worked for more than Xolie did.

But Xolie has been great to me in the past few days. I feel like my mother's death hit her hard... like... she was more to her than just the woman who mopped her floors and changed her children's diapers.

I feel like mama's hostility against her had a lot to do with her being more of a mother to Xolie's children than she was. She often described her as crazy and absent; said she was a bad mother who allowed her stress to take over her when her sole priority should have been her children and husband.

I rolled my eyes whenever mama said that because women are human too; women are not sponges that wet and dry immediately. But mama – despite being who she was – was still old school when it suited her. Her maternal instincts towards Sambulo and his children clouded her view of the woman who stood right in front of her, troubled as fuck.

It's not really hard to understand why there was some hostility between mama and Xolie. They both had males to love and protect. One grown male and four young males. Mama knew too much; Xolie suffered too much. They both loved the same people, but both of them knew them differently. They meant different things to them.

They were... the maid and the madam.
Different worlds.

Thando

A whole medical doctor!

Smoking?

I don't know her much. Yes, she's one of the Zulu wives but I've never bothered much with her because I know she probably doesn't know anything about what happened and why I had to leave.

The first time I met her was when we were on that vacation in Margate. She was as new as I was in this family, but I did feel like she was more welcome than me to Hlomu, Zandile and Xolie.

They were just genuinely happy about her.

Me, on the other hand, I was just there, just winging it, hoping they were going to let the Ntsika thing go and welcome me like they welcomed Naledi. I didn't end up under Ntsika's penis because I'm a whore; I ended up sleeping with him because I was angry.

Mpande is incapable of loving. He doesn't know how to love a woman – not like his brothers do.

I was angry and tired of him acting like he was in love with me to his family when he couldn't even cuddle with me through the night. He had this thing of taking a shower after ejaculating inside me like I was dirt he needed to wash off or something. And then after that, he'd not come back to bed; he'd go to the sitting room and watch TV until the morning.

It was never my intention to do what I did; I was just angry and Ntsika was there.

To be honest, I'm not sure who the father of my children is between the two of them, but I did my calculations and decided Ntsika was the better option. Had I called Mpande and told him I was pregnant, he would have

dragged me back to Gauteng or taken my kids if I refused. I wasn't going to have that. I wasn't going to come back here and face Hlomu and Zandile's judgment, and I wasn't going to lose my children.

So I called Ntsika. He didn't even ask how I knew they were his. I think... because he didn't want any trouble; he cared more about his relationship with his brother than he did about me and the fact that I had children that could be his. Besides, I had already taken the money and left, so I was always going to be that girl. He sent money from London; I sent him pictures of the twins as they grew. I'm not sure what his plan was, but I also didn't have a plan. I had kids; he had a life which I was very much aware of, and all the girls in his life were white.

I know Ntsika is not in love with me. What happened between us was one stupid mistake, but that doesn't mean I won't use it to get the life and comfort I deserve or to get back at Hlomu and Zandile for treating me like trash. They chose to come for me like I was the villain and treated their precious Ntsika like he had done nothing wrong when he was the one disloyal enough to sleep with his own brother's girlfriend.

They mess with me – I talk. I will tear this brotherhood that means so much to them apart if they even try me. Unlike them, I'm not here for love; I'm here for me. Ntsika and I will never be together, and to be honest, I don't want him and his English. He also still needs to grow up and act like a man. But Mpande is at a point where he needs to be a man; to have his own family and not die with nothing but money to his name – like his brother did.

I don't mind having more children with him; these big-eyed little creatures are a ticket to a life that exceeds anyone's dreams. Look at the life I'm living now... it is what dreams are made of – love or not. Right now, I'm sitting here sipping Champagne at 11 am, in a swimsuit and sunglasses with a cheeseboard in front of me.

We drove back together; it was her suggestion. She had to leave early because you know... she has small kids. And besides, Gugu was left alone in Gauteng and she could give birth anytime. Someone needs to be close by

for that. We were sitting at the back because we had a driver. We chatted a lot. I can safely say she is the nicest of them all and I think she and I are going to be great friends. We hugged when the driver dropped me off at my house first.

This morning she called to invite me to her house, said let's have a pool day and drink cocktails. I did not hesitate. I packed my bikini and got in the car. When I arrived, all this stuff was here and ready – three bottles of Champagne and a cheeseboard.

I laughed as she told me how she missed alcohol when she was breastfeeding, and how some days ago she found herself drinking and decided to put those triplets on formula from that day on. She said she didn't explain anything to Qhawe; she just told him that the babies were old enough for formula now.

“So now I'm taking pills to stop me from producing milk and drinking alcohol while at it. I expect them – the pills and the alcohol to work together – as a team,” she said.

I laughed; she's hilarious. I didn't know that until today. I guess it's because when I came back into this family, things were hectic, dark even, bones being reburied and all.

“Your house is beautiful,” I say.

I'm not sure why I'm even saying that. It is beautiful, yes, but it does not have a custom-made Japanese garden like mine, and it is in the south. Why live in the south? Soweto is classified as the south. Why live in the south when you could live in Glen Austin? We don't even get load shedding there.

“We had to leave the glass house when we started having kids,” she says, sipping her mojito and pulling her straw hat down to cover half of her forehead.

I haven't said anything about the man wearing black who seems to be here just for one job – to refill our glasses with the cocktails of our choice.

