



Uncharted

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UNCHARTED

PROLOGUE

I walk inside the prison feeling more and more tired, anxious and unfree. I keep counting 1 2 3 4 5 over and over again like a mantra. It's like my life is a transition. A transition into worse pastures. Drier pastures. It's as if I am stuck in the thorns and the more I try to escape, the more the thorns sink in my skin.

I take in a deep breath as I sit down. My hands feel sticky, sweaty and they are vibrating. I stand up when he walks in. He looks good as always and he is smiling. He always smiles whenever his eyes fall on mine. And I wish to smile that real smile.

"Pumpkin.." He says and gives me brief hug. I inhale deeply smothering the sob that wants to escape. I can't let him know.

"Smanga.."

"You look.. Good." I smile looking down on myself. It's the new dress.

"Thank you."

I smile widely as we sat down.

Don't let him know.

Don't let him see.

I repeat it over and over in my head.

"How are you?" He asks. I try my best to keep my fake smile though all I want to do is cry and wail.

"I am fine. You?"

"You can't possibly be asking me. I'm good, you know that. How are the kids and.. That thing you call your husband."

"The kids are fine. And Eric is fine. Eric, my husband. Sma you need to accept him. We have a child. When are you going to give him a chance?"

"He's not the right man for you and you know it. But.. Ok."

I smile then take his hands into mine. "Your birthday is coming up."

He chuckles. "And I'm in jail." My breath catches.

And he's in jail.

Because of you.

“Because of me..”

He squeezes my hands. “I love you pumpkin. We are only two, and I don’t regret anything. I will still do it if given another chance to.”

I feel tears wet my cheeks.

Don’t cry.

Don’t do it.

He will know.

I smile. “Well I was hoping I could do something for you.. Even in jail. You know.. You are now going to 34.. You deserve it.”

He laughs. “If you insist.”

“Yeah..”

We are quiet for a while and I try to keep an impassive look.

“Khanya.. What’s going on?”

I look at him.

“With what? I’m just..”

“Just what?”

“I’m pregnant. Eric.. He—”

“He what? Won’t be happy?”

“Sma my life is falling apart. I don’t know what to do anymore. Everything is falling apart..” I sob. It feels as if there is just something wrapped around my neck and its killing me slowly. Everything is just falling apart.

And it’s your fault.

•

The first thing I notice when I walk inside our bedroom is him packing. Again.

“Eric.. What’s going on?”

“How was your jailbird brother?” He asks and I know he’s looking for a fight. So I ignore him.

“Baby if it’s about yesterday.. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.” I apologize but I know there’s no stopping him. He’s going to her. He’s leaving me again for her.

And here I thought it was over.

I feel tears stream down my cheeks.

“Baby.. Khosi.. What am I going to tell her?”

“You should have thought about that before you let that whore you call your friend disrespect me. How dare you Nokukhanya!” He roars startling me. He is upset.

I told Lerato to stop but she wouldn’t listen to me.

“Baby I’m sorry.. Listen to me my love—”

“I’m not listening to anything. Nokukhanya you are so annoying. You are so clingy and.. too much. I can’t handle this. I need some space!”

“Eric I will stop. I promise baby.. I will stop being.. Clingy. I will give you space.” I say hugging him but he pushes me away.

“You hanging out with that whore makes you one!”

I look at him. He knows Lerato is my only friend. The only friend I have.

“She’s my friend.. You know that..—”

“Fuck it manh Nokukhanya! I’m not the man in this house obviously. You wear the fucken pants huh?”

“Sthando same.. Please—”

“Listen and listen carefully. I’m tired of your shit. I need some space dammit!”

“You want her don’t you?”

He looks at me slowly. “Who’s her?”

“Lindiwe Eric. Eric why are you doing this to us? I love you..”

“You have started.” He says closing his bag.

“You are cheating on me again with the same woman!”

“And she’s here to stay. How about you have a talk with her, she might give you a few pointers on how to act like a the wife you are.”

“10 years Eric! 10 years! I have loved you for 10 years. Given up my dreams for you. Did everything for you and this is what you do to me?” I say sobbing. But he doesn’t seem moved or bothered. I have known about Lindiwe for three years now. I thought it was over.

“10 years of you not learning to act like the wife you are. 10 years of your nagging. 10 years of taking care of you while you sit and do nothing in this house but just eat. 10 years of you bringing nothing but shit to our marriage.”

I look at him in silence. If Eric has ever hurt me, it has never been like this moment. I feel so hurt. So broken.

“Lindiwe is here to stay. You better start learning to get used to her. She’s not going anywhere.”

“Eric I love you..”

“Go and shed some weight. You are too fat and get something for your skin colour.. You are too.. Dark. Even for that bastard child of yours.”

“You will not talk about our daughter like that Eric. Not Khosi..”

“You cheating bitch. You think I don’t know that Khosi is not mine.”

“Eric.. Love. Stop.”

“Start preparing a room for Lindiwe. She will be moving in.” He says then grabs his bag and walk out. I fall to the ground as I feel so weak.

Why has God deserted me like this?

10 years ago I was his life but today here I am.. Being treated like trash. I did everything for him, loved him and had his back and today here I am.

Being treated like the enemy.

ONE

I run my lipstick on my lips, makeup always does it. It always hides everything. The pain. The ache. Everything. It hides it. It has been doing a very good job for the past 5 years.

But it wasn't like this at first. He was never like this.

"Mummy!" Khosi screams getting in the bedroom.

I put on my happy smile and look at her.

"Yes hunny,"

"I'm done."

"Great!"

I stand up then grab my car keys. Walking inside my car I take in a deep breath, I am Nokukhanya Khumalo, Eric Khumalo's wife, his wife for 10 years.

I start the car then reverse it to the road.

"Teacher said we are going to paint today." Khosi says excitedly from the backseat.

I smile. "You are going to do a great job baby."

"I'm going to draw Mummy, Daddy and me!"

"That's great baby, your Daddy and I will love it!"

She keeps quiet and focus on her book she's colouring. I like her happy, she doesn't have to know what goes on. She doesn't have to know that her father didn't sleep home last night. Or that he is with his girlfriend.

After a while I park the car in front of her school. I walk inside with her keeping my happy face intact.

Her teacher is already waiting for her by the door.

"Good morning Khosi," her teacher greets.

"Good morning teacher, Mummy bye."

"Bye sweetheart."

She rushes inside the class leaving me with her teacher.

“Mrs Khumalo,”

“Hello, how’s she?”

“She’s doing ok. She’s so active and smart. I think she’s going to take us by storm.”

“That’s great.. That’s so lovely. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

I walk out and go straight to my car. I get in the car then decide to drive to Woolworths. I need to buy some things I saw were not at home.

I park my car by the parking lot then step out. I notice the car besides mine, it’s Eric’s.

Is he here?

As I look around I see her.

Her, the woman who’s behind my tears. The woman who’s behind my sleepless nights and constant heart aches. The woman who’s behind my everyday prayers that I don’t even think are reaching God.

She’s beautiful. I think she’s always been there just till three years ago when I found out about her.

When I met Eric, we were in university. I was only 20. We got married immediately after I was done with varsity. I was actually never a fan of marriage because of what had happened with my parents. But Eric convinced me otherwise. Had I known that today I will be here crying the same tears my mother cried for 20 years, I would have refused.

She notices me then walks towards me, her red short jumpsuit is hugging her perfect slim figure. She’s perfect.

“Mrs Khumalo by name, fancy seeing you.” She says.

I want to smile to show her that I’m not moved but I fail. Why does she have to be perfect? I feel so weak.

All her clothes are labels. I know he bought them for her with our money.

“Lindiwe.”

She looks at me for a while. “I see your style hasn’t changed.. Not even a single bit.”

“What do you want?”

“What do I want?.... Ohh have you prepared my room? You know I’m moving in.”

“How do you feel? Destroying my marriage that I worked so hard all this years trying to maintain? How do you sleep at night?”

She laughs.

“Oh Khanyi get over yourself. I kept your marriage intact all this years! Appreciate me. I keep him happy for you.”

“You are nothing but a whore. And you know what... He will never leave me for you.”

She rolls her eyes. “Khanyi I’m here to stay. I’m the reason you are still here.. Sister wife!”

“You whore!” I say slapping her. I have heard enough. She laughs.

“Sisi how about your go have some bedroom lessons. You’re failing to keep your husband happy.”

“He doesn’t love you!”

“Well.. I guess that’s why he’s paying my lobola during the weekend.”

She says then walks away. I feel weak by the second. I feel my knees give up on me. How did it get to this?

I fall to the ground besides my car then just cry. For the first time ever I cry. I cry for everything I have ever held back. For all the pain. For all the heartache.

I just cry.

“Hello.. Hi,” I hear a voice. A tiny voice.

I took my hands off my face, I quickly stand up when I see the little kid who is crouching before me smiling. I hastily wipe away my tears.

“Hi sweety..” I say fixing myself. I feel so mortified. Crying in the parking lot is the worst thing I have ever done.

She giggles showing me her two missing front teeth.

“Hi.” She says.

I take in a deep breath. At least no one saw me.

“What’s your name?”

“Anaya..”

I smile genuinely. She’s so cute. “Wow! Nice name.”

“Yes..” She says then crouches again on the ground then starts trying to put my grocery back in the plastic. She looks about 6 if not 7.

I laugh. “Oh no don’t, I will do it.”

She gives me the plastic then I finish putting my things back in the plastic.

“So where’s Mommy?”

“Mommy is visiting her Mummy.. I came with Daddy.”

“Ok, where’s Daddy?”

“There.” She says pointing behind her. I look and wonder if he saw everything that happened. God why!
Can’t the earth just open up and swallow me already.

He walks towards us.

“Hello,” he says taking his daughters hand who looks so excited.

“Hello.” I don’t know what to say. I’m so embarrassed right now.

When did I even start crying in parking lots? I’m stronger than that.

“I’m Lonzulu Dlamini, this is my daughter, Anaya.”

“It’s nice to meet you. Uhh Anaya it was nice meeting you.”

She smiles again. “You are beautiful.”

I laugh. “Oh well you too.” I look up at her father. “And again it was nice to meet you too.”

“Likewise.”

“I have to get going.” I say then unlock my car. As soon as I get in the car I start it and drive away. I can’t have him looking at me, the embarrassment is just too much.

I drive home reprimanding myself. No more crying in parking lots.

The weather slowly changes and it starts raining. Arriving home there’s a closed truck outside. And it looks like they are packing things inside the closed truck. I quickly get out of my car, Eric can’t possibly be moving out. He can’t. How long do I have to lie to Khosi?

I ignore the rain as I run towards the car. There are three man holding a huge box and they are putting it inside the closed truck.

“Hello.. What are you doing?”

“Oh Mr Khumalo asked us to move this things.”

“His things? No please stop..” I say dialing his number. He answers immediately.

“Nokukhanya.”

The coldness in his voice makes my intestines knot. I take in a deep breath.

“Honey what’s going on?”

“What do you mean?”

“You are moving out? You can’t do that. Love please.”

“I’m not moving out. You are.”

“What?”

“Lindiwe won’t move in with you inside the house especially after you hit her.”

"I.. You can't do that. This house is your house as much as it is my house."

"Who paid for it."

"We are married in community of property!"

"You don't want to go down that road with me Nokukhanya!"

"I'm not going anywhere Eric. We are having a second baby."

"What?"

"We are having a second baby! I'm not going anywhere Eric. I'm not!"

I look at the movers and they are still moving my things.

Tears are already streaming. He can't do this to me.

"I'm not going anywhere Eric! What are you doing? Stop!" I scream at the man putting another box inside the truck.

"Nokukhanya we are not having another baby. You better take care of that pregnancy do you hear me?"

"I'm not killing my child neither am I moving out of my house." I say then hang up.

"Stop!" I scream but they they are just not listening to me. I feel so weak. My knees feel so wobbly.

"Babe what's going on?"

Lerato asks walking towards me. I didn't even realize her parking her car besides mine.

"Lerato.. He.. He.."

"Shhh.. Take a deep breath in."

I shake my head. No deep breath is going to help me. My marriage is over.

All the sacrifices I made. Gone just like that.

"Lerato.." I sob. She hugs me tightly.

"He doesn't deserve you. He never did to begin with."

"Lerato.. 10 years!" I manage.

"Babe come on. He's not oxygen. This guy is trash. He does nothing but emotional abuse you. You are far better than that. You can still go back to work. You are a doctor."

She doesn't understand. No one understands. They don't understand the tears and sacrifices I invested in my marriage. I can't just leave my marriage.

"I'm not going anywhere! This is my house!"

"You can't keep doing this babe. This guy is nothing but —"

"HE'S MY HUSBAND!"

“A husband that doesn’t respect you!”

“You need to leave.”

I say wiping my tears away.

“Khanya..”

“Please.. Leave.”

“Take!” She says giving me her house keys.

“You know I’m going to Israel for that interview with the minister and I will be gone for a while.”

I sigh then take the keys.

“Die safely.”

She laughs then kisses my cheek.

“I love you. Bye.”

“Bye..” She says then walks away. It’s pouring and I’m very wet.

The movers haven’t stopped shifting my things. I walk over to the veranda then sit down.

It’s not really registering that he’s kicking me and his daughter out. For his girlfriend.

All along he managed to keep his affairs away from me. I knew he was cheating but I could never accuse him because I never really had proof. Out of all that time I let him convince me to quit my job then I became that wife. The housewife who does nothing but clean, wash and look after him. I always tried by all means to please him but it was just never enough. And that got established when I found him with Lindiwe in our bed three years ago.

I forgave him but at the end I didn’t even know what exactly I was forgiving him for— maybe it was for the fact that he told me I sucked in bed.. Or maybe it was the fact that he had introduced a third party in our marriage. I pull my knees up and just stare into nothing. The truck hasn’t moved, of cause it won’t because I’m not going anywhere.

After a while I hear my name being called softly. I look up and it’s one of the movers.

“Uhh Mam where should we take your belongings?” He asks and I get angry instantly.

“Nowhere!”

“Mam we have to get going. We have other appointments we have to catch.”

“I’m not going anywhere neither are my things.”

“Mr Khuma—”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

He sighs then walks back to the truck. As soon as he gets in the van, a police car pulls up and behind it, it's Eric's car. I quickly stand up. I don't care if I'm wet or not. I rush towards him but stop halfway when Lindiwe also steps out of the car holding an umbrella.

"Eric what's this?"

"You refused to leave my premises so I reported you to the police for trespassing."

I laugh. This is a joke.

"What? Trespassing in my own house?"

"This house is not your house. It's my house with Lindiwe."

"I'm your wife!" I scream. "I'm your lawful wedded wife Eric!"

"Look Khanya, just leave." She says kissing Eric's cheek.

"You are crazy. I'm not going anywhere. Eric I will not leave this house. This house is my house. It's our house. I'm not going anywhere!"