When I'm married, I will have the freedom to do all this stuff. Great as my life already is, I still drive myself to places. I can't host dinners and

nobody invites me to anything. Also, I still haven't made my debut as a 'Zulu Wife' in the media.

Mpande never takes me anywhere with him. I'm still just a baby-mama and I'm too ambitious to be just that. I have learned that with Mpande I need to be gentle. He is one of those men that need assurance and attention. Your world as his woman needs to revolve around him. I'm not the type, but I'm here to secure a ring, so...

She lights another cigarette.

I want to ask because Qhawe doesn't strike me as a guy who would be comfortable with his wife being a smoker. Also, where are her many children? I haven't seen them since I got here and I know she doesn't have a nanny.

"I can't believe MaSbisi is gone," she says.

I feel it's a random thing for her to say right now, but I nod and watch her exhaling smoke out of her nostrils.

"She was great with the kids, you know. She raised Xolie's kids; they loved her very much."

I nod, again. I didn't know MaSbisi well. I met her a few times but I always felt like she was still holding on to Ndoni and found it hard to acknowledge me. She was also too attached to this family. I felt like somewhere along the way, she strayed from her lane and started thinking she was one of them – one of us.

"But... sometimes people have to go."

Huh? That doesn't sound sympathetic at all.

She sits up, grabs the opened bottle of Veuve Clicquot Brut from the ice bucket and drinks straight from it. She'd been drinking cocktails this whole time; I was the one drinking Champagne. She puts the bottle back in the ice bucket and turns to look at me. I'm starting to feel uncomfortable...

"There's money in there," she says, pointing at the pool house behind us.

"It's R1 million; take it and go."

I'm confused.

“It’s for you; just you. I’m sure by now you know you can’t take the children with you. Go. Start a life somewhere. If the money runs out, call us and we’ll send you more. Just go.”

What the heck? Not this again!

“Naledi?”

The look on her face is different. We were vibing just now... what the heck is going on?

“You are not here for this family, Thando; you are here for yourself. We can’t have that. That’s not how it works here. All of us are here to ensure that our children are far removed from what our husbands are. You are not here for that, so you have to go.”

Not her too...

What’s freaking me out more is that I’m looking at her, but somehow I don’t feel like I’m sitting with the Naledi I was sitting with a few minutes ago.

“It’s a million, for now, cash, but if you ever need more money, all you have to do is call.”

Zimu! She’s serious!

Does she really think I’d leave this life, and my kids, for a mere million? Does she even understand what it took for me to get here? If there’s one thing I promised myself while raising my kids alone, in hiding, it was that I will never let myself be bullied by these Zulu wives again – ever.

“I don’t want your money, and I’m not going anywhere.”

I have to get out of here...

She grabs my arm just as I get up.

“You know Ntsika can deny everything, right? Mpande doesn’t even like you, let alone love you. We control this family, Thando – us, women. You are here for the money and all the glamorous shit? You think it’s that easy? In this family, women don’t force their way in, they are chosen.”

What does that even mean? And she must take her fat hand off my arm; she’s hurting me.

“I gave birth to children of this family so...”

“Who is their father?”

Bitch, please! Fuck off!

“Does it matter? They look exactly like *your* children. I’m not going anywhere!”

I pull my arm off her hand. Who the fuck does she think she is?

Who the fuck do they all think they are? They will be dealing with me for the rest of their lives because Mpande will marry me. Whether they like it or not! Whether he loves me or not!

I need to call Ntsika. Now.

That bullshit Naledi just said about him denying everything if I ever open my mouth about us was the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard. I have receipts. Now let me see how he explains sending me money every month for years, and all the baby pictures I’m sure he has kept all these years.

Yerrrrr, he must answer his damn phone before I lose it!

I have triggers.

But Mqhele obviously doesn't know about them. Otherwise, he would have let me leave with Naledi yesterday instead of making me leave today, with all of them in a Quantum.

Yes, of course, MaSbisi was family and all, and yes, we did what needed to be done, but driving away and leaving her grave behind brings back memories of the worst time of my life. He has his arm around my shoulders, and I'm not sure if it is because he is reliving the moment like I am right now, or if he is just being needy as always.

He hasn't asked me anything, so I doubt Sambulo told them the truth about what happened to MaSbisi. Even me; I don't know if she died because it was her time, or if Masetla had something to do with it. He wasn't at the funeral, although he was the one who prescribed her blood pressure pills and all.

Peter came alone. Of course, he was the odd white guy out, but I don't think that bothers him anymore. MaSbisi's death touched him too because sometimes when he had to go on business trips with his wife, he'd leave Oliver at Sambulo's house. He is Mabutho's age, so they get along very well. Our kids see him as one of their brothers and in fact, he can speak Zulu. He doesn't look the same after the plastic surgery, but you know... he

is still our Peter, and we will forever be grateful for what he did for us in our time of need.

I almost laughed when I watched him take the shovel from one of the local men and participated in the burying. *Yerrrrr*, poor man, he's been to too many black funerals.

On top of that, MaMtshali is not giving him peace; he's been in and out of courts representing her on her mission to deal with Ngcobo's other wives. I don't think she has a strong case because the other women also have Ngcobo's children, minor children, but she honestly has nothing to lose, tormenting them seems like fun to her. Besides, I wouldn't put anything past her, including having them all killed when she's done causing havoc in the taxi industry.

I'm not even mad at Peter for what his grandparents were. The job to make sure his name didn't come up when the story was all over the media was done carefully and I know these men of ours had everything to do with that; someone was paid for sure.

If it had come out, it was going to destroy his career completely. It's the 'sins of the father' type of thing; guilty by association and all that because, if we are, to be honest, we black people will never get over apartheid. We aren't trying to because it's not like someone has ever taken accountability for our suffering, or apologised, at least.

Now I'm going home to yet another problem called Thando. Naledi has just sent a message on our: "*Real Housewives of Bree*" WhatsApp group. Gugu created it and decided that was a proper name for it. We laughed about it because Langa was the one who gave us that name.

Naledi: She refused the money

Zandile: As expected

This is the same money we were going to give to MaSbisi and her daughter to shut them up.

Gugu: Now she knows where she stands, mission accomplished

Well... I'm not exactly sure about that.

Me: We're on our way back. Mpande stayed behind with Qhayi. That is what we should be worried about. If Mpande leaves Thando, she'll be left with nothing to lose, that's when she will strike...

Xolie hasn't said anything. I look behind me and see her in the back seat, her head on Sambulo's shoulder, her eyes closed. Honestly, she's the person we should be focusing on, not that little thot called Thando. Xolie needs to go to therapy soon. Yes, we are bad women, but none of us has ever physically murdered someone. Yes, people have been killed in our names but... we stay cute... and we don't know where their bodies are buried so...

Gugu: We need to come up with a Plan-B

It must be the hormones because when it comes to this, she has become the ringleader. As long as the Plan-B she is thinking about doesn't involve pushing Thando down the stairs or downright murdering her; I'm all for it. That girl has to go.

Naledi: Qhawe has just called, he says we are all going to Ntsikeni tomorrow

Ntsikeni?

Who decided that? When? I want to go back to my house and take long hot showers. I've been skottel-bathing for days now, wearing pinafores and serving cakes I didn't bake to crying people. More than anything, I really need to be in a space not full of women singing church songs every day.

"We are not going back to Joburg. We'll sleep at the La Lucia house; we're going to Ntsikeni tomorrow," Mqhele says to me.

I'm double shocked, but I realise he is serious when the car offramps to Umhlanga Drive from the N2.

What the hell are we going there for?

... • ...

I've only been in this house three times, and it's funny because I'm the one who made us buy it.

Lethu once lived here, Lwandle too, until he was kicked out. It was supposed to be a family holiday home, and their accommodation when we are in Durban because Mqhele never wanted to sleep at my mother's house. But no, they all always end up sleeping at Gaba's house, so this one is pretty much just one of our properties we forget exists until we have to use it.

It's just me, Mqhele, Xolie, Sambulo, Zandile and Nkosana who ended up here. Qhawe, Nqoba and Mhlaba went to Gaba's house. The boys went straight back to Ntsikeni – all of them.

They didn't even inform us; they just took the Stanger off-ramp while we drove on. They've gotten to a place where they've decided they don't need to explain themselves to us, and frustrating as it is, we all have to accept they aren't kids anymore. It doesn't help that their relationships with their fathers are somehow complicated.

Msebe and Langa are still just kids, but they seem to listen to Phakeme more than they do to their fathers. Phakeme is attached to Sbani and Lwandle. Sbani and Lwandle are attached to Ntsika. The little boys, on the other hand, just love being with their elder brothers; they see them as their heroes. The only thing keeping us stable right now is we know that we raised our children to protect each other, so we aren't worried about whatever they are up to there.

Mqhele said they are probably sleeping in tents and that Chloe will make sure they are fed and bathed. Chloe... *sigh*... she clearly doesn't

know what she's gotten herself into but you know what? I like girls like her – girls who know they aren't in a normal situation but are kind of fascinated by being there. She has some Greek surname I can't even pronounce, but as long as she's there taking good care of my babies, we're good.

I want to ask this one here why we are going to Ntsikeni; I've never even been there, but he looks so exhausted, and I feel sorry enough for him to want to let him rest. This is the first time in days that he's slept on expensive sheets and a feather duvet. Nandi booked them at some BnB and every morning when they arrived at MaSbisi's home, he complained about how dodgy it was. He couldn't understand why I insisted on sleeping at that home instead of going to the BnB with him. I'm going to let him sleep now, but in the morning, he'll tell me what this Ntsikeni thing is all about.

My phone beeps...

Gugu: She's anaemic. She takes one iron supplement pill every day. If she takes 10 at once, on an empty stomach, she'll die...

Jizas!

Me: Gugu, why aren't you sleeping?

I can see she's typing a reply, but Naledi's message comes in first.

Naledi: Gurl, you need to pop that baby soon...you're acting crazy right now, plotting a murder? Really?

Gugu is still typing, I foresee a long essay coming.

Me: And you Naledi? Why are YOU not sleeping?

Naledi: I have triplets

This WhatsApp group will get us arrested...

Zandile: We are going to need more than iron supplements. I've been chatting to Mpande all evening, he's leaving her for Qhayiya...

Oh shit!

Xolie is still not participating here.

Zandile: Oh, and I'm still up because I've just had sex, 10 minutes ago, and Nkosana is already fast asleep and snoring...

We definitely did not need to know that information.

Gugu is still typing.

I'm done here. I'll read her essay in the morning.

The man next to me is also fast asleep.

34

I'm a former journalist.

I know all about how land claim cases work. Yes, the judgment is already out and this land now legally belongs to its rightful owners... but... what our children did here is what you call land invasion.