"As you can see.. Sir please.." Lindiwe says looking at the police officers.

"Eric!" I shout.

"The divorce papers will be served to you."

"No.. Baby please.. Don't do this. We have a child. This.. It's going to break her."

"A child? Your child. Nokukhanya please leave."

"I'm not going anywhere!"

I move back as the police officers walk towards me. This is my house. I'm not leaving!

TWO

I walk inside Lerato's house all wet. I feel so lost, so broken.

How could he?

How could he chase me out from my own house. I chose the house for us, I chose the house because I saw us growing old in it. Because I saw us living happily in it. It hurts, she's now the woman of the house. She's using my plates, cooking in my pots, sleeping in my bed with my husband of full 10 years.

Nothing matters to him, not even our daughter. Or our unborn child. The police took me in then gave me a restraining order; he filed it. My own husband filed a restraining order against me.

What I have now.. Is this ring. This ring that holds or held.. A great significance to me.

When I met Eric I didn't.. Or could never fathom what happened today. I thought—I had thought our love was so strong..I mean it was, it was strong. But I guess it's not anymore. All the pain that he always put me through.. I always took it in.. I took it in because I thought that one day I would have the same man I fell for. That man who treated as if I was his life. I take my phone then dial my mother's number.

She takes a while to answer.

"Khanya,"

"It's over.." I whisper. "It's over Mama. It's over.. I failed. I failed." I say slumping to the floor. I feel cold all around me, I have only myself.

"Noku.. What happened?" She asks but the worry that lances through her voice has me breaking down. All this years, I refused to believe when she told me she saw my father in his eyes. I.. I painted him good before everyone. Even after he started going out with Lindiwe publicly, I still lied and said he was good. I kept his shameless acts from everyone.

"He brought her home.. And kicked me out."

"Oh my baby... Honey.. I'm sorry."

"Ma what did I do wrong?"

"You did nothing wrong baby. He is the one who doesn't deserve you. You made that boy. He is nothing without you so leave him."

"I just can't leave.. Ma.. Khosi.. What about her? I don't want to fail my daughter."

“Noku what’s the use of staying where you are not appreciated. Let him go baby.. He will live to regret it. You are beautiful and still young. He does nothing but break you. You were never like this!”

After varsity Eric and I got married. Our marriage wasn’t that ideal.. We were not exactly.. Stable. Financially. He couldn’t find a job so the salary I got, I used it on keeping us going. Two years after we got married he finally got a job but in those two years I never complained. I had signed up for it though Ma and Sma were against it. 6 years into our marriage he was the boss at work and he had attained some shares. He convinced me for a whole year to quit my job, plus by then we already had Khosi. So I agreed. Then that’s when his infidelity started showing.

“I love him. I love him so much.”

“I know baby.. But.. To this stage? He doesn’t respect you. Let him go. Is this the trauma you want to expose Khosi to? It has gone for far too long!”

“She moved in, in my house Ma. All my hardwork..”

“You are a bright girl. Let him go. He has embarrassed you enough. Holidays are starting in two days, bring Khosi over while you put everything in order. Go back to work.”

“He wants a divorce..”

“Let him go baby. You can do it.. On your own. You can do it.”

I take in a deep breath. I feel so tired, all I want to do is sleep and just never wake up but It’s almost four, I need to pick up Khosi from preschool. I have no doubt Eric’s family will be happy. They never liked me, they never approved of me. I also don’t know how I have managed to stay all this years, they hate me and they don’t even hide it. His mother thinks I’m all for the money but it’s like she forgets I was with him.. When he had nothing. I took care of him, I loved him albeit he had no job by then.. And I still love him. She says I bewitched him, it was worse after I gave birth to Khosi.

It hurts to even think about it. I look around Lerato’s small flat and my things have crowded her small living room.

I stand up feeling weak then take one suitcase and open it. I chose my tracksuit then quickly change to it. I charge towards Lerato’s bedroom, my reflection catches my eye. I stare for a while then take her scissor from her dressing table. I start cutting. Every portion of my hair which falls to the ground leaves me more in tears. I loved my hair. It meant a great deal to me.. But not anymore.

After I’m done I look at myself, it feels as if I’m staring at a stranger. A woman I completely don’t know. She’s looking right back at me, looking so sad and lost. She looks like she has not slept for ages and she looks so fat. I don’t know this woman, she scares me. I step away from the mirror, I can’t believe this has become me. Mama is right, I was never like this.

I turn and walk out trying to keep tears away. But I can’t. Getting in my car I take a deep breath in, I can’t let my daughter see me like this. I can’t do that to her. She doesn’t it.

1 2 3 4 5.. I start counting. Over and over again but it doesn’t work. It never does.

I reverse out of Lerato’s yard after a while then drive to Khosi’s school. I keep it together as always when she sees me. She’s so happy and I wish I can just be happy.. Just like her.

“Mommy.. Look! I painted!”

She says showing me what looks like a heart.

“This is beautiful..”

“I love you.”

I feel tears warming my cheeks. “I love you baby.. Mommy loves you so much!”

“I want to show Daddy!”

I look at her and suck in a deep breath.

She doesn't have to know.

“Uhh baby. Daddy went on a business trip.. He won't be back for a while so we are going to stay with Aunty Lee.”

“Ok!”

“Great.. Come let's go home.”

I say leading her to the car. I drive us straight to Lerato's house in silence. I'm getting angry by the second. How could he disrespect me like that? After everything.

I'm burning with fury and anger. He has no right to bring his whore into my house. As soon as I park my car in Lerato's garage I get off the car. Khosi follows behind me holding her papers.

“Sweety go to Aunty's room and undress.. Then uhh...” I walk over to some bags searching for her clothes. When I find them I give her one of her favourite dresses. “Wear this. I'm cooking.”

“Ok, Mommy?”

“Yes honey..”

“Can we call Daddy?”

“We can't. He's busy.. We don't want to disturb him now do we? We will call him later.”

“Today?”

I fake a smile. “Yes today.”

“Ok,”

I give her the clothes then watch her walk away.

I take out my phone from my sweatpants pocket as it rings. It's the prison. I take in a deep breath, I don't want Sma to know. He will go crazy.

“Sma!” I say trying to sound excited.

“I heard.”

“What?”

“Ma told me.”

I close my eyes tightly. How could Ma tell him? She knows his temper.

“Sma.. It’s ok. I’m fine.”

“Dammit Nokukhanya! You fucking not fine! That bastard!”

“No.. Listen.. We will work it out. I know we will. He’s my husband and he loves me.”

“So what now?”

I blink as tears fall. “I don’t know.”

“How’s Khosi?”

“She doesn’t know.”

“I actually wanted to surprise you but.. I’m getting out of here in a month.”

“What?”

“Yeah.. On good behavior.”

“I’m so happy. I’m so happy Sma.. I’m really happy.”

“I know but know that shitty ass nigga is fucked! Imma fuck him up real bad he will regret being born.”

“Sma..”

“I’m telling you. I got one of my friends to sort you out with accommodation. I know you are probably cramped in Lerato’s house so I organized a bigger house for you.”

“You didn’t have to..”

“Ma is right Khanya.. Go back to the hospital and leave this asshole!”

“Hey.. There’s an incoming call.. I will come by next week.”

“Ok, I love you and take care..”

“I love you too and take care too.”

I hang up then take the incoming call. It’s an unknown number.

“Hello?”

“Oh hey love, they forgot some of your belongings. I had no choice but to throw them away and jeez girl! This house looks ancient.”

“You are not going to win. You might think you won but.. You are digging your own grave!”

She laughs. “Oh please! But don’t worry. I’m going to.. Revivate this house. You won’t even recognize it when I’m done with it.”

“This will not last. Eric is my husband and—”

“And he’s leaving you. Don’t behave unladylike Nokukhanya, it’s very unattractive.”

“You are just one of them. You will not last.”

“I am going to last.. We are having our first baby. His baby not that thing you call your daughter.”

I feel tears fill my eyes. “Don’t you talk about my daughter like that ever again, do you hear me?!”

“What? That.. Thing? Take it to the clinic, it needs serious treatment or better yet, you could have aborted it.”

“You will not get away with this!”

“Oh.. Oops.. I just did. Bye Nokukhanya.”

Khosi was born with albinism, she didn’t choose it. It’s really hard for her sometimes because of the way people look at her. They look at her as if she’s a monster. I remember a time a time she refused to get out of the house because some kid had screamed “Alien!” To her in the restaurant.

I stare at my phone and now I’m more than angry. I quickly start cooking.

By then Khosi is watching TV. To her everything is still ok.

After I’m done cooking I serve her and watch her eat. She eats while telling me about how her day went.

“Trisha says we can be best friends.”

I smile. “That’s really nice baby.”

“We ate together today.”

“I want to meet Trisha.”

She smiles then continues and I hardly listen most of the time. My heart is cold. I’m angry.

I stay with Khosi watching TV till her bedtime. Immediately after I tuck her in I walk out of the house locking behind me. I drive to a garage. I need petrol. I’m shaking with anger. Eric and Lindiwe are going to pay.

“Good evening Mam, what are you having.”

“Petrol..” I say giving him 2k, I withdrew it yesterday. “In a 20 litter bottle.” I whisper.

He looks at me for a while.

“Uhh why don’t you park over there.” He says pointing a few yards from the garage. I just nod then start my car. I park a few yards from the garage. The garage doesn’t sell petrol in 20 litters bottles but I know he will make a plan. After a while there’s a light knock on my window. It’s him.

I roll down the window and look at him.

“Got it.” He says and I notice the 20 litter bottle he’s carrying. I get out of my car then open the boot. He picks it up then place it inside.

“Thanks.”

“Pleasure doing business with you.” He says then walks away. I don’t waste time, I immediately get in my car and drive to my house.

The moment I park my car behind Eric’s car I start to shake but he deserves it. I’m not thinking straight, I’m just angry. I get out of the car then go to the boot. I take out the bottle, it’s heavy but I don’t stop. I carry it to the door then open it. I split the petrol on the door then on the walls and windows all around the house together with Eric’s car.

He doesn’t know me.

I walk back to my car then take the matches I keep on the headboard.

“Lindiwe is here to stay. You better start learning to get used to her. She’s not going anywhere.” His voice rings in my head.

“Go and shed some weight. You are too fat and get something for your skin colour.. You are too.. Dark. Even for that bastard child of yours.”

I can hear him in my head getting louder and louder. Tears prick my eyes.

What have I ever done to him that he would do this to me?

I did nothing but love him unconditionally. I gave him my all, sacrificed my all to him and this is the thanks I get. I walk to the door slowly then struck a match, I stand still for a while then throw the burning match to the door. It immediately starts burning. I move back immediately walking to his car. Struck the match I throw it to the car and it immediately catches fire. I take the bottle then quickly place it in my car then drive away.

What have I done?

I might go to jail!

THREE

He looks at me with such hatred I have never seen. When did we get to this? How did we we get to this?

He used to be so crazy about me.

“You are so sick! I don’t want to see you anywhere near me!”

“Wait.. I’m sorry Eric.. Baby I love you. You know I love you.”

“Is that why you tried burning us in the house?”

I look at him. I can’t admit to that. I will go to jail and what will happen to my daughter?

She will suffer.

“Eric you should know me better.. Baby.. I would never hurt you.”

“You are a sick woman. I hope they lock you in here forever!”

He says then walks out. I can’t even cry anymore. I’m just numb. I don’t even scream his name when he walks out. The detective who’s been questioning me for about six hours now comes back.

“Ready to talk?”

I rest my head on the cold table and just close my eyes the same way I have been doing since they arrested me. They don’t have proof that I’m the one who started the fire but I’m the only suspect.

“You know keeping quiet won’t help you in anyway. You don’t even have a lawyer.. You might as well just talk.”

“She does have a lawyer.” A voice says. I slowly raise my head and I immediately want to die.

“You are her lawyer?” The detective asks.

“Yes. And I don’t think you have any right to keep my client here.”

“We were just following the normal procedure.” The detective says.

“Well I seek the release of my client immediately.” I want to cry. This is not happening.

The detective looks at me.

“This is not over.”

•

“Hi, nice to meet you again.” He says as we walk to the car. I look at him wondering how he knew about me.

“Who told you?”

“Ohh.. A friend of mine asked me to rescue his sister. I just didn’t know the sister was you.”

“Smanga?”

“Yes. Did you say anything?”

“No.” I mutter.

“Good.” He says unlocking his car.

“Let’s go.”

I blink a couple of times before I get in his car. Probably Ma told Smanga. She always tells him everything though I told her to stop.

“I’m going to be standing up for you though I really don’t see a case here. They don’t even have proof that it was you.”

“I started the fire.” I mutter looking outside the window. It’s still dark but it’s in the morning. I didn’t sleep but I really don’t feel sleepy.

“We have been married for 10 years. In all the 10 years I did nothing but love Eric. I gave him my all. Sacrificed everything for him. Stood by him when he had nothing. I gave him a child. And today he treats me like this. He treats me as if I’m a dirty thing. I have been nothing but a good wife to him.”

“I’m really sorry about that but was burning him in the house going to bring him back.”

“I was just angry. I was hurt, broken.”

“We need to get rid of the proof. This Eric guy doesn’t sound like he’s going to back down.”

I don’t say anything anymore but only when he asks for the directions to Lerato’s house. The moment he parks the car by Lerato’s complex I immediately start feeling sick. I hope Ma have arrived. I called her when the police took me. Two hours after I left the house and car burning.

“Thank you Lonzulu.”

“It’s ok. Just rest, we will talk about everything later but don’t worry. It will be over soon.”

I nod then step out of the car. The moment I open the door into Lerato’s house, Khosi comes running to me. I left her asleep.

“Mom! You are back. Granny is here.”

“She is?”

“Yes..” Just then Mama stands behind Khosi.

“Thank you for coming.”

“What could I have done? Khosi.. Go and take your drawing so that you show Mommy.”

Khosi squeals excitedly running to the bedroom I guess.

“I’m sorry..” I murmur.

“I’m really sorry.”

“Oh my baby..” She says then hugs me. I can tell she’s crying.

“I’m sorry my baby.”

I let her go then walk to the couch and sit down.

“It’s ok.”

“You deserve so much better.”

“How’s my baby?”

“She’s fine.. I just told her you went to help a child who had drowned. She believed me.”

I nod then look at the ceiling. “Maybe I’m destined for pain.”

“No baby.. No one is destined for pain. You are not destined for pain.”

“Then why is this happening to me? I just want to die Ma.. My heart is broken. All my hardwork.. All the sweat I put in this marriage.. It’s just gone. Just like that.”

She comes and sit besides me then take my hand.

“When I married your father.. I was the happiest woman ever. I had just given birth to Smanga. 10 months later, I gave birth to you. Everything was perfect. For three years it was but then your father started cheating. I always forgave him.. The same way you always forgave Eric in the name of not being called a failure. We settle for pain and hurt, we keep adjusting to it while in actual fact its slowly breaking us. Finally after 20 years, your father decided to leave. He left for the other woman and he’s still with the other woman. All this years I wasted. If Eric really loved you, he wouldn’t have cheat at all baby.”

“I’m hurt Mama..” I whisper still looking at the ceiling. “I’m so hurt.”

“Yes and you will need some time but think about your daughter. She doesn’t need you breaking like this. You have to be strong for her. She has no one but you. You need to stand up for her and be the mother she deserves. You are hurt and probably still love Eric, but he doesn’t. He’s ready to send you to jail for what you did.”

“I shouldn’t have done it. It was wrong.”

“It was but you were just hurt. Honey if it’s meant to be, it will be. For now, you need to focus on yourself and the unborn baby together with Khosi. They need you.”

“Eric said I should abort.”

“What? That’s insane. Children are a blessing from God. I know it’s hard but God does have a plan.”

“What am I going to do Mama?”

“You are going to pull yourself together!”

“Mama look!” Khosi says running towards me. She has a piece of paper with her. I take it from her and it has a lot of stick people.

“Wow baby.. This is beautiful!”

She just smiles. “Ok.. How about you go to sleep just a little while. I will wake you up when it’s time for bathing ok?”

She nods then hugs me. I stand up as Khosi rushes away. I need a drink. I walk to the kitchen then take a bottle of wine from the cardboard. Lerato always stays with wine. She says it helps her think sometimes. I pour in a glass then start drinking. Mama is standing by the kitchen door looking at me.

“Look for a job.” She says.

“I haven’t practiced in years.”

“So? Nokukhanya how are you going to support your child if you don’t look for a job?”

“Ma! I’m being served a divorce! I’m losing marriage! A job is the last thing on my mind. You need to be telling me ways of saving my marriage.”

“A job should be the first thing on your mind. This marriage is over Nokukhanya! You can’t save it. It has sunken. You are about to face jail time because of that marriage. Look at you all miserable because of this marriage!”

“So I should just let my man go.. Just like that? I’m not like you!”

She laughs. “You are not like me? Ok. Nokukhanya I just wanted to help but seems like my help is not needed. I’m leaving.”

“Ma.. You know that’s not what I meant.”

“I don’t know anymore. Maybe you wanted me to fight for your father. But you know what, I had a tiny bit respect for myself so I chose to let him go. If he wanted the other woman then he could go to her. So if loving and respecting myself is wrong, then so be it. You can go and start fights with the other woman and let’s see where it gets you. If he wants her, he wants her. Let him go!”

“I can’t just lose him.”

“Look for a job. I’m taking Khosi with me. This environment is not good for a child. I’m sure this last days they won’t be doing anything so much at school so I’m leaving with her. If you want her, you can always come see her.” She says then walks away. I gulp down the remaining wine on the glass then pour again. I can still see their faces in my head. Eric looked happy. He looked happy with her. He never looked that happy with me.

I keep wondering if maybe there was something I should have done differently. But then I did everything. Nothing worked.

From time to time again he would still go back to her. I even knew if he's not home by nine in the evening then he's not coming. I look at my reflection on the bottle of wine. This is not me. I once was on top of the world. I knew the direction my life was taking but that was till I married Eric. I thought he was an Angel. I lay my world at his feet, leaked the ground he walked on.

"Sma wants to talk to you." Ma announces getting in the kitchen again. She hands me her phone then walks away. She looks so defeated.

"Hello?"

"Khanya what's going on?"

"Sma Eric is leaving me."

"You shouldn't have started the fire. I told you, I will fix him when I walk out of here. Don't worry about him. I will sort him out. But I got you a lawyer."

"Thanks."

"You know I love you. Go get a job. Stop being stubborn. You know that bastard won't support Khosi."

"I have been a fool all this years haven't I?"

"It's life. We all have been fools sometime but we can choose to be smart in the long run. Khanya you were never like this. That bastard broke your self confidence and esteem. But you know what you are capable of. He won't get away with this."

"I just want everything to be ok."

"And it will be. Lunzulu will sort everything out, including your divorce. You married in community of property right?"

"Yes.."

"Good. You get half of everything. That's the price for your daughter but for hurting you.. He's going to regret it big time."

"I will get a job."

"Good. You are a doctor. You won't struggle that much and stay away from alcohol."

I sigh. She always tells him everything.

"Ok."

"Take care ok? And don't worry about accommodation. I have found a place for you."

"Ok.." He then drops the call. I put the phone down then walk to the bedroom. Mama is packing Khosi's clothes.

I sit in the bed.

"I will look for a job."

She looks at me then smiles. "That's my girl."

"Yeah.. I guess I just have to live with the fact that I failed my marriage."

"You didn't fail anything Nokukhanya. He lost a precious stone to dust."

"Yeah but —" I'm cut short by a loud bang on the door. I look at Ma.

"Expecting a visitor?"

"No." I stand up then walk to the door. My things are still all over Lerato's sitting room. Opening the door I laugh.

"What are you doing here?"

"So you wanted to kill me?" She screams.

"Lindiwe leave before I call security. I don't want to talk to you."

"If you were looking for Eric's attention, you won't get it. He's mine and I know your little brain is probably thinking that you will get something out from your divorce but we shall see. You and that daughter of yours won't get a single thing! Eric and I are going to get married and move to a better and bigger house. We will be very happy while you suffer with your daughter."

I start laughing. I can't believe I have allowed this floozy to hurt me all this years. I can't even believe I thought she was above me.

"You are sick in the head."

"You are the sick one Nokukhanya. How can you try killing —"

"Next time I won't just try but I will really kill you. You don't know me!"

"You lost him! Deal with it like a lady. And go lose weight."

I laugh even harder.

"If you won the man, what are you doing here? You better go and buy some more clothes because I'm coming after everything. Every single thing."

FOUR

“Mommy will call ok?”

She nods, I can't help but notice her sad face but there's nothing I can do. I hate separating from my daughter but maybe I do need the space.

“I will call.” I tell Ma.

“I know, take care of yourself and put yourself first. You deserve it. This is not the end of the world. You still have a long way to go.”

I smile then hug her one last time. “Thank you.”

“I love you baby..” She whispers.

“I love you too.” I let her go then hug Khosi one last time.

“I will visit ok?”

“I'm going to miss you.”

I smile away my tears. “Me too baby. I'm going to miss you too. Mommy loves you ok?”

“Ok.”

They get in the the uber I hired for them which is supposed to take them to the airport. I stand rooted by the door as the uber moves. I want to badly cry but I'm way past that stage. I have cried for years now and I think I have run out of tears. I woke up early in the morning today so to burn the 20 litter bottle. Now there is no proof that I burnt the house, I touched nothing at his house.

Walking inside the house I look at my mess in Lerato's sitting room. I'm expecting transport so to move me to the new house. I start repacking some of the things I unpacked from the boxes. As I do that my phone starts ringing. I take it from my hoodie's pocket. It's a foreign number, probably Lerato.

I quickly answer.

“Hello?”

“Hey girl.. How are you?” She starts.

“Hey, I'm fine. How was your journey?”

“It was ok. I talked to the minister yesterday, I'm taking a plane back home in an hour's time. How is it going there?”

“I'm at your house though Sma said he found a place for me so I'm moving out.”

I hear her sigh. “You know I don't mind us staying together.”

“Yeah but you should see how things are.” I say eyeing all the boxes that has filled her sitting room.

“Whatever that makes you comfortable. How is he?” She asks. They once dated but it didn’t work out sadly. But then they always fuck.

“He’s fine, he’s getting out next month.”

“That’s so great.”

“Yeah.. Look let me finish repacking.”

“Ok. Bye..”

“Bye..”

I hang up then go back to work. Every second I pack, all that’s on my mind is Eric. People think everything is just easy as leaving. They don’t understand what 10 years can do to a person. There’s no way I can just wake up and say I don’t love Eric anymore, it’s impossible. I shared my life with this man for good 10 years. I suddenly stop packing. Without thinking twice I take my car keys then walk outside locking behind me.

I have made up my mind. I get in my car then drive to his office. I have to make him see what he’s leaving behind.

I park my car by his company’s parking lot then walk inside the building. I walk towards the reception.

“Hey Carol, is my husband in?” She looks at me for a while. I think it’s the way I’m dressed. The skin tights and oversized hoodie. I should have changed. I probably look like hood ratchet.

“Uh.. He’s.. Over there!” She says pointing at the elevator. They are walking towards me. Together while smiling. I take a deep breath then meet them halfway. Eric is angry while his mistress just rolls her eyes.

“Nokukhanya what are you doing here?” He whispers rudely.

“She’s not what you think she is,” I tell him making her laugh.

“Really now Nokukhanya?” She asks. “You really are obsessed. He doesn’t want you no more. Let him be!”

I ignore her.

“But that’s not why I’m here. If it’s Lindiwe you want, go ahead Eric. It’s fine. I won’t even bother you no more. You never deserved me to begin with. She will never love you the way I loved you and you will regret this. In all the years I let you make me your doorstep, I’m coming for you. I just want you to remember it.”

“Ohh now what are you going to do? Try to burn us again?” Lindiwe asks.

“I never tried to burn you.”

“You know what Nokukhanya—”

“Let me handle this Babe..” Eric says.

“As I was saying, I’m coming after everything. Remember that this company you own.. I own 60% of the shares.”

He looks at me.

“Babe what’s she talking about?” Lindiwe asks Eric softly.

“He didn’t tell you? Everything he owns, I own half of it. This company.. I own 60% of the shares. He doesn’t have any because.. Well he thought putting the shares under my name was a smart move.”

“You wouldn’t dare Nokukhanya!” He shouts.

“I would. You think you can just dump me like this huh? Humiliate me in front of your whore? When I’m done with you, you won’t be left with anything!”

“You whore!” He says then grabs my neck. He’s strangling me. I’m struggling breathing. I feel dizzy. Suddenly he let’s me go and I start laughing.

“I’m going to report you for assault. Maybe a night in jail would do you good.”

“I’m going to kill you Nokukhanya!” He threatens.

“You are going to lose everything! You are going to be left with nothing! I loved you Eric! I gave you my all and this is how you thank me? I took you to school! I made your dreams come true! And I’m going to make them disappear. Watch me!”

“You bitch!” He shouts as I walk out of the building. Tears sting my eyes as I hurry to my car. I want to breakdown but I won’t. Not anymore! I’m over that. I start my car then drive back to Lerato’s house. As soon as I park the car my phone starts ringing. It’s an unknown number.

“Hello?”

“Hey it’s Lunzulu, I just contacted the movers and they are on your way there.”

I take in a deep breath. “Thank you.”

“Thank your brother. Anyways.. We can meet up to discuss your case.”

“Eric strangled me, can I file a case of assault?”

“Yes. Matter of fact you should, this will work to our advantage. Where did this all happen?”

“His company.”

“Ok, can I come over there right now?”

“Yeah.. It’s ok.”

He hangs up.

1 2 3 4 5.. I start counting. My head is buzzing. I keep counting till I feel as if I’m going crazy.

There’s a knock on the door. That was quick.

I walk to the door then open it. It’s him.

I open the door wider and let him in.

He stands where there's space.

"It's really crowded here."

"Yeah.. It's my friends house." I mutter then sit on the floor where I have been sitting all along.

"Umh I looked into your case, as I have said, they have no proof so you might get off easily this one. But I wouldn't advise you to do that again."

I look at him then smile.

"I won't."

"Good. Now about him strangling you.."

"I own 60% of the company. His company. I told him that then he strangled me."

"You do?"

I nod. "Yeah.."

"You do know that the company will probably be liquidated right?"

"Whatever. I don't care anymore."

"And from the divorce, what do you want?"

I look at him. "I want what's rightfully mine. I'm not going to walk out with nothing."

"Ok. Since you are married in community of property, I'm sure it won't be a struggle."

"I hope so."

"Do you have a child?"

"Yes."

"Well this means he will be required be to pay child maintenance."

"Ok."

"Sma said I should help you find a job."

I look at him.

"Don't worry about that. I will sort it out on my own."

"Ok. Well then we will talk. We need to report him for strangling you."

"Ok."

He looks at me for a while before he walks out. I lie flat on the ground but only to stand up minutes later. Lying down won't get me anywhere. I take my phone then call Ivy, one of my fake friends who was also or still is part of the housewives club. She doesn't take long to answer.

“Hey sweet Noku..”

“Hey Ivy, how are you?”

“I’m fine girl.. I just came back from my shopping spree in london.” She says giggling.

“That’s great.”

“I know. You should join me for my spa day tomorrow.”

“I would love to.. But that’s not why I called.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah.. I’m looking for a job.”

“A job?” She sounds shocked. All the ladies in the housewives club don’t work.

“Yes. At the hospital.”

“Ohh.. Uhh I will talk to a friend of mine. There’s this new private hospital. I think they are in need of doctors. You can get something.”

“Please talk to your friend. I would really appreciate it.”

“Ok sweet Noku. But girlfriend what’s going on? There are rumors.”

“I will tell you sometime but right now I just need a job.”

“Don’t worry, you are my girlfriend. Let me call him right away.”

“Ok.” I hang up then look around the house. The sooner I move out the better. After a while I hear a truck outside. I walk outside and the movers have arrived. Great.

•

“Do you like it?” He asks.

I chuckle.. “I love it Sma!”

“Good. You don’t need that bastard.”

“Thank you so much..”

“It’s ok. We will talk.”

“Ok.”

I put my phone away then walk around the house. It’s not as big as the house I burnt but it’s beautiful and has this warm atmosphere. I love it. It has three bedrooms. I rub my flat belly.

“Its now me, you and Khosi..” I mutter.

My furniture has already been unpacked. The movers really did everything though the house was partially furnished.

I sit down on the couch and just close my eyes. The last three days have been the worst of my life but they opened my eyes.

Maybe Eric just never loved me. He never stood up for me whenever his family attacked Khosi and I. He was never there emotionally. Maybe the reason he stuck with me all this years is because I took him to school. And also because of the company that was started with my money. Slowly I start resenting him.

I'm startled by my phone ringing, it's Ivy.

"Hello,"

"Hey girl.. I spoke to my friend and he said you can go to the private hospital tomorrow. I'm so excited for you."

I almost scream but I hold myself. At least if I get a job, I will keep Khosi at the private school.

"Thank you so much Ivy."

She giggles. "It's ok. I saw that ugly bitch with your husband. Girl you should have told me at least."

I sigh. I painted my marriage to be so good in people's eyes, how was I going to tell another rich housewife that my husband is nothing but a cheat?

"I'm sorry. I was just.. Hurt you know."

"It's ok. She's not that pretty. I'm going to make sure you get the job. You deserve it."