When I went to sleep last night, the plan was to make Mqhele explain to me why we had to come here as soon as we woke up, but something in me said do not bother him, allow yourself to be surprised Hlomu.

I know how significant this place is to him, to them, but I also know they don't like it, especially Mqhele, because he knows the fate of his twin brother had everything to do with what started here. He never talks about that, but I know he named him before they buried the bones. He named him Xola; I don't know why.

I have come to realise, or maybe, I'm not really sure, I have decided that there are things that belong to only him and I must let him have them. With Mqhele, it's either peace or war; there is no in-between. I know what triggers peace and what triggers war.

I noticed how his aura got more intense after we drove across that shallow and almost dry river. It was like... something about him changed soon as we touched this land. As if something suddenly came and sat on his shoulders.

I didn't ask – not because I thought he might snap – no; he has grown and that has a lot to do with him discovering himself. And, more than anything, what haunted him the most is gone – the guilt about Zwakele and the fear of looking Mahlubi in the eye.

I didn't ask because I too think I understand him more now. I know what is *our* burden and what is *his* burden. The truth is, no matter how much you love someone, there is healing that they need to do themselves alone. But as long as I breathe next to him, I know he'll stretch his hand out if he needs me.

I see many people gathering as we approach where we are going. It's interesting because we didn't see a single person as we were driving on the gravel road that weaves around mountains as we made our way here. We were the last ones to leave the La Lucia house. When we went downstairs, everyone had already left, which was weird because we all arrived in one car last night but, who gives a shit... weird is our middle name.

We drive past the large crowd I saw as we were approaching. Mqhele doesn't even glance at them. We drive for another 15 minutes or so before I see a house. We park next to one of Gaba's cars. I recognise the black Jeep next to it and I know it is that Jeep, yes that one, because Gugu's last message on the WhatsApp group at 3 am was that they were leaving the house with Hlangu.

Gugu: It's the dodgy black Jeep, don't even know this driver.

I only saw her message when I woke up. Actually, that contributed to my decision not to ask Mqhele questions because if they went as far as getting Gugu here, in her state, then that means this is some deep shit. The house is done and painted but not fenced. There's a green Jojo tank attached to it. It's a modest one, almost the size of my mother's house in KwaMashu, except this one has a smaller veranda and no manicured grass lawn.

As we walk towards the entrance, Mqhele's hands are in his pockets. I have this overwhelming urge to pull one out and hold it. But I hold myself.

Just when we are about to step onto the veranda, I feel his hand grabbing mine. I guess he needs me now.

This is quite a moment, but it doesn't feel like that day when I touched Mbuba soil for the first time. Everyone is here – literally everyone whose surname is Zulu from the fathers to the children – but it's quiet.

The house is fully furnished with a generator roaring outside. I don't see Gugu, Zandile, Xolie and Naledi. I also don't see Thando and Mpande's kids. But Mpande is here. I know Zamani and Mqhe did a lot to make all of this happen, but they aren't here. Neither is Chloe, whom I still don't understand how she survived two months in this place sleeping in a tent from what I've heard.

"They're in the bedroom," Phakeme says before I can even ask.

I don't understand why everyone is so quiet, especially because the triplets are here, one sleeping in Nqoba's arms and two crawling on the floor tiles. I walk down the passage.

"It's this one, Mami," Sbopho says, running before me to the fourth door.

There are three bedrooms, a kitchen and a sitting room, that's it. They all look up when I open the door and enter the room. There is no bed, just a grass mat, a blanket and two pillows all on the floor. Naledi lying on the mat, on her side, quiet and staring at the white wall in front of her. Xolie and Zandile are sitting on the floor.

"What happened?" I ask.

I'm looking at Zandile and I know something is not right. I look at Naledi on the floor and I know something is really wrong with her. It's like she's shut down.

"Babes," I say, and I kneel in front of her.

Her eyes are open, so at least she is not in a coma again. But she doesn't move, and she doesn't speak. I look at Xolie this time.

"How long has she been like this?"

"Since she entered this house," Zandile says.

Last night we were talking about planning a murder and having sex in a WhatsApp group. How are we here now? Also, where is Gugu? They left Gauteng at 3 am. I didn't see if Hlangu is here or not; there are too many kids in this family; one needs time to count all of them.

“And Gugu? She's supposed to be here.”

No, wait...!!! I didn't see Niya either! I'm three seconds from a state of panic when the door opens and she walks in.

“Mami, you must cut my hair,” she says, without even looking at me, and sits down on the same mat where Naledi is lying.

She's always loved her dreadlocks. She even got mad when her teacher wouldn't let her play Snow White in her school play. Instead, the teacher told her she'd fit the character of the evil stepmother better. I was boiling inside, but I was going to let my daughter have a normal school day and then attend to the matter when I picked her up in the afternoon when most of the kids had left. But Lethu beat me to it. She was already parked outside the school when the gates opened. I found her in the principal's office, 'processing' those people one-by-one. All she wanted to know was why Niya fitted the evil stepmother character. Was it her hair or her super-dark skin?

The play was subsequently cancelled, and Niya said she didn't even like being in that class anyway. She told me that night that she wanted to be in the art class. I was at that school at 7 am the next day, and when I fetched them in the afternoon, her fingers had paint all over them. That old bitch teacher eventually took early retirement, something about “refusing to be dictated to by this generation of children”.