"Thank you so much Ivy."

"It's ok. Maybe we can do dinner? I will invite Diana and Ntombi."

"No, I'm tired I just want to rest."

"But girl you should fight for your marriage. That man is yours."

"I think three in a marriage is a big number. I will just walk away with the little dignity I have. This is not the end of the world."

"So you are just going to let that bitch take your husband?" She asks, I can easily feel the judgement in her tone.

"There are three of us in this marriage, it's too overcrowded." I say and I feel so confident.

"Ok, so dinner?"

"I will take a rain check but thank you so much."

"Anytime." I hang up and minutes later she sends me directions to the hospital. For the first time in ages, I kneel down. Ma says sometimes God is needed. I don't really believe in God but today I humble myself before him. The baggage is just too heavy for my shoulders. I open mouth but no word comes out.

“Just talk to him. He’s your friend.” Mama’s voice rings in my head. She always tells me this but maybe talking to the air will help.

I open my mouth and I tell him about my pain. I don’t stop though I constantly feel stupid for talking to myself.

It has really gotten to this.

FIVE

I look at myself on the mirror for a while. I like my black dress. I know I lost weight but my figure is still there. I'm regretting cutting my hair but I'm slowly embracing my look and constantly reminding myself that a new start is necessary. New me actually.

I finally just went to the salon yesterday and just got a clean bald. My head looks big but I swat any negativity away and either way, the head wrap pretty covers everything. I need to start staying positive. All the negativity is not necessary. I'm going to show Eric that I'm fine without him. I get my heels then put them on and I'm good to go. They are actually not my heels but Lerato's but I'm sure she won't mind. The same way I didn't mind when she stole my red dress. Though I did just a bit but moghel plainly denied it.

"You can do this Khanya. You can do it!" I say to myself then walk out of the house. I love this house, it's comfortable and warm. Yesterday I spent my time fixing Khosi's room. I'm sure she will love it. I still don't have a clue on how I'm going to break the news to her. I don't want to hurt my baby, she's already going through a lot as it is.

Getting in my car I immediately start it then start driving to the hospital. I'm quite nervous, it's been years since I last practiced. The moment I park in front of the hospital I immediately feel some sort of confidence glide in me. Stepping out of the car, I relish on the fresh chilled air that hits my face. It looks like it's about to rain. They do say rain is a good sign so I charge my energy to positive vibes. No one has to know about my failed marriage. Walking inside the hospital I pass the canteen on my right and walk straight to the reception. The receptionist gives me a warm smile.

"Good morning, how can I help you?"

"I'm Nokukhanya Khu.. Nokukhanya Ferguson, I'm here to see Mr Zulu." I say smiling. If I'm getting a divorce then I might as well use my maiden name.

The lady smiles.

"Second floor, first door to your right." She says and my eyes fall on her tag. Nthabeleng Mokwena.

"Thanks Nthabi," I say then walk away. I walk to the elevator then summon the lift. The doors open and I get in as some two ladies walk out.

You can do this Khanya! I keep telling myself. The moment the doors open again, I reown my confidence then walk to the first door on the right. I knock slightly before I'm told to come in. I take in a deep breath then walk right inside the office. A man, probably late 50's or early 60's, is sitting on the chair. I smile as soon as I walk in making him smile back.

"Mrs Khumalo?"

I walk towards him extending my hand.

"Ms Ferguson, in the middle of getting a divorce." I say and funny enough I don't feel the wave of sadness when I mention my divorce.

He laughs. "And who on earth would want to divorce such a beautiful lady like you?" He asks laughing. I hand him my hand and we share a brief handshake.

"A man who doesn't know the value of a real rare diamond." I say smiling. "Thank you for agreeing to see me Mr Zulu."

"Patrick please. I was told you are a doctor."

"I'm a surgeon." I say handing him my CV.

"Wow!" He says opening it.

"Impressive.." He mutters after a while.

"Thank you."

"I recently opened this hospital at the memory of my late wife." He says and I can tell she meant a lot to him.

"But as you can see.. I'm too old to be doing this. I should be in Bahamas having a good time while waiting for my death."

He says making me chuckle. "I'm going to hire you." He says making my heart skip.

"Uhh.. Thank you."

He smiles. "I'm hiring you because I feel you can do this."

"I'm glad you think so."

"Yes.. But.. You are the only surgeon. There are a couple who are going to be hired and we are also expecting a few more but.. We are going to have interns here in a few months."

"I don't know what to say but thank you Mr.. Patrick."

He smiles then looks at my CV again. "You are 33?"

"Yes."

"My son is 36 and single."

I laugh. "Not all of us are blessed at the love department."

He shakes his head. "You youngster, he never even visits but.. Back to you. I'm going to give you the position of being chief surgeon though I really don't have much of a choice."

I gasp in shock.

"What?"

"Yes. That's if you want the position."

"I do! I do!"

"I love your energy. The confidence. Just wait here while your contract is being fixed or are you in a hurry?"

"No. No I'm not, I will wait."

"Good."

•

Waiting for the contract was exciting but reading through it is more exciting and signing is the best part. The pay leaves my jaw right on the floor though. Who gets paid 85k for just being a surgeon?

The highest pay I have ever gotten was 30k. For some reason I keep rereading through the contract hoping they made a mistake. This is not real. It's not realistic.

"85k?" I ask in shock. I can't hold it anymore.

"We signed a deal with the government. They are going to be giving us patients. The deal will start acting after a while and when it does, the pay will rise."

I think I can't hear properly.

"85k... Wow! I'm in. When can I start?"

I ask making him laugh.

"That.. That spirit is beautiful. I will ask one of our staff to show you around and you can start immediately, tomorrow actually. We really need a surgeon around here."

"Anything is fine."

He takes his office phone then dials a number.

"Hello Nthabeleng, can you please bring someone to show our chief surgeon around." He says then hangs up.

"Well, someone is coming up."

"Thank you so much Patrick.. —"

I'm interrupted when he starts coughing. He looks like he's struggling breathing. I stand up out of panic then rush to his side.

"Are you... Uhh water!" I say grabbing a jug on the table then quickly filling his glass. I help him drink his water and once he's calm I sigh sitting down.

"Thank you," he says wiping his face with a handkerchief.

"It's ok." I want to ask him if everything is ok but I'm scared of overstepping the line. Just because the old man is friendly, it doesn't mean I shouldn't know my place.

Just then the door opens and some lady walks in. She's wearing the same uniform like Nthabi's.

“Hello Noma, meet Chief surgeon uhh Nokukhanya.” He says. The way he’s friendly with everyone makes me just want to be a better person.

Noma looks at me then smiles. I smile back politely.

“Noma is a potter. Noma please show Nokukhanya around... I am sorry, Show Dr Ferguson around, together with her office. She’s starting tomorrow. I hope you like it.” He says making my smile widen.

“Thank you Patrick.”

He just smiles then I walk out with Noma. As we walk through the passage she decides to talk with me.

“This hospital started functioning a month ago. We are still new around here. All of us.” She says.

“It’s a beautiful hospital.”

“It is. I’m studying being a nurse. I hope they take me in here.” I look at her, she looks so young and vibrant. She reminds me of myself before Eric. I was also vibrant and determined. Just like her.

She starts showing me around. It’s a big hospital. By the time we are back at the ground floor I’m exhausted. I really liked my office. It’s big and has a view of the city.

“Ok, that’s all.”

I smile.

“Thank you so much Noma,”

“You are welcome, I better go back to work. See you tomorrow chief surgeon.”

“You too Noma.” Walking out of the hospital I want to jump up and down. I could never guess for my day to go the way it went. 85k is far more than the money Eric gave me. The wife allowance. The moment I get in my car my phone starts ringing. I answer quickly when I see who’s calling.

“Hello, and you are speaking to the chief surgeon of Molly’s private hospital.” I answer.

She starts screaming and I can’t help joining her.

“Friend! Damnnnnnnn!”

“I’m so happy. I can’t believe this. I swear, God is real!”

“I’m glad you know.”

“Damn girl when I told this nigga yesterday that I badly wanted this job I never thought he would bless me with it.”

She starts laughing.

“Well maybe it’s time you start believing. I’m so happy for you.”

“And my pay.. Girl I get paid 85k monthly.”

“Don’t be surprised, some people get paid far more than that. I’m glad you got the job friend. When are you starting?”

“Tomorrow.”

“We need to celebrate. I know it’s Wednesday but we have to. Let’s meet by our favorite restaurant in 20 minutes”

“Ok.”

I sigh when she hangs up. Everything feels so surreal. With my pay, I will manage keeping my life going. I start my car then start driving to the restaurant. I remind myself that I have to go to the police station to report assault. I did take pictures yesterday. If Eric thinks its over, he hasn’t seen anything. After I’m done with him, he will know to never mess with a woman’s feelings ever again.

I park my car on the free space on the restaurant’s parking lot then step out. Locking the door I hold my handbag and walk inside the restaurant. My eyes fall on Lerato. She’s already here. That was quick.

I hug her tightly, I missed her.

“Girl you look smoking hot!”

I smile. “Thanks. You had a meeting here?”

“Yeah. There’s a scoop but that’s not why we are here.. Tell me about your new job.” She says as I sit down.

“Apparently the hospital recently opened. I’m starting tomorrow. Well.. I’m the only surgeon at the moment but still..”

She laughs. “Oskalayo! Chief surgeon!”

“I’m so happy. Khosi will continue at the private school. She can even keep her swimming classes. I was so scared for my baby.”

“I’m so happy for you. I hope there are hot doctors there.”

I laugh shaking my head. “For now it’s only me and Khosi and her or he.” I say rubbing my flat belly. “I’m done with men. You give him everything so that he can dump you when he’s finally something.”

“Eric is an asshole. I don’t even know what you saw in him.”

“Let’s not talk about him. I don’t want to spoil my mood.”

“Sorry, should we order?”

“Yeah.. I haven’t eaten anything since I woke up.”

She raises her hand summoning the waiter. We order then continue chatting.

“The interview went well. My boss loved it.”

“Well I’m glad.”

“Yeah. You know the other day I was—”

She's cut short by a waiter who's passing an announcement. Something about a car parked on the reserved parking lot and should be moved before towed.

"Girl ain't that your numberplate?" She asks and it immediately registers. I laugh standing up.

"My brain is so switched."

"I know you are already thinking of cutting people." She says standing up too. We walk outside and straight to my car. As soon as I park my car on another free space, a beautiful new edition white ranger rover parks on the space I just moved from. The reserved space. It's so beautiful, makes me feel as if my range rover sport that's almost two years old is ugly.

I walk and stand near the restaurant's entrance with Lerato who's staring at the white range rover.

"Girl I want that car."

I chuckle. "Buy it then."

A few moments later, a man steps out. Ok, I have seen hot man but fuck! Not this one.

"Shiiit! Girl I want him!" Lerato whispers.

"He's too hot for us."

We laugh but stop when his companion also steps out.

"What?" Lerato shouts. At least they are far, they can't possibly hear us.

"I knew there was something about this girl!" I say then laugh.

"Haibo girl! Your husband's mistress is playing him with this hot piece! Ngeke!"

"Lindiwe is woke!"

We both laugh. They kiss each other for a while standing in front of the car. I just want to take a picture but I don't.

"I can't wait to see Eric's face when you tell him."

I look at Lerato then chuckle. "Tell him what? Look Sisi, we are going to go back in there and do what we are here for. This is new Nokukhanya and new Nokukhanya minds her own business." I say then start walking back inside the restaurant. Lerato follows after me laughing.

SIX

I walk in my house, I like the fact that it's my house and my house only. I like my freedom though I do wish if my daughter were around. I take off my shoes then throw myself on the couch. Before I can do anything my phone starts ringing. I take it out quickly only to regret it. Why is he calling me?

I answer annoyed.

"Eric.."

"You bitch!" He shouts. Probably he has already been arrested.

"Ah ah.. Talk to me nice!"

"You are going to pay for this!"

I laugh. "Pay for what? Look, call Lindiwe to come bail you out because if she doesn't, you are going to sleep in there. I heard there's a lot that happens in jail. You wouldn't to sleep in there. It can get nasty..."

"You seem to have forgotten me Nokukhanya."

I switch in the TV while putting my feet on the couch. "What do you want?"

"So you think just because you—"

"I said talk to me nice! Nigga I'm your God, you better respect your God cause if God gets angry then God will punish your lil dick." I say laughing making him drop the call. I put my phone away then watch TV. Reporting him to the police for assault is turning out to be the best thing I did today including the little movie I saw of his mistress. That guy Lindiwe was with looks more richer than Eric making me wonder what Lindiwe really wants though I'm not concerned. She's not my concern. I stand up after a while then just go take a shower. I ended up spending the whole day with Lerato. After my shower I decide to call Lonzulu hoping I'm not disturbing him anyhow. He answers on the third ring.

"Khanya,"

"Hi. I hope I didn't catch you at a bad time."

"No it's ok."

"I was wondering if you can draw up the divorce papers?"

"Yes of cause. We will have to meet then talk about all the assets you guys share."

"Ok. Uhh there's really one thing I really want from the divorce. Apart from other things I want of cause."

"What is it?"

"The company. I don't want Eric to take that company. I own 60% of the shares and he owns nothing."

“That will be very hard. He will probably try fighting you then the company will probably be liquidated then both of you get half of whatever comes out of it.”

“No.. What about right now? If I sell the shares, then transfer the money to someone else’s account, What will happen?”

“I think maybe we should discuss all this in person.”

“Ok,”

“Good night.”

“Night.”

I drop the call then throw myself on the bed. I don’t even try feeling sorry for Eric, he did this all to himself and he’s going to reap what he sew.

Waking up the following morning, I check the time first. It’s just before six. I guess my body clock is used to waking up this time. I immediately go and take a shower. Once I’m refreshed I start dressing, I take my time trying to look elegant and sexy. After all, I’m Chief Surgeon. I put on my black slacks and black lace top tucked in. I take a black and white head wrap and fix my makeup. I take my time to look good, something Eric despised because it’s what ‘whores’ do. He hated Lerato because she was my ‘whore’ friend.

After I put on my heels I grab my handbag and I’m out. I don’t feel hungry so I pass by my regular coffee shop.

“Wow!” Julius says smiling. The cashier and well.. The guy who makes the coffee. It’s actually his shop and it has become a big thing because this is where the rich housewives club hang around.

“What?” I ask giggling.

“You look beautiful..”

“Thank you.”

“The usual?”

“Please.. With a chocolate muffin.”

“Coming right up.” He disappears for a while and when he comes back he has my coffee and muffin. I take out my credit card from my purse then hand it to him.

“So where are you going?” He asks taking my card.

“I’m going to work.”

“Wow! I’m so proud of you.. Pin.” I take the machine then put my pin before handing it to him again.

“Thanks.”