I know that incident got to Niya; it was probably her first experience of adult stupidity, and also her first glimpse at what life can be like for a girl that looks like her. I know I always say I want the kids to be humble, but Niya can pass on that; she can use her rich-girl privilege to fight for herself. Mami will be right behind her, cheering and taking pictures and videos.

After that Snow White incident, I was proud of my daughter for three things: that she told, that she got angry and not sad, and most of all, that she

decided to remove herself from that teacher. She was 10 at the time, and if a 10-year-old can decide they don't have the time or energy to deal with you, you really have to question yourself as an adult.

“Mami?”

I've been staring at her this whole time as I recalled that school incident.

“My hair,” she says.

I'm pretty sure there is no pair of scissors in this house and no, I'm not cutting her hair. Since she was eight, I have taken care of it myself. I had to learn to wash, twist and tie dreadlocks because she hates going to the salon.

“Here,” she says, handing me a small pair of scissors.

I know these scissors; they were part of her school stationery when she started Grade 2. They are the one thing I have never had to buy at the beginning of the school term because she has never lost them.

It's interesting how present she is – no iPad in her hands and how she is sitting with her arm on Naledi's hip. But then again... her aura gives me authoritative vibes, and I'm not sure if I'm the only one seeing it. And I can't have that because...

The door opens. I look at her and I know nothing in this life is impossible. How does a person go from being the Gugu we all know to look like this? Yes, I haven't seen her in a while because we were all too occupied with evil deeds and she was on bed rest, but we talked to her every day and she should have been kind enough to send us a picture of herself so that we at least had an idea what she looked like. I'm not even going to ask why it took her 10 hours to get here because... there are obviously bigger problems here. For some reason, the Jeep got here without her.

She's bigger than Naledi, I swear. The impossible has happened.

“I need to lie down,” she says.

There isn't enough space on the grass mat. It's actually the size of a single bed.

We are all looking at her – bush eyebrows and all. She's almost unrecognisable. She's pregnant and all, so we shouldn't be shocked, but

come on... it's Gugu. She's the one who wears make-up and weaves in Mbuba, custom made pinafores and ties Burberry scarves across her chest as umhezo.

Actually, no... I have to ask.

“Where have you been? I thought I'd find you here. You left your house at—”

“I need to lie down,” she says again.

Oh, hell no! Not this again!

Zandile and Xolie are already up on their feet, holding both her arms and I'm just here watching liquid dripping down her legs. We must take her to hospital, now. How far is the closest hospital again? Stanger, and that's quite far.

I've been in this family long enough to know that we aren't the long-labour type. When the kids decide to come, they come, quickly. I pushed the twins out in just 15 minutes.

“I want to sleep,” she says.

I assume she hasn't realised she's in labour. I'm just standing here because this whole thing feels like that jail cell all over again. The three of us, desperate, scared and yet thinking fast. I turn around to see Naledi up on her feet; just seconds ago she was a zombie staring at the wall. Niya is still sitting exactly where she was seated before Gugu walked in.

Xolie and Zandile assist Gugu to the grass mat. She lies on her back and opens her legs.

I'm not doing this again!

Naledi seems relaxed. Yes, she's the doctor, and if anyone knows what to do right now, it's her. But still... she's too relaxed for my comfort.

“Niya, go to your brothers,” I say.

She shouldn't be here experiencing childbirth. And also, nobody outside this room knows what is happening – that the baby is coming. She looks up at me once and stays put.

I assume Gugu has come to her senses now because she looks more worried than she did when she walked in here. Naledi is telling her to push.

Yep! We're here again!

Honestly, I should have died when those men hijacked me and put me in my own car boot. It would have saved me a lot of traumas and...

“Push!” Naledi says.

This baby is coming, here, in this room! What exactly is Nqoba and Gugu's problem with hospitals?

Naledi is on her 30th ‘push’ – I think; it's not like I've been counting – when the door opens and Sisekelo walks in. He doesn't look at any of us, or Gugu on that grass mat literally squirming in pain and Naledi telling her to push every second. He just goes to the corner of the room, places an enamel plate on the floor and lights up incense with a cigarette gas lighter. When he walks out and closes the door behind him, he hasn't looked at us or said anything.

I'm lost here, completely lost. I do not have a connection with this place, not like Mbuba, where I feel like the soil belongs to me every time I step on it. The smell of burning incense makes me sneeze, but everyone in here, including Niya, seems not to be bothered by it.

The head is pushing its way out of Gugu's vagina. Three ‘push’ calls by Naledi and she's holding a human in her hands, screaming, yet still attached to Gugu's vagina with a long pipe. This is where the doctor grabs a scissor and places the baby on the mother's chest... but noooo... Gugu tenses again and pushes another one out, easier this time. The placenta lands on the grass mat just after we hear the scream.

I don't know why, but I rush to the door and lock it.

“This one is a girl,” Naledi says, the baby in her hands. She holds it upside down and with its ankles, in one hand, taps its back a few times before it cries.

It's the absence of shock and worry on her face that has me concerned. Xolie and Zandile here are as shocked as I am. She knows exactly where to cut, and she does it with Niya's scissors.

“Don’t open the door,” Naledi says as she places both the babies on Gugu’s chest.

None of us moves. As loud as the knock on the door is, we ignore it. They must have heard the babies crying; that’s why they are banging on the door. I’d have expected Sisekelo to tell them what was happening after he left this room, but you can never put Sisekelo and expectation in one sentence. He is not of this world; he is a reincarnation of someone or something. By the look on Gugu’s face, she didn’t know she was carrying twins; neither did we. Sisekelo probably knew.

We are quiet because... well... I don’t know anymore. The incense is still in the corner of the room, but it’s all ash now. I can’t even smell it anymore.

You’d think that nothing can shock us anymore, but no, we are shocked by this.

“There was one baby, only one; I went for an ultrasound last week,” Gugu says.

She has both her babies on her breasts, but the situation right now is that we have to get her and these babies to the hospital now. She has a history and – although these babies made it – we all know she isn’t like Naledi and Xolie who just be popping bug eyes anytime they can. We don’t know what to say to her, mostly because she looks freaked out.

“Where is Nqoba?” she asks.

He is definitely standing outside this door; they all are. It’s a miracle they are not going crazy, screaming at us to open and threatening to kick the door down. But then again, they’ve grown, and they’ve learned along the way.

I kind of feel relieved Gugu is asking for Nqoba because it means we can get out of here. Look, we all know that it is actually Sisekelo who knows more about this than Nqoba. This is, after all, his house. I grab Niya by her arm as Zandile unlocks and opens the door. Nqoba shoots in like a bullet.

I grab the scissors on my way out and ignore Mqhele when he looks at me and raises his arms. He must go inside and see for himself. In fact, all of them must stop standing here on the passage like confused donkeys and go inside that room where Nqoba is. I'm going outside with Niya.

If she wants her hair cut, I will cut it because I'm tired of these people and their weird shit.

But maybe not because I stop and turn around just before I step out of the house. I look at all of them – bug-eyes out, the same old look they give me every time they switch from being deadly weapons to being scared, little boys.

“Twins: a boy and a girl.”

Silence.

I have nothing more for them; Ntsikeni is not my turf – it is Naledi's.

“Mami, my hair.”

I pull my daughter out of the house by the arm. She wants her hair cut? I'll cut it.

“Hlomu!” Qhawe says and pulls me back inside.

Why is he looking at me like this?

“Where are you going?”

“Outside, to cut Niya's hair.”

He looks confused. Why? I have the scissors in my hand, blood all over it and all.

“Come back inside,” he says.

But I'm already inside because he pulled me back inside without even trying to negotiate... Also, where did all our children go? They aren't here anymore.

“It's a boy and a girl,” I say again because maybe they didn't believe me the first time and I assume that is why they are all staring at me like I've lost my mind.

“The door is locked,” Mqhele walks back into the sitting room and speaks.

I don't remember seeing Naledi leaving that room.

He glances at the bloody scissors in my hand and then at Niya, whose hand I'm still holding tight. He looks at Nkosana before he looks at me again.

"Hlomu," he says, in almost like... a hiss... as he approaches.

He tries to grab my hand but I move it swiftly because I know I have to go out and cut Niya's hair, otherwise she'll nag me about it all day.

"I'll cut the hair," Nkosana says.

I didn't see all of them coming closer, not until now. They are standing in a circle, me and Niya in the middle. It feels like that moment at the hospital; the night I met all of them for the first time. They stood like this, looked at me like this, except at that time Nkosana was missing and Mqoqi was there.

"No baba, it's Mami; she has to cut my hair." She's talking to Nkosana.

Silence.

I look at all of them, expecting at least an explanation as to why they are making such a big deal out of this. It's just hair and she doesn't want it anymore.

Nothing? Okay.

I pull Niya and we break out of the circle; there's space for us to get out because one piece that made it full and impenetrable is missing. Eight pieces formed what it once was; now there are only seven.

As soon as we step out of the veranda, it's not me pulling Niya anymore, it's her leading me. I follow her under a big tree. We sit, her in between my thighs as I nip and throw them to the ground. She has thick hair naturally and to be honest, I had never thought about how long I'd let her dreadlocks grow. The last four... I grab and cut at one go.

"Done!"

"Okay, let's go," she says, not even looking at the pile of her hair sitting under a tree.

Sigh... now she looks like the rest of them.

I start collecting the pile, in case she wants to put them back on in future...

“No, Mami, leave it!”

Did she just snap at me? Oh, hell no!

“It’s *my* hair Mami: I want it to stay there.”

She’s been rude since she walked into that room. But as I follow her back to the house, my mind starts functioning again... why on earth was I out there cutting hair when we should be taking Gugu to hospital? That’s the first thing we should have done after she gave birth. I’m in a state of panic as I walk back into the bedroom.

They are all here, sitting lining the wall, knees high on their chests, even Nkosana. Mhlaba looks rather dazed, like something none of us is aware of has just happened. The room hasn’t even been cleaned; it smells like blood.

“Thulula,” Nqoba says.

He’s holding one baby. I assume it’s the boy. This is not how it works; Nkosana names all the children. He named all 18 of them.

Jizas!!!

There’s 18 of them and one grandchild!

Gugu has the other one on her breast. It’s interesting because the last time she gave birth, under unpleasant circumstances, of course, because clearly, that’s her thing, she ended up in ICU half-dying. Now I wonder why she looks like all she did was pee, not push two humans out of her vagina.

We are waiting for a name, or at least I am. I’m expecting it from Nqoba since he has already broken protocol, but he is quiet, so I’m expecting Nkosana to remember who he is and why he names the children.

“Nqobile.”

Silence.

“Her name is Nqobile,” Gugu says, again.

Nobody speaks, but Nqoba looks shocked.