“Uhh.. Your card is declining.”

“What? Try again..”

I know what’s happening but I refuse to believe that Eric would go to this extent.

“Still..”

“Uhh try this one.” I say taking out another card and giving it to him. We do the same process again and again, it declines. I laugh, he really has outdone himself this time around.

“Don’t worry K.. It’s on the house.”

“No.. Let me count —”

“I will pay for it.” A voice says from behind me. Deep and rich. I turn almost immediately but to only wish I hadn’t. He’s really handsome.

“I will pay for you.” He says.

“Oh no, it’s ok. I will handle it.” I say taking out some few notes and coins from my purse. I can’t have Lindiwe’s boyfriend or whatever he is paying for me. I count the notes and money and sigh when I see it’s actually enough. I give it all to Julias who just smiles.

“I like this Khanya Kh—”

“Ferguson. Nokukhanya Ferguson.” I say laughing while taking my coffee and muffin. I avoid looking at Lindiwe’s boyfriend but I do catch a breath of his cologne. He smells good. Getting outside it’s raining and my car is no where to be seen. What happened? Did my car get stolen? But...

Just then a security guard walks towards me.

“Mrs Nokukhanya—”

“Where’s my car?!”

He hands me a piece of paper and I see that he’s holding my handbag and my file. As I read through the paper I get so angry. This is not happening to me. Not today of all days. How can Eric have my car taken? He bought it for me as a birthday present, it was mine.

I take my handbag and file from the security guard but it’s a bit hard to hold everything. I am standing right in the rain not sure of what to even do. All the courage and confidence I have been building is slowly being washed away by the rain.

“Need help?” He asks standing besides me. I take a deep breath, I can’t break now. I start walking, I don’t know where in going but I just start walking.

As I reach another building from the coffee shop his car starts driving besides me slowly.

“Hey.. I don’t know you but I’m only trying to help you here.” He says from his car.

I look at him then back where I’m going. I decide to take the turn and his car follows.

“Ok.. I can’t believe I’m actually begging to help you.” I look at him then laugh.

“Please.. It’s raining. You really look too good to have the rain ruin your look.”

"I don't need your help, thanks."

"You need it. I'm just trying to help. It's drizzling but it's going to get worse. Ain't you going to work?"

"That's none of your business."

"I know but you really need to get to work. Come on Khanya.." I look at him shocked. I wonder if Lindiwe has told him and all this is a...

"I heard that guy call you that. Then you said your name is Nokukhanya Ferguson. Please let me drop you off."

"No I'm good."

He chuckles. "You are stubborn." He says.

"Good to know." Just then hail starts. The ice painfully hits my skin. It really couldn't get better.

"My car is still available for free."

I find my legs walking towards the passenger door, totally disobeying my brain. I sigh as soon as I get in the car. It's now raining really hard. He turns the car that now it's looking where I was coming from.

"This road leads you to some industry. Where are you going?" I sigh, I'm already in his car so I might just as well. If he's a serial killer then well.. I hope they say really good things at my funeral

"Molly's private hospital."

"You are a doctor?"

"Surgeon."

"Wow! Me too.." He says.

"Liar!"

He laughs. "Caught me. Anyways I'm Kenya. And don't laugh. I'm Kenya as in the country Kenya."

"Wow!"

"I know it's weird."

"Maybe your parents were trying to be unique." I blurt out only to regret it.

"Out of all my 4 brothers, I got the weird name."

"You have four brothers?" I'm now interested.

"Yeah. And one sister. It still baffles me how they could just name me Kenya. I really would have taken any name not Kenya. I would have loved being called something of origin not this.."

I laugh. "You should love your name." I say, something that my mother used to tell Sma when we were young. He used to hate his name because he said it was girlish.

"I wish.. So married?" He asks glancing at my ring. I sigh looking at it. My ring for 10 years.

“Getting a divorce actually.” I say then remember everything. I look at him then at my ring.

“How’s Lindiwe?” I ask.

He briefly looks at me looking confused.

“How do you know her?”

“Let’s just say she’s an acquaintance.”

“Well my fiancé is ok. I’m so surprised you know her.”

I laugh. “You are getting married to her?”

“Yeah.. I have been away for sometime and now that I’m back, I figured why not just do it.”

“So when is your wedding? She never told me.”

“In two weeks. She’s been planning everything. I guess she just forgot to tell you.”

“I’m really happy for you. Tell her Nokukhanya said hi and it’s been long.”

“I will definitely tell her. And we are here..” He says parking in front of the door of the hospital. I smile.

“Thank you so much Kenya.. Don’t forget to greet Lindiwe for me and I will definitely come to your wedding.”

He smiles nodding. “I won’t.” As soon as I get off his car he drives away. It’s still raining. I rush inside then walk past Nthabi giving her a huge smile. As soon as I get in my office I settle down. It’s been a morning. I know probably Eric is waiting for me to call him but not today, today he won’t get my attention. I’m sure someone bailed him out. I take out my mirror from the bag then quickly fix my makeup. I still look good regardless of my morning from hell. I notice a white coat on my table. It looks new.

As I get my hands on it, I’m paged by Nthabi. My first task on the job has come up. I need to perform an appendectomy on a patient. A nurse is in my office minutes later with the patient’s file. I’m quiet nervous, I haven’t done this in a long time.

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“Gods job!” Dr Lawrence says as we step out of the lab. He’s a doctor around here and he’s actually nice.

“Thanks, we all did it.”

“You did it most.. I will brief her family.”

“Ok, thanks.” I walk to the changing room then quickly take off the scrubs. First surgery has went well. I feel my confidence come back. If Eric thinks cutting me off will stop me, he’s in for a surprise. I walk with Nurse Sharon to my office. She gives the files of the patients I need to attend. The moment I get in my office I start going through the files. I page Nurse Sharon and have her prepare the lady with neoplasm. I

don't want to get over excited but I am. Being in the lab just reminded me of what it feels like. I missed the feeling. The adrenaline.

As I start preparing for my next patient my phone starts ringing. I answer almost immediately when I see that it's Sma.

"Hey.. I heard you got the job."

"I'm so happy.. I already did my first surgery. Wasn't anything that much serious but the next one is."

"I'm happy if you are happy."

"I am, even Eric's cunning ways won't stop me."

"What did he do this time around?"

"He cut me off."

"That bastard! Don't worry, I will be out in a while."

"It's ok. I'm setting up a board meeting tomorrow at lunch. I'm having the board vote him out. And have his mistress chew him on the other side. That girl is getting married to two guys at the same time."

"He's going to regret playing you rough like this. When I'm done with him, he won't be walking."

"I'm on the last the level of caring. My child and I are better off without him. He may think he's on top of the world but he's down with the shit. It's a shame."

SEVEN

I look outside through the window of my office. It's still raining really hard. I keep wondering how I'm going to get home, I already tried calling Lerato but her phone led me straight to voicemail. I don't even have money on me, if I did I would call a cab. I really despise Eric right now. I look at my watch, it's just after six. After a while I decide to just swallow my little pride and ask for help. I will probably look like an unorganized person. Definitely looking at the rain is not helping anything. I grab my things then walk to Dr Lawrence's office. It's not that far from my office. I slightly knock on the door and I hear a faint voice telling me to come in. I walk right in then smile. He's busy packing his things, our shifts are one hour apart but since there isn't much going on today I'm free to go home.

"Hey.."

I smile. "Hi, I have a little issue." I say then inhale deeply. "I'm facing.. Well I faced problems with my car in the morning so... I really don't have a car right. I'm asking for a lift if you don't mind."

He starts laughing. "It's ok. I understand, where are you going?" I sigh feeling relieved. I tell him where I'm meeting Lunzulu to discuss the divorce process.

"Ok, let's go."

We walk out together then go to his car. As he drives me to the restaurant where I'm meeting Lunzulu I find out that he has a wife and two kids. Also the fact that he's been married for 7 years and that's he's very happy. I think I too was once happy like him. I don't tell him about Eric though, only about Khosi. Talking about her makes me realize just how much I miss her.

"Thank you so much Kabo." I say stepping out of his car. I got to find out his name during the drive. We have arrived at the restaurant. I rush inside the restaurant though the rain is calm now.

As soon as I step inside I spot Lunzulu but he's not alone. He's with Anaya and they look so cute together. I bat my mind from thinking about her mother. I walk towards them then sit down.

"Hey.." He says while Anaya regards me with the widest grin on earth.

"Hello.. I see we are happy." Lunzulu laughs.

"She's getting her favourite because she did well st school."

"Daddy says it's because I passed."

"Well high five to you girl!" I say slapping her hand slight with mine. She's really cute.

"I'm sorry but I had to bring her."

"It's ok. I understand." Just then the waiter arrives with ice cream. I guess it's for little Missy seeing the way she starts clapping her hands. There's a time I used to pray to God for such a relationship between Khosi and Eric but it never happened. I never wanted to accept it but Eric always seemed disgusted by his own daughter. I don't even remember a time he showed love to her. He hated his daughter together with his family. I never knew it was possible for a person to hate his own blood till Eric.

“Want to order anything or..?”

“No I’m fine, thank you.”

“Ok, so I looked at the list you emailed me a few hours ago. Everything is likely going to be divided between both of you. Even the company.”

I sigh. “Wow!”

“And by the look of things, he’s going to try fighting you and this may really drag the case.”

“He cut me off. Had my car taken and cut off my bank cards.”

“We can demand for everything back.”

“No. Let him keep everything. I want to have him voted out of the company tomorrow.”

“Well that can only fix him but at the end, he’s going to get half of everything.”

“I don’t think I still want to fight with him. I just want the process done and finished.”

“I will draw up the divorce papers.”

“Thank you so much.”

“I’m just doing my job.” I start gathering my things.

“You can stay with us... We don’t mind.”

I smile. “I would love to but I really had a long day. Bye Anaya..”

“Bye..” She waves at me.

Walking out of the restaurant I immediately call Lerato. I’m relieved when she answers.

“Girl..”

“Hey, I need a lift.”

“Uhh ok. Where are you?”

I tell her the name of the restaurant then just wait for her. As I stand there my phone starts ringing and it’s an unsaved number. I answer reluctantly.

“Nokukhanya speaking hello?”

“What are you playing at?”

I laugh. It gets interesting by the day really. “No, I’m not playing at anything. I just want to say congratulations on your wedding that’s coming up in two weeks.”

“What do you want?”

“Oh me? Nothing.. Nothing.. I want nothing.”

“Nokukhanya if you know what’s good for you, you will stay far away from Kenya.”

“The same way you did with my husband?”

“Eric doesn’t love you. Why are you so bitter?”

“Oh no hun, I’m not bitter. But there’s something that I want come to think of it.”

“And what makes you think that I will give it to you?”

“Because you certainly don’t want me telling Kenya what you have been up to in his absence.”

“He won’t believe you.”

“Why won’t he? I have no reason no reason to lie to him.”

I hear her groan. “What do you want?”

“Ahaaa! Now we are talking. I want to be your maid of honour and make my best friend your second maid of honour. It’s been a rough month, we deserve a little bit of fun.”

“You must be crazy.”

“Well I can be crazy telling Kenya.”

“First of all... You...—”

“All of first bitch! I’m on top of this game! Respect me. Better yet, pray me. Now I will leave you to arrange for our measurements to be taken. Your wedding is close. We need to be prepared.”

I hang up then laugh. I can’t help but feel it’s still to early for Eric to find out and regret.

Just then Lerato’s car parks right besides me. I get inside and I’m immediately welcomed by warmth.

“Hey, how was your first day?” She asks driving away.

“Amazing! But much more amazing that now you and I are attending a wedding in two weeks and we are the maids of honours.”

“What?”

“We are attending Lindiwe’s wedding.”

She starts laughing. “Hold up! Let’s start from the start. What happened?”

I tell her everything while we laugh.

“Maybe you should date Kenya.. Just for control.”

“Nope.. He’s not my type.”

“And what is your type?”

“I don’t know but it’s definitely not him.”

“So what are you going to do with no money. I can give you some and borrow you the KIA.”

“Thank you so much friend.”

"It's ok. I will pass by debonairs and get us pizza."

She does pass by debonairs and get us pizza. She drives to my house after getting us wine and we hang out a bit till she has to go. I don't want to spend too much time focussing in my loneliness so I look at the files I brought home with. Tomorrow is going to be a very long day but I'm ready for it. I decide to call Ma before I sleep. I badly want to talk to my baby. She takes a while to answer.

"Nokukhanya.." She sounds so in distress. I get worried immediately.

"Ma what's going on? Are you ok?"

"Nokukhanya nothing is ok." She whispers and now I'm worried.

"Ma tell me.. What's going on?"

"Khosi.." She says and my heart skips. What happened to my baby?

"Ma what's wrong with Khosi? What happened to my baby?"

"She's missing."

It feels like the world has stopped. Everything has stopped moving. The only thing I can hear is my heart beating. It starts getting faint till I can't really hear anything anymore. Just silence. I can't see anything but darkness. All I can think of is my daughter before it all just melts away.

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"Khanya?" A voice calls out but it sounds so far.

"Khanya.." Again. This time it's a little louder than before. I'm slowly gripping into reality. I can feel movement around me. I open my eyes slowly but only to close them seconds later.. The bright light blinds me almost immediately.

"Oh my God... Noku wake up.." It's Lerato. I know I her voice. I try opening my eyes but this time so cautious of the light. It takes a while for my eyes to adjust to my surrounding and when it does, I remember. My daughter. Khosi.

"Khosi.." I say.

"Relax.." Lerato says trying to keep me down.

"No.. My daughter.. Where's she?"

"Nurse!" Lerato calls out fighting me from getting up.

"Leave me.. Lerato where's my baby?"

Just then a doctor walks in.

"Where's my baby?" I ask him and he regards me with sadness.

"I want my baby! Where's my baby?"

“Uhh you lost the baby.” He says.

I stop breathing. No.. My baby. My daughter.. I can't.

“No!” I scream.

“No! No! I want my baby.. Eric.. He killed my baby.. I know he did.” I'm sobbing and wuthering.

“I want my baby! Where's she!” I scream pushing Lerato away. I pull the drip connected to my arm then get off the bed.

“Mam please calm down. The baby wouldn't have survived because —”

“No! I want my baby..” I push him off so hard he losses balance. I run out screaming Khosi's name.

“Khosi!” I run not sure when I'm going. All I want is my baby. I need to find her. My feet are moving so fast. I push myself so much when I hear someone screaming my name from behind. I want my baby. I want Khosi.

As I run across the drive away, busting through the door, I'm met by the cold wind and darkness. It's dark outside. As I run I'm blinded by the headlight of a car coming my way. I try screaming but I can't find my voice. It's suddenly not there. Everything is just happening so fast and next thing is the car driving sideways towards me. I get weak before I feel the strong impact throwing me off completely then followed by darkness. So soggy weighing me down. I try fighting but it's like a fog and it has completely covered me.