I look at all of them and I conclude that there are no objections. I know that it’s not that they are happy with this, it’s that things are happening and they have no idea how to *deal* with any of it.

Their way is violence, guns and blood and all, and none of that works when you face Phakeme's ghosts from the past, which we have all realised are key to the future.

And yep! We are here. The first-ever wife to name her child in this family is Gugu Zulu.

Naledi walks in just as I start wondering where all the other women are. She smells of mint and lemongrass. I bought her the mint-infused waterless hand sanitiser from Woolies the other day, and the last time I went to Herbology, I bought the lemongrass oil. She's always accusing me of being a hippie, but she was quick to snatch that oil from me when she realised it was more aggressive than the nicotine scent.

Every wife, everywhere, is hiding at least three things from their husband. Naledi is hiding the fact that she went back to smoking after the traumatic birth of her triplets. And of course, we help her with that because her smoking is nothing compared to the fact that we are sitting pretty with the murder of our domestic worker to our names.

Ahhhh man, our Tswana princess. I was always sure about her. Even at that time when she left, I was always sure about her.

"We're going to the hospital now. The babies are perfectly fine, but we still have to go. It will make the birth certificate process easier," she says.

Sisekelo is standing quietly beside her.

"You're coming with us," she says, looking at Nqoba.

Qhawe is standing there, but she's not bothered by him; we can all see that. This is her turf.

"You all can leave now," Sisekelo says.

I'd raise my eyebrows and ask questions, but we are all aware that the boy standing over us right now is not a child.

"This is my house..."

It is, isn't it?

"You have to leave, all of you," he says. Looking at his fathers.

I feel sorry for Xolie, she has had to give up so much, including her son here who suddenly sounds like an old man when he is just a teenage boy.

“It’s over now. This is the end of it all. Hlomu, you won’t burn to ashes, you will have a grave.”

The part where he calls me by name is shocking, but the other part, I don’t know... it’s like my mind is frozen. I look at Mqhele and something tells me he is lost. Nkosana and Mhlaba know; I know they know.

I’m also in a state I cannot describe because Sisekelo told me, not once, and yes, I did figure it out too. I must have felt that my death was near, but instead of accepting what it was going to be like, my mind chose denial and made up some disease; my body listened to it. I thought my husband would never allow it to happen, but what I didn’t know was that Xolie’s child would have to give up his life instead.

“Bafo?” Mqhele says.

“We will talk later,” Nkosana says.

He didn’t know? Also, now I see why Nkosana was acting strange around me. He knew all along. I glance at Phakeme; he looks agitated.

“Go. I have to bury her before the sun sets. I left a pile of soil at the front door; don’t jump over it, walk around it, pick a handful and throw it in the bucket outside as you leave – all of you.”

This is...

“Where is it?” he asks Naledi. She hands him a black plastic bag.

“Go,” he says, walking to the corner where the enamel plate is still sitting with the ashes of the incense.

We leave with Thulula and Nqobile. We do as he said: in silence. I’m the first to throw my handful of soil in the bucket and I notice there’s already a lot of soil inside it. I can see all our kids standing next to cars, including Niya without hair... It is clear that they have already done this.

“Hlomu, you’re coming to hospital with us. Xolie is staying behind; she wants to talk to Sisekelo,” Naledi says.

One of us has to go back to Joburg with the kids, so Zandile it is. I’m about to get on the front seat of the Jeep when Mqhele grabs my arm. He doesn’t say anything, just looks into my eyes. He’s figured it out, and he needs me, but I’m not available for him; not this time.

“Take the kids home,” I say.

He’s still mute.

“Mqhele, Sisekelo is going to bury Niya’s hair. That is what will be in your grandmother’s grave – that and the soil in the bucket.”

It didn’t take much for me to figure that one out. I’m leaving with Gugu and Naledi because I need him to process this on his own, and it’s a lot to process.

“I’ll see you at home, my love,” I hug him very tightly before I let go and get in the car.

I should never have gotten in the front seat of that Sprinter and... and... and... *urgh* fuck that! Nomafu was always going to find me; Mthaniya was always going to find Naledi.

She’s driving; Gugu and Nqoba are in the backseat with their very calm newborns.

“That is where we are going to build the hospital,” Naledi says to me, in a very soft tone.

She’s pointing at the place where the many people were gathering earlier. I look at her and I realise that what we’d always dismissed as ‘Qhawe’s goat things’ was deeper than what we thought.

“That’s great, Naledi. That’s really great,” I say and smile. She smiles back and drives on.

Mthaniya has erased Naledi Montsho, just like Nomafu erased Mahlomu Dladla; we can never go back.

But the best part is, it is all over; it is fixed.

I feel it the moment we get back on the gravel road after we drive across the river.

That cleansing of Iqunga thing was not it; it was just the beginning of the journey.

The journey has just ended.

Zulu

“So, ntwana, where did you sleep last night? Which house?”

He’s about to turn this into a joke.

I know this by the way he has just laid back on the chair and puffed cigarette smoke out of his nostrils.

“Ushaya ama up and down ntwana, ubusy,” he says.

Every family has a Mhlaba; the one who jokes about serious things, and yet has the ability to force you to confront them. My brothers are laughing at what he has just said, and at me, actually. They do that all the time, and it bothers me because I feel like they do not take my quest to build my own family seriously.