“Khosi get down right now!” I tell her. She's in the tree and I have warned her about this.

“Mommy it's fun!” She says laughing.

“Khosi I'm going to whip you! Get down now!”

“Is Daddy going to play with me today?” She asks innocently. I blink away my tears then look at her.

“Yes. Daddy is going to play with you today, now get down.”

“Daddy says I'm ugly. Like Jason.” I swallow hard then smile.

“You are the most beautiful girl on earth. You are a princess.”

She giggles. “Really Mommy?”

“Yes my love. You are the most beautiful girl on earth but princesses don't climb trees.”

“They don't?”

“Yes.. Get down princess Khosi..”

“Ok.” She says then starts coming down. She misses a brunch and she screams. I panic as I watch her fall from the tree to the ground with a loud thud. I don't even hear my own scream as I rush to her. She's bleeding. I scream for help. My baby.. She's bleeding. My baby.. I scream again.

I feel my body shake vigorously. I can't make out anything though I can hear a sound. It's so fast I don't even know what's happening. My heart is beating so fast then I start hearing voices though I can't make up what's being said. I start feeling weak and weak till everything just stills.

EIGHT

The dripping sound of the IV is the first thing I hear when I open my eyes. I shrink my eyes when the light attacks them and I can tell where I am almost immediately. I'm in the hospital. Besides me there's Lerato, she has her hands in her head and she's sleeping. I try to move my body but it's just so stiff.

"Khanya.." Lerato whispers opening her eyes.

"Don't move, I will call the doctor." She says then rushes outside. I recognize the doctor. He smiles as soon as our eyes meet.

"Khanya, good to see you awake."

I just stare at him.

"Ok, today we are just going to relax. Khosi is fine. She's ok." I look at him then Lerato.

"She's fine. She was at the neighbour's house and Ma couldn't find her, she just panicked."

"Oh my God.. Where's she?" I manage through my dry throat. It hurts though but I don't care.

"She's at home, your house with Ma. They were here in the morning." She says.

I feel myself relax. I wouldn't have forgiven myself if anything happened to my baby.

The doctor continues, "You have been here for a week now."

"Week?" I squeak.

"Yes, you were hit by a car. Thank God it wasn't anything serious. You will be out of here before you know it." I slowly nod looking at him then I start connecting the dots. It hurts. It really does.

"I lost my unborn baby?" I whisper.

"Yes. That's what I was saying the last time." He says. "The pregnancy wasn't going to make it either way because the foetus was growing outside the womb."

"Oh.." I'm saddened by the news.

"Yes. I'm going to do a check up you. Just relax, it won't hurt." He says and before I know it he's busy poking me all over. He checks my eyes, ears, nose and my eyes.

"Give her water," he tells Lerato who quickly obliges. She pours me a cup of water then makes me drink using a stroll.

"I want to pee.." I say when Lerato puts the water aside. I'm really pressed.

"You have a catheter connected to you." I immediately get disgusted. I hate those things.

"Please have it removed."

"I will call in a nurse and we will remove it."

I look at Lerato, she looks far beyond relieved. "Do I still have a job?"

She smiles. "Yes, your employer was here yesterday, even the day before yesterday. You are still the Chief Surgeon."

I chuckle slightly not wanting to hurt myself.

"Call Ma, I want to speaking with Khosi."

"Ok,"

The nurse walks in after a while and they remove my catheter. The nurse has to help me to the toilet because my legs feel wobbly and everywhere is just painful. After I pee, she helps back to the bed.

"Khosi.." Lerato says giving me the phone.

"Hi baby.." I say and I hear her scream.

"Mommy!"

My heart swells and I feel tears sting my eyes. "Sweetie.. You are ok?"

"Yes.. The doctor says when you wake up, you will come home."

"Yes I will sweetie.." I want to just hold her in my arms.

"You and Granny will come later to see me."

"Yes! Mommy, Uncle Kenya's car is so big and nice. I told him you had one that looked like his that Daddy bought for you."

I'm momentarily frozen. Kenya?

"Uh Uncle Kenya?"

"Yes, your friend. He drops us and picks us up. Grammy says he's a very good man."

"Uh sweetie, why don't you give Ma.. Your Grammy the phone?"

"Ok.."

I wait for a while till I hear Ma's voice.

"Hi Noku.." She says.

"Ma, how are you?" I try to take it easy.

"How should I be fine knowing I'm the reason my daughter is in hospital."

"Ma it's not your fault plus I'm fine now."

"I'm really sorry baby.."

"Mom it's... I'm fine. Ma, who is Uncle Kenya?"

“Oh, it’s the boy that hit you with his car. He’s so sorry, he drops us home everyday after picking us up. I slowly look at Lerato and she just shrugs.

“He hit me?”

“Yes. You know, that disgusting ex husband of yours removed you from his medical aid and you had to go to a government hospital but this Kenya guy took you to one of the best hospitals and he’s paying for everything.”

“Ma!”

“He offered. He’s s very good boy.”

I sigh. “We will talk when you come.”

“Ok baby, don’t over work yourself.”

“Ok.” I hang up then hand Lerato her phone. Just then there’s a slight knock on the door followed by the door opening. I smile when I see Lonzulu. He shouldn’t be here. He’s holding flowers.

“Wow! Good to see awake.”

I smile. “It’s good to be awake.”

“How are you feeling?”

“I’m fine, you shouldn’t be here.”

“You are my client.”

I take in a deep breath. “Really now?”

He chuckles. “Anaya was so worried about you.”

I smile. “Bring her next time.”

Lerato is just looking at us.

“This is my sister from another mother, Lerato and Lee this is Lonzulu, my lawyer.”

Lerato gives him a smile. “We already met.”

“Oh.. Great!”

“I brought you flowers.” He says putting them down.

“Thanks.”

“Well I just came to see you.” Lonzulu says making me smile, he’s so nice.

“Thank you. How far is the divorce?”

“We will discuss this later, first recover.”

I roll my eyes smiling. “Ok.”

He walks out leaving Lerato laughing.

“What’s funny?”

“He likes you.”

“What? No he doesn’t! He’s Sma’s friend who is my lawyer!”

“He likes you. I’m dead serious!”

“You are imagining things.”

“And he’s hot. See? Leaving Eric opened the doors for good hot sexy men!”

“You are crazy.”

“I’m telling you. You should see Kenya up in..—”

“Ladies!” His voice interrupts us. I look up and see him. He still does look like Lindiwe’s fiancé. Nothing has changed expect the fact that today he’s wearing sweatpants and a hoodie instead of a jean and a T-shirt.

“Hey.. I heard you are awake.”

“I am.. and I’m fine.” He chuckles.

“I’m glad, you had me worried—well everyone worried.”

I smile. “I’m ok now. Can’t believe you didn’t want me to attend your wedding.”

He laughs. “I wouldn’t want you to miss it. You are one of the few people I know around here.”

“What is it? You haven’t met Lindiwe’s friends?”

“She doesn’t have a lot, I was even surprised she knew you.”

“Then I’m sure she told you that Khanya and I are her maid of honours.” Lerato says smiling.

“Yeah..” I back my friend up after we share the ‘look’.

“Wow!” He exclaims.

“I know right.. It’s going to be beautiful.” Lerato continues.

“That it is. We will see you on Friday at your rehearsal dinner, tell her we miss her.”

I stifly laugh then nod.

“Definitely, well.. I will see you Khanya. And you have a beautiful daughter.”

I smile. “Thank you.”

The moment he walks away, Lerato starts laughing. I can’t laugh hard because of my stiff body.

“Damn girl! I can’t wait for the wedding.”

“Me either. I really can’t wait.” I say.

“I don’t think Eric knows though and I think he paid lobola for her this past weekend.”

I shake my head, she’s really smart. “Probably she organized some people to pose as her family because according to my research, this Kenya guy already paid her Lobola.” She says making me laugh.

“All I want is everything that belongs to me. I need this divorce to go smoothly.”

“I think him marrying another woman while still married to you will work at your advantage.”

“I just want Lindiwe to finish him off once I’m done with him.”

She looks at me smiling. “I’m behind you all the way. I can’t wait for the rehearsal dinner though. White people things.” I laugh shaking my head.

Later that day I lie in bed with my phone in my hands checking it. I want to call Eric and tell him about the loss of our baby but I don’t even think he deserves it. I put my phone away almost immediately when I hear a knock. It’s not a knock but more like a bang followed by the door roughly opening. I put an impassive look. I don’t show him that I’m moved by him.

“So your bastard child died?”

“What do you want Eric?”

“Accidents happen.”

I laugh. “If this is threat, it’s pretty much weak. Weak as you. Congratulations on you paying Lobola for Lindi. You must be happy.”

“I am, she’s much of a better wife than you ever were.”

I nod. “Well I’m happy for you, though I do wonder what the judge will think of that.”

“You don’t have a lawyer, I’m going to squash you.”

“Well, break a leg!”

“You are so pathetic, you thought sending me to jail will stop me.”

“No, I sent you to jail because I’m against women abuse. And I wonder if I’m as pathetic as your bedroom game.”

I just pressed a button, I can see from how his face change.

“Don’t get upset. I’m sure Lindiwe will deal with it but I do suggest that perhaps sometimes you use Viagra. I heard it helps.”

“You..!” He says then his hands are on my neck. His hands clasp at my neck. He’s too angry I can see from the way his eyes are reddish. My airway is cut off and I’m melting.

“The fuck!” A voice roars then someone starts fighting Eric off me. They struggle for a while before Kenya, I finally notice when he leads Eric to the ground. I took a deep breath rubbing my neck. After a while he’s up and leaving.

“Hey are you ok?” Kenya asks. I nod, this isn’t the first time Eric ever strangled me.

“It’s ok.”

“Who’s he?”

“Ex husband.”

“That scumbag is your ex?”

“Yes.. Well not exactly, he’s about to be though.”

“I wonder how you dealt with it if you were married to him.. Still is married.” I look at my ring on my finger then take it off.

“I wonder too.”

“Your mom and Khosi are coming, they went to get Khosi some fruit by the canteen.”

“Ok, thank you for bringing them.”

“Considering the fact that I am the one who’s is responsible for this, it’s nothing.”

“It’s ok, it really is.”

“It will be once you out of here. Your friend is gone?”

“Yeah she had to go to work.”

“Maybe I should brief the security not to let that scumbag in again.”

“I would really appreciate that, thank you.”

“Feel free to tell me if you need anything.”

“I will. Thank you for doing all this.”

“You need to stop saying thank you.” He says with a chuckle.

“I’m sorry, I can’t help it.”

“Mommy!” Khosi screams getting inside my room. I sit upright as she jumps unto the bed hugging me.

“My baby..”

“Mummy look at what I drew!” She says showing a piece of paper.

“This is Grammy, me, you, Daddy and Uncle Kenya!”

“Ohhhh this is beautiful sweetheart..”

“Uncle Kenya promised to teach me how to ride a bicycle.” I look over at Kenya.

“You don’t have to, I will—”

“Don’t worry. I’m free at the moment.”

“You should be preparing for your wedding.”

“Lindiwe is on top of everything, I have time for Princess Khosi.”

I laugh.

“Ok, thank you.”

“This hundredth time you are saying it, I will leave you with your mom and little Princess.”

“Thank you for bringing them.”

He chuckles. “You are welcome Nokukhanya.” He gives Khosi a fist bump before walking out.

Mom puts a plastic of food down then looks at me.

“Eric did this to you, didn’t he?” She asks pointing at my neck.

“It’s ok. All this abuse and everything he has been doing, I no longer want 50% of everything we own, I want 75%.”

“We are all supporting you. Sma too.”

“I know. I want Lenzulu to start with the process.”

“He’s a very good boy.” She says making me laugh.

“You said the same thing about Kenya.”

“Yes, they both are.”

NINE

Walking in my house, it feels like home and I'm relieved to be out of hospital. That place is just draining when you are a patient.

"Are you sure you will be fine?" He asks, he's been asking the same question for the last 20 minutes.

"Yes, I will be fine."

"When you need anything, just call." He says pointing at his card in my hand.

"I won't call. You are getting married in 3 days. You need start behaving like a husband."

"You are so straightforward."

"I have nothing to hide, anyways thank you for picking me up. I really appreciate it."

"Ok,"

"Yah.. See you at your wedding."

"Yeah bye." He says then walks out. I look around the house, Mama and Khosi went out to the mall and that's why they couldn't come with when Kenya came to pick me up at the hospital. I'm thrilled to be free because now I can go back to work. Patrick did come yesterday and told me not to feel in a hurry to come back to work because they hired three more surgeons but I can't just sit at home doing nothing. I stand up when I hear a knock on the door. I walk over and open the door.

"Really now?"

"I forgot my car keys." He says laughing.

I move from the door letting him in. He takes them from the small table in the sitting room.

"I think you like my house."

"It's nice, what can I not like about it?"

I roll my eyes ushering him out but when we reach the door we are welcomed by Lunzulu. He doesn't bother looking at me because his eyes are on Kenya.

"Uhh hey.. I didn't know you are coming this early."

"Yeah.. But I figured to catch you this early because we have a lot to discuss." He says shifting his eyes from Kenya to me.

"That's great. Thank you Kenya.." I tell him opening the door wide for Lunzulu. Kenya just nods then walks away. I follow Lunzulu inside the house.

"Would you like anything to drink?"

"Uhh no.. I'm fine."

"Ok."

We sit down then he hands me the divorce papers he drew. I read throughout it then look back at him.

“Obviously I don’t think he will sign that, so we will then take it to court.” He says.

“What do you think will happen?”

“Well.. It’s kind of tricky because you are married in community of property but we will fight to get everything you want.”

“Ok..”

“But you should be ready to fight.”

“I am. I just want this over and done with quickly.”

“Well I’m handing this to him today so probably we will hear from him tomorrow.”

“I want full custody of Khosi.”

“Considering what you told me, that will be easy though he will be required to pay child support.”

“Yes.” I sigh then smile.

“Thank you.”

“You are welcome, how are you feeling?”

“Well I’m fine thank you. I’m going back to work tomorrow.”

“Good luck.”

I laugh. “I don’t need luck but thanks.”

He stands up then smiles. “Anaya misses you.”

“Aww.. I miss her too.”

“Maybe we should do dinner sometime. I’m sure Anaya will be very pleased to meet Khosi.”

“Yeah.. That will be great.”

“Ok we will talk.” He says then walks out. I stand up after a while then walk to my room. I take off my beanie then stare at myself on the mirror. There’s a little scratch on my forehead though nothing makeup can’t fix. I take in a deep breath then smile.

“You are beautiful..” I whisper to myself.

“You are strong and beautiful.”

All this years I believed Eric when he told me I was fat, that my stretch marks were disgusting. I used to apply different oils to my body everyday, my clothes would crease but because I wanted to be perfect for him, I kept using them. I don’t remember ever being happy with myself, I was always drinking slimming products just to satisfy him. All this while I let myself be lied to. I let myself be discouraged.

I look beautiful because I am beautiful. If he likes Lindiwe so much, let's see how he will take her wedding on Saturday.

I sit on the bed regretting the day I married Eric. Regretting the reason I stayed with a big belly man all this years because I loved him. I take out my phone from my sweatpants when it starts ringing. It's an unknown number though I answer.

"Nokukhanya hello?"

"Hello Mam, this is Mr Richards, Mr Khumalo's lawyer."

"Oh.."

"I'm calling about the divorce."

"My lawyer is handing the divorce papers to your client today."

"Oh then—"

"I don't think you and I should be having this conversation, please wait to hear from my lawyer." I say then drop the call. I go back to the sitting room when I hear Khosi's voice. They are back.

"Hello baby.." Mama says as I approach them in the kitchen where they are packing groceries. Khosi hugs me.

"Grammy bought me a toy." She says holding it up.

"It's so beautiful, did you say thank you."

"Yes.."

"Good girl."

She disappears as I sit on the kitchen stool.

"I can't wait to have all my kids around me."

"Me too.."

"You too what?" She asks laughing.

"I can't wait to have my brother around."

"I'm sorry for your unborn baby."

"It's ok. The foetus was growing outside the womb. It was still going to happen.. Sooner or later."

"Still.. Maybe we need to go to church on Sunday. When last did you go to church?"

I answer truthfully, "I don't know."

"We should go to church and just praise the lord and thank him for everything. You know with God, anything is possible."

"I wish God can strike Eric with a lightning."

“That’s not so nice.”

“I’m just saying. We will go to church next Sunday.”

“Good. Your father called.”

“What?”

“He called.” She looks so calm. I take in a deep breath. This is the man who abandoned us 18 years ago. He supported us for the first two years but then one day he just stopped. Maybe he got tired or maybe his wife got tired of us. From that day, it was as if we didn’t have a father. The pain of growing up without a father while he’s alive is really unexplainable.

“What did he want!”

“He wants to see you and Khosi, and Sma too.”

I laugh. “He must be joking. Mama after 18 years he finally remembers that he has kids? He couldn’t take care of us while he lived a good life. You became a slave to keep us going. He must be joking!” I’m standing now, breathing hard.

“Khanya calm down.”

“No! Mama I’m not going to calm down. I want that man far from us. I hope you told him to stay away.”

“Khanya all this anger does nothing but hold you back.”

“All this anger? All this anger? I hate that man. He’s not my father. My father long died.”

“He’s dying. He needs to see you. Just once.”

“Well I hope he’s going to hell!”

“Khanya I wish you can let all this anger go.”

“I’m not letting anything go. We suffered. Mama we suffered. All the days I missed school. Sma becoming a thief. He did that to us. Mama I’m not going to forgive him. Neither is Sma. He doesn’t deserve our forgiveness or yours.”

I say then walk away. I walk out of the house and out of the gate. I’m just too angry. As I walk I realize just how quiet this place is.

Sometimes I always wonder how Sma and I would have turned out if that man we call our father didn’t abandon us. I wonder just how we would be. My mom washed peoples clothes, cleaned their houses to put food on the table. Everyday she would wake up to clean people’s houses while my father lived a good life with his new wife staying in a big house. He never bothered with me and Sma. When Sma got in jail the first time because he had stolen food from the local market, they locked Ma in. The whole community thrashed her. I understand why he did it, we didn’t have food at home and it had been two days since we had eaten. He didn’t have a choice. From then, Sma just became a thug so I go to school. He was always in and out of jail. My varsity fees. Everything he did it for me. I blame that man for everything then he has the audacity of wanting to see us. The nerve!

A drop of rain trickle on my bald head forcing me to look up.

Great!

I didn't even realize the darkness of the clouds when I walked out of the house. More drops starts falling on me but I keep on walking. I miss the days where I had the clock in my hands. My life was already planned, I had planned it already but because of love... I laugh. Love.

Love brought me here today.

Love made me love the man I should have never loved. The wrong man.

As I keep walking it starts pouring harder. I take my phone that is vibrating from my hoodie pocket, at least it's water proof. I sigh when I see the name flashing. I'm pretty sure he's the one who saved his own number because I don't remember ever taking his number.

I answer.

"Kenya.."

"Hey so I spoke to Lindiwe. We figured maybe we should take you out for dinner tonight."

I start laughing like a whole mad person. I can't stop myself. My laugh slowly turns into a sob. A sob I have been holding back for a couple of days.

"Khanya are you ok?" I hear him asking.

"Where are you?"

I take in a deep breath. "I'm walking."

"It's raining."

"So? I heard rain is a sign of good things. So I'm going to keep walking to receive God's blessings directly. I think he abandoned me."

"Tell me where exactly you are."

I laugh. "Why? Because you want to play the hero? I lost my unborn baby, I'm sure Lindiwe must be happy but then again.. I wonder what really makes her happy. She's.. Quite a complicated woman." I say laughing.

"How do you deal with her? Damn when did you guys even meet?"

"Khanya where are you?"

"I'm home, bye." I say then hang up. My heart feels so gloomy. I just want to walk wherever my feet lead me but I have a daughter. A responsibility. I turn then start walking back home. Each step I take feels heavier than the previous. Maybe it's my wet clothes. I push till I'm standing right in front of my door. Seems like Mama never bothered closing the gate. I open the door then walk in.

"Thank God! Khanya I was worried."

Mama says walking towards me. She helps me take off my clothes by the door leaving me in my panties and bra.

"Come, let me run you a warm bath. You are going to catch a cold." She says dragging me to my bedroom. I don't spot Khosi anywhere, I guess she's in her room drawing. Mama quickly fills the tub then help me inside.

The water is so warm and it smells good.

"I'm sorry baby.. I just want you to set you free from this anger."

"He hurt me.." I whisper. "He hurt us. I will never forgive him."

She sighs then starts bathing me, the same way she always did when I was young. She doesn't say anything anymore as she washes my numb body. After she's done she makes me wear track pants and a hoodie.

"Come, I will make you coffee." She says leading me back to the kitchen. I sit on the kitchen stool as she makes me coffee. I can notice how red her eyes are but if it's because she wants me to forgive him, I'm not going to.

"Drink this.." She says giving me a mug. I hold it tightly though it's hot.

I murmur a thank you then take the first sip. Just the way I like it. I look at her when I hear a knock on the door. She walks straight to the door then comes back after a while with Kenya.

"Mom!" I groan.

"He called because he was worried about you." She says walking away.

"Are you ok?"

I look at him and my mouth just want to run but then.. It's not my secret to tell.

"I'm fine. You didn't have to come back."

"I was really worried."

"Where's Lindiwe?"

"She went to Pretoria with her boss, work."

Probably Eric. Poor guy.

I smile. "So will she be there for the dinner?"

"Yeah.. She's really excited."

"She should be."

"How do you know her again?"

"She was fucking my husband." I say then laugh. He looks shocked and confused. I laugh even harder.

"Stop playing like this.." He says joining me.

"I'm sorry, I really am." I say wiping my tears away.

"It's ok. I wish I didn't come back.. Well I'm glad I met you but..."

"But what?" I'm now serious.

"Me marrying Lindiwe.. It's just a... an arranged marriage."

I stop breathing for a second. "What?"

"Yeah.. I didn't even know her till a month ago."

"No!"

"My parents paid Lobola for her without telling me. My whole life is based in Australia but I had to come back for this sham of a wedding."

"I can't believe this. I really thought that you guys maybe have known each other for a while."

"Nope.."

"So you have a girlfriend?"

"No, I hate relationships. The last girl I had really broke my heart and I swore to never try it again."

"Wow!"

"I know.. I guess it's just bad luck though I think maybe she's a good person."

I laugh. "That depends on the definition of nice."

"She's not?"

I inhale. "I really don't know. I don't know her that much."

"It's ok. Where's Khosi?"

"Drawing probably or playing with Mama's phone."

"How old are you? You look so young."

I laugh. "Is it my bald?"

He smiles shaking his head. "You look beautiful with the bald, I'm starting to wonder why you even put the head wrap."

I smile. "I'm 33 you?"

"32.."

I gasp. "You lie!"

"I swear."

"Wow! I'm the older."

He laughs. "Well that depends on your definition of older."

"Oh please, it's not like you have inner age."

He laughs really hard. "I—"

"Sorry to disturb kids but Khanya your phone is ringing. It's the devil." I take my phone from her and my smile fades.

I answer already annoyed. I know it's about the divorce.

"Nokukhanya you won't take my business from me!"

I laugh. "My business you mean. Eric you have nothing. Almost everything we had we got it with my money. I started that company for you. You own nothing."

"If you think—"

"I don't think anything, I know! I'm going to make sure you don't get a dime of anything I bought or started with my money. You are so pathetic flexing around as if you were long something. When I'm done with you, be ready to suck the ground!" I say then hang up. Mama and Kenya are just staring at me.

"What? He's annoying. Talking about my business like he started that business. I'm having him voted out. I spoke to the shareholders yesterday."

"Wow! I admire your strength." Kenya says.

"Yeah.. Don't mess with me because if you do..you will lick the ground with this bastard of a man."

TEN

Lindiwe is looking at me harshly, I swear I will just die from her stare.

“So.. How was Pretoria?” I ask her, the fact that I’m on top of the game makes me feel very powerful.

“Fine.” She responds.

“What were you doing there?”

“That’s really non of your concern.”

“Ohh.. I’m sorry.” I feign my apology making Kenya give her a look.

“It’s ok.” She says smiling. “Just had a long day.”

“It’s fine, I understand.”

“But Pretoria was fine.”

“That’s really nice, I’m sure it was.” She throws a look at me and I fight with my all to hold it in.

“Yeah.”

“So Kenya tells me—”

“Honey, want anything to drink?” She interrupts me. I look down on their plates, no one of them have eaten while yours faithfully is half done with her food. I’m not even bothered.

“Yeah.. You can get it while I get something in the car.” Kenya says standing up. As soon as he’s gone she begins.

“I see what you are doing now!” She says.

“You do?”

“Yes. You can take your pathetic husband back. But just so you know, almost everything he owns is in my name. Go ahead and tell Kenya, we are still going to get married either way.”

“You know what, you think I care about Eric? I don’t. Actually you guys can get married for all I care. I do feel sorry for Kenya though, he’s marrying the wrong woman for the wrong reasons. You don’t deserve to be happy. You are a very bitter person who finds joy in hurting people and for that reason, you can never be happy. I’m nothing like you and never will I be the woman you are. I know my value and my worth is a lot. You thought you would break me but news flash, you played yourself. Good luck on your married life and I will gladly keep Kenya in my prayers.” I say standing up.

“Thanks for the dinner, have a lovely evening.” With that I walk out with head raised high and my shoulders squared. I get in Lerato’s KIA that she borrowed me then drive home. For some reason I feel very relieved for having the small talk with Lindiwe. Arriving home I find Mama watching some gospel channel.

“Already back?”

“Yes, I’m tired and I’m going to sleep. I’m going back to work tomorrow.”

“Good night baby..”

I check on my baby before walking to my bedroom and just throwing myself on the bed. I’m too tired to undress so I just sleep with my clothes on.

•

“You look beautiful Mommy..” Khosi says as I step into the kitchen. I’m rocking my bald today, no head wrap. I take a spin showing both Mama and Khosi my white bondage dress.

“Thank you!”

“I cooked porridge,” Mama says making me frown.

“You know I hate porridge.”

“It’s good for you.”

“Well I won’t certainly die because I don’t eat porridge.. But thank you.” I say hugging her while grabbing an apple then kiss Khosi. Getting outside, I’m ready for the new day. No more crying over what’s been broken because broken is never bad.

I get in my new borrowed car then drive to Julias’s coffee shop.

“Hey, wow!” He says as I step in.

I laugh. “Thank you.”

“Well what can I get for the beautiful lady?”

I smile. “Coffee and a chocolate muffin please.”

“Coming right up.”

He says disappearing somewhere.

“Wow! It’s really is you!” I turn and put up my fakest smile to Erin, Eric’s sister. I wonder when she even arrived or what she’s even doing here.

“Hi Erin, nice seeing you.”

“Ohh certainly is a pleasure for you to meet me. I couldn’t believe my brother when he told me he finally got rid of you.”

I chuckle. “Well better believe it!”

“There’s your favourite!” Julias says putting my order on the counter. I give him some notes then grab my coffee and muffin.

“I bet you must be very... Well you must be seeking money since you stopped sucking my brother dry.”

She says and I laugh really loud that a few people turn to stare. “Nope. I’m not seeking for money and certainly wasn’t sucking your brother’s money. I took him to school. I, Nokukhanya Thembeke Ferguson, took your brother to school. He didn’t have nothing. Your family didn’t have nothing! That’s why they failed to control you and you have 100 babies with 100 fathers.” I say calmly smiling. She starts with her rotten mouth but I stop her.

“Don’t open that big mouth of yours. If it wasn’t for me, AIDS would have long swallowed your mother. You are all ungrateful. I took care of you and today you think you have the balls to talk me like that? Let me tell you something, you are going back to poverty where you belong. This fancy life you are leaving with no degree or job qualification whatsoever will be over soon. Bitch I’m Nokukhanya and I make it rain.”

I say then walk away. She’s always hated me but not when they were still poor. Take him out from the sewage, wash him and clean him up and already he has the audacity to call you shit while he’s the shit’s son. Humans!

I get in my car then place my coffee aside and take my phone which is ringing. I hold it for a while in my hand before just deciding to ignore it. I have no business with Kenya or Lindiwe, they are non of my concern. Starting my car I start driving to work while eating.

Arriving at, Nthabi blesses me with a hug. A huge warm hug.

“Hey! I’m so glad you are back.”

I laugh. “It’s good to be back.”

“They hired new surgeons. I like one of them, Nevaeh but the two white ones think they own this place. I’m so fed up. I hope you put them in place.” She says making me laugh.

“Certainly, I will see you later.”

“We can do lunch together.”

“Yeah, I would love that.”

I say walking away. I hope the new crew is not as bad as Nthabi describes them. I have a lot of shit to deal with already.

The moment I get in my office, first thing I do is open the windows. It feels stuffy. Settling down I finally put my files before me. My door swings open making me raise my head.

A coloured woman with red hair walks in. This should be interesting.

“You are the Chief Surgeon?”

“It’s written on the door but yes, I am. Who are you?”

“Natalie, I didn’t think you would actually be...”

I laugh. "Be what? This beautiful? Don't worry, I get that from a lot of people. How can I help you Natalie?"

"I'm the other surgeon."

"Oh, well it's a pleasure meeting you."