We’ve been here since midday and it’s only now, in the afternoon, that we find ourselves sitting around the table together – just us. We have been having meat, chats and laughs with owners and drivers since we got here. Yes, we are famous and all that but none of these people here care about that. MaMkhize still expects us to sit at her table and eat only her food.

“You boys have money now, so it’s R200 for each piece of meat, R100 for uphuthu. Do you remember how I used to give you leftover meat when you were young?”

She always uses that to justify the daylight robbery. And she only gave us leftover meat twice, me, actually. Mqoqi didn’t even like meat then. My brothers don’t know anything about that though because they didn’t know we were roaming around kwaMaiMai when we should have been at school.

The past few months have been great. Yes, a lot happened for us to get here – heavy shit. But we are here and I don’t remember us ever feeling this light and free.

Rank duty is not some form of punishment anymore. In fact, we all look forward to being at Bree for a week. The truth is, we don't need to be in the taxi business anymore, but it is home; it is what raised us. Yes, we have moved with the times, jumped into the Uber business as soon as it came on and we do make more money from our other businesses than we do at the rank but you can't just pack up and leave home.

Ngcobo made this... these people... our home.

We owe it to him to never leave them, especially because we couldn't save him when he needed us to. Besides, someone has to keep an eye on MaMtshali. The last thing we all want is for her to be taken out with one bullet in her head, like all the industry rivals we took out. This industry is not for women, but MaMtshali knows so much about its ins and outs that it is shocking to watch, bordering on dangerous. What she is gunning for now is to be appointed as an executive member of the national taxi association, and she doesn't look like she needs our help with that.

She still calls us 'bafana bami', even Nkosana, and she's at all the ranks guarding her money every day. She drives her Fortuner from rank to rank – all over Gauteng in black clothes, every single day. She knows all of Ngcobo's taxis and every driver by name. They all know not to double-cross her. The other owners are getting irritated and the only reason they haven't called a hit on her is that they aren't sure what the ramifications will be.

I mean, all of them wanted to kill Ngcobo all their lives, but they couldn't. Instead, he was the one who easily killed whoever stood in his way. In the end, he was killed by people who had nothing to do with the taxi industry.

And also, there is us; they know not to touch her. We love and respect MaMtshali. She is the closest thing we have ever had to a mother. That is why we sat and decided to take care of Ngcobo's other wives financially while that court thing she has is dragging on. She doesn't know that, of course.

The truth is, she doesn't have much of a case because all these wives she is putting through hell have Ngcobo's children, minor children. We don't want Peter to tell her that though because she might just start taking them out one-by-one. She insists it was *her* money that made Ngcobo rich, and that he married the other two wives without her approval so she has no sympathy for them. It doesn't help that she knows how to fire a rifle and is literally scared of nobody.

But... I didn't suggest a day at KwaMaiMai with all my brothers to sit here and worry about MaMtshali; I need to talk to them about something serious. I'm tired of living life this way, and I know that eventually, they will get tired of lying for me about non-existent out of town business meetings that I have to go to often.

But... worried as I am about them, that is nothing compared to my fear of Qhayi getting tired of this whole thing and giving up on me.

I know that the upgrade from an RDP house in Orange Farm to a country estate in Hartebeespoort doesn't mean much to her, and her agreeing to live with Zothile – after some serious persuasion of course – had nothing to do with her love for me. She agreed because she is still grieving her mother, and she needed something to give meaning to her life.

Sthembile called me two weeks after we left Ntsikeni.

“Come, fetch the child; everything is sorted. Lale is still sniffing cocaine so she'll probably live and die in Hillbrow,” she said when she called.

I didn't ask about the rest of the child's family because when it comes to someone like Sthembile, sometimes it's better not to know how she gets things done.

I had to get that child off her hands because I know that mentally, she's down by the riverside. I couldn't take the child home to Thando, so my obvious option was Qhayi.

I kept my promise to Sthembile; I gave her Mqoqi's house – including his beloved books – in exchange for the little girl who taught him that he had a heart that could love. I didn't immediately tell my brothers about it,

but when I did, the reaction was better than I expected. We haven't told the wives.

Mqhele was my biggest worry, but like I said, we are better and lighter now, even him.

Sambulo is the one who has been against my decision, even after I told him MaSbisi's daughter is the only woman I know for sure that I love.

... • ...

Now that they've moved on from Mhlaba's comments and I'm no longer the joke, I think this is the perfect time to say this.

"Madoda, ngiyolobola, kwaCeza."

I expected the silence, but not this much shock on their faces. Thando has been waiting for me to give the date so she can inform her family that we are coming. Qhayi has been waiting for me to make a choice. Both of them have been patient with me.

"KwaCeza?" Sambulo asks.

"Yebo, kwaQwabe," I say.

"And Thando?"

Why is he so concerned about Thando?

"She doesn't have to know."

I have no plans to marry Thando. Yes, she is the mother of my children and I've made promises to her, but I'm a man with three children – two that are my sperm and one who is the only thing Mqoqi left in this world. I don't know if he ever heard the word *baba* from her, but I *will* hear it from her. She's my child now.

"What if Thando leaves with the boys? You know that's what she'll do if you betray her," Ntsika says.

He is worse than Sambulo.

This is my life; these are my children. Zothile is what I owe to Mqoqi. I'm going to follow my heart. Sambulo and Ntsika are going to have to

accept that.

“I love Qhayiya, and I’m going to marry her.”

I will not be the first man to leave a woman at home on a Saturday morning to go “run errands”, when in fact I’m off to marry the love of my life.