"Do you even have qualification for this job? You don't look like you do."

I laugh, so rude but funny in a stupid manner.

"No I don't have qualifications Ms Harvard. I think we need to set down a couple of rules."

She laughs. "Rules?"

"I think that's what I said, you and I need to respect each other. I'm your boss, respect me before I have you transferred to a small village. You talk with me with respect, I'm not your friend and lastly, you knock on my door. This is not your mother's house. Now, if you may excuse me, I have to work."

She glares for a while before she leaves. My day do keep getting better and better. There's a knock after a few seconds.

I sigh, "Yes come on in."

Some lady walks in. Long black hair and very beautiful.

"Hello," she says with smile while walking in. "I'm Nevaeh."

I stand up then give her handshake.

"The other surgeon?"

She smiles. "Yes, I just wanted to meet the boss."

I laugh. "I'm not the boss but it's nice to meet you Nevaeh.. Your name is very unique."

She smiles. "Thank you. And don't ask, it's an English name and I'm from Ethiopia."

She says and I die of laughter.

"Wow!"

"I'm tired of people thinking my name has some hidden gold." She says laughing too.

"Well I'm Nokukhanya Ferguson but call me Dr Ferg."

"You are so nice."

"It's in my blood and —"

I stop talking when I notice my phone ringing. I take it giving Nevaeh an apologetic look. She nods then walks out.

"Lunzulu."

“Hey, so we are meeting Eric and his lawyer today at lunch, will you be free.”

“Of course, place?”

“I will send you the directions.”

“Ok,”

“How’s work?”

I smile as I stand up to look out through the window. “Work is fine. I’m tackling it.”

“I like your energy.”

“Thank you.”

“Ok, we will talk.”

“Yeah.”

I sigh then hang up. Getting back to my chair I decide to stop thinking of the meeting and just focus on work. My morning is not that slow, we receive a patient who’s been involved in a robbery and she’s been shot. The bullet is a few inches from the heart and as I expected, Natalie tries to give me trouble. I remove her from the team and chose Nevaeh and I for the task. She can go perform the C-section.

The surgery goes well and we manage to remove the bullet. I go to my office leaving Nevaeh informing the lady’s family. After that I have to deal with a patient who has been involved in an accident with Malcom, the other surgeon. He’s not bad but I can see the way he looks at me, he probably doesn’t think I deserve my position.

But guess what? I have the job!

We amputate the patient’s arm because it’s beyond damaged. We have no choice. Apparently it was an accident between taxis though I don’t get much into it, too much drama. There’s a taxi driver at the reception making noise, he’s having the police trying to question him because the accident was his fault or something like that.

I ignore it all and start preparing for my meeting. Lonzulu has already sent the directions. As I pack my things, Nthabi peeps in.

“Hey, ready for lunch?”

“Shit! I forgot.”

“It’s ok, your morning was messed up. They finally managed to take the driver dksn to the police station.”

“Good... But I’m really sorry about lunch.” I apologize. “Just that I’m meeting my lawyer.”

“Ohh.. For what?”

She’s a gossiper, that question is a whole red flag.

“Nothing serious, my car.” I say.

“Yeah.. I realized it’s no longer there. What happened to it? They crushed it? You know they did that with my sister’s car. They crushed it and we had to get a very good lawyer.”

I smile. “I know.. We will talk. Take care.” I say then flee leaving her. I’m not ready for my business to be the talk of the hospital as yet.

As soon as I get in my car, I read the directions again before I start driving to the place, Lonzulu’s offices.

Arriving I see a relatively big building. Not that big but big, certainly what I had expected. I walk in and receptionist directs me of where they are. I’m late but I really don’t care. I steadily walk to the conference room and arriving they are all sitted on a huge table. Eric’s lawyer really looks young.

“Sorry I’m late.” I apologize sitting down.

“It’s not like you ever do anything right anyways.” Eric responds.

“Still stupid I guess.” I shoot back and his nose flares. Fat pumpkin.

“Let’s start!” Lonzulu says.

“My client gave me all the list of everything you own together.”

“She doesn’t own anything!” Eric shouts. God what did I even see in this pathetic man?

“Mr Richards please pour your client some cold water to drink, he needs it.” I can see Eric’s lawyer stifling a laugh while he looks ready to just explode.

“My client gave me a list of all things they own together.” Lonzulu continues and start mentioning them. I’m praying I get the beach house in Mauritius. Matter of fact, I want it.

“Is there anything I may have left?” He asks and Mr Richards stays quiet.

“Ok, I guess that’s all of it including all the money. My clients wants the house in Mauritius, half of every cent you own together which gives us a sum of 6.4 million together with the company.”

Eric starts laughing. “Whatever you are smoking Nokukhanya is strong.”

“Furthermore on top of that, my client demands that Mr Khumalo pay a sum of 5k monthly for his child and on that 5k she will use it for the child’s needs, Khosi Khumalo who is five years old.”

“I’m not giving you anything for that bastard child!” He roars.

“Failure to comply, we will be forced to take your client to court Mr Richards. We are asking for something very small. Don’t forget all the public harassment your client have been putting Nokukhanya under together with you paying bride price for another woman while still with your wife.”

“Fine! We will meet in court!” Eric says, he’s even sweating.

“Then well, I will set a date at court and let you know when we are ready.”

“You are going to lose.” He says as I stand up taking my bag.

“You should learn to relax Eric, you will die young. Look at how you are sweating. And one more thing, stop barking. You have a lawyer for a reason.” I say then walk out. As I approach my car, I hear Lunzulu calling me.

“Hey.. Wait..” I stop then look at him smiling. He’s really the best lawyer ever.

“Hey, sorry just that I can’t stand that man.”

“It’s ok, I understand. You don’t worry, we will win this case. I’m positive.”

“Thank you so much.”

“You are welcome. Anyways Madam Anaya is cooking tomorrow, she demanded that she starts cooking too. She’s tired of takeaways.” I laugh with him.

“Takeaways are not good so I agree.”

He chuckles. “Daddy can’t cook. But I was wondering if you and Khosi can join us.”

“We would love to.”

“Great, I will send you directions to my house.”

“Do that, greet her for me.”

“You too,”

I smile then walk to my car. I swat any thoughts of Lunzulu liking me, he’s just a nice friendly guy and is likable. Driving back to work I feel so happy. Watching Eric’s face was so much fun. I wonder what his face will be when he finds out that his so called perfect partner is not his.

Arriving Nthabi is already at her desk and she’s looking at me with weird look.

“What is it?”

She points at the waiting area. I chuckle looking at him.

He stands up and walks up to me.

“You were not answering my calls and yesterday you just left. I had no choice. What happened?”

I take in a deep breath. “I’m really sorry but your fiancé and I are not best friends or even friends.”

“I know, you said you are acquaintances.”

I chuckle shaking my head. “Yes so I left because I don’t like her.”

“I figured, there was just too much tension. So you are not coming to the wedding anymore?”

I laugh. “Why won’t I?”

He joins me. “Well I brought lunch.” He says raising the MacDonald’s paper bag. My stomach rumbles making both of us laugh. What a day.

“I think we should go and eat.” He says.

“Just because I’m hungry, yes. We can go and eat.”

ELEVEN

I put on my shoes as Lerato zips my dress.

“There!” She says making me laugh.

“Thank you.”

“I have a feeling today is going to be good day.” She says rubbing her lips together.

“I just want to eat. Let’s go, we can’t be late.”

She grabs her car keys and we walk out. Lindiwe did have our dress tailored but they are not what I expected. They are just plain but it’s fine, it’s not my wedding anyway. I didn’t have a big wedding, Eric and I just went to home affairs because we couldn’t afford a real wedding but by then it was ok, not anymore. He really did take me for granted and I still wonder why I even stayed through his abuse.

“Wanna grab something to eat?” Lerato asks.

“No, we will eat there. Just hold your hunger.”

She clicks her tongue then continues driving. Arriving at the venue it’s really beautiful, I’m really taken and I have to give it to her. They decided to do their wedding near the lake so it gives it that feeling, that outdoor feeling. There’s a huge tent at the other side and I guess that’s where the reception will be happening. The ceremonial side has glassy chairs with white ribbons on them and they are a lot of chairs. I guess it’s a big wedding.

“What are we—”

“Ladies!” Some white lady says. She’s wearing a formal white skirt and shirt holding a tablet in her hands.

“Morning,” Lerato greets.

“You must be the bride.. The maids of honours?”

“Yes.” Just then my eyes fall on four girls wearing long shiny navy blue dresses with a vent on the front near the tent. Their makeups are perfectly done and they are holding small bouquets of flowers.

“Are you seeing that friend?” Lerato asks chuckling. “Ausi kante why are we dressed differently from bo ausi bao?”

“Uhh because you ladies are the special people of this wedding.”

I laugh. “We can see that we look ordinary and those ones look like the real deal. Lindiwe thinks she’s smart. Lerato come!” I say dragging her hand. We walk over to the four girls who are chatting while taking pictures. I recognize the thin one, she’s the one who I once slapped, I won’t even get into the details right now. The green lawn is very slippery but I maintain my speed.

“Ladies!” I say eyeing all of them then take the hand of the thick one and the other slim figured one.

“You two, please help us with something.” I say and Lerato nods as soon as she understands what I’m doing

“O nyakang mo wena?” The thin one asks with a whole load of attitude.

“Nna ke bidiwa Lerato Bakwena, we not here to cause a scena but if you push me, kao jwetsa, ke tlaonyedisa, nx.”

The skinny bitch starts laughing. I want to slap her again but not today.

“Lerato we are wasting time.” We drag the two ladies to the car and surprisingly they are not resisting.

“You are the wife of Lindiwe’s affair ain’t you?” The thick one asks with a smirk.

I smile then open the car door.

“You guys are going to undress. Give us your dresses and you take the ones we are wearing. If you don’t want to do that then me and Lerato will be forced to use physical force.”

“What?”

“Get in the car.”

•

“This dress is a little too tight.” I complain as we walk back to the chairs.

“Mine too, that girl was too skinny, you could have taken the other one.”

“Where’s the white lady?” I say looking around. I spot her with some man. The place is filling up and most people are sitted. Lerato giggles.

“This is going to be fun. I need a glass of wine.”

I laugh. “Make it two.”

Just then everyone takes their sit.

“I think it’s starting. Where are the other girls?” I whisper.

Lerato points at the tent. “In there.”

“Let’s go.”

We quickly walk there and they are really there, including the ones we undressed. As I expected, it looks so beautiful. There are round tables with the glass chairs. Everything looks beautiful.

“Wena Nokukhanya you really—”

This skinny bitch!

God help me! I pray for the ancestral spirit of calmness.

"I'm the maid of honour for the ceremony and Lerato is the one for the reception. Respect us."

"What?"

"Call and ask her." Lee backs me up.

"You are a whole woman with a grown child Nokukhanya, you need to grow up."

"And you look like you have AIDS."

"Uhhh.. Wow!" The white lady says joining us. She's surprised to see that Lerato and I have changed.

"Uhhh.. The maid of honour will go first."

"Me!" The skinny bitch says.

"If she goes, I'm telling everyone that Lindiwe is having an affair with my husband." I say, my voice firm. I'm not playing.

The white lady looks shocked.

"Should we go now?" Lerato asks making the white lady nod.

"Yeah.."

I walk over to the skinny bitch then grab her bouquet.

"I think this is mine." I say then walk out of the tent. Everyone is looking at me and I put on a smile. A song is playing and it's too slow and I'm walking fast. I really don't care though. As I reach the aisle I notice Kenya, he's wearing a navy blue three piece suit and he looks good. He gives me a smile and I return it politely. There's another man standing besides him. They look almost the same and I don't need anyone telling me that they are brothers. I can't really decide who's hotter than who but I think the other brother is. He's so hot making me wonder how the other three look like.

"You look beautiful." Kenya says though only his brother, the Rev and I can hear him.

"Dress too small." I say making him chuckle. I look at the crowd and notice Lerato coming. Lerato has always been better than me. She has the perfect body, the perfect independent life and the beauty. When we started being friends, I always tried to look my best, I even started going to the gym more frequently than I ever did because I just wanted to be like her. She always intimidated me and still does especially this moment. She doesn't have burst hips like mine and a huge ass, her body is just... Perfect. Her skin flawless, I have never seen a single scratch on her skin and a stretch mark. She flips her weave behind as she joins me. Kenya's brother whistle at Lerato who just laughs.

Two more of Lindiwe's friends joins us and the skinny bitch is throwing daggers at me. I really don't care, I'm way past that stage. I finally notice Lindiwe. She's with her father I guess or whatever wearing a mermaid dress with the longest tail ever. I can't really see her face because of the veil but I know she's probably looking beautiful.

Slowly they walk till they join us, I can feel her eyes on me and I give her my best of smiles to look like the maid of honour that I am. Lindiwe's father hands her over and he walks to the front role.

"Dear beloved, we are gathered here....."

My mind trails off as the Rev starts with the long speech of marriage and how it's sacred and blah blah blah.

Maybe I should have not come here at all, now looking at it I feel so immature. I should be at home spending some time with my daughter but here I am, witnessing the woman who wrecked my marriage get married. It doesn't even feel like me but then how does being me even feel like? I snap my head back when I hear the Rev asking the question. It means Kenya said I do. I wonder why he even agreed to all this nonsense. He doesn't deserve all this shit, he's a good guy.

"Who here is against this union, if there's anyone please rise but if not, forever hold it."

There's silence then a voice speaks. My heart skips. Kenya! There are gasps and I can see that everyone is shocked. Even Lindiwe herself because she removes the veil from her face. I heard if you do it yourself, it shows a sign of ill omen coming.

"Kenya!" She exclaims.

"Before we can go ahead," he starts. "There's someone I wish we all meet." He says and already Lerato has her phone out taking a video. Didn't she leave her phone in the car? She doesn't even look concerned.

"This person is so important I couldn't let us continue in his absence. I hope we all understand." He says and I can see that Lindiwe is breathing hard.

As the maid of honour, I try to act like one. "Want a glass of water while we wait Lindiwe?" I ask sweetly. She just ignores me. Ok, I tried.

My jaw falls to the ground when I see Eric walking towards us. Everyone turns to look including Lindiwe. She gasps loudly.

"Monate mpolaye!" Lerato says laughing still shooting the video.

"Ahh right on time." Kenya says.

"Don't look so shocked Lindiwe, it's all a game isn't it?"

"What's going on here my love?" Eric asks Lindiwe. He looks pained and shocked at the same time.

"I don't know him." Lindiwe denies him looking at Kenya.

"All along, Lindiwe has been having an affair with this married man who's about to get a divorce."

"She's my wife." Eric says confidently. "Her parents approves me."

Kenya laughs. "Her parents? The people you met are not her parents. She doesn't even know them, she just paid them to pretend to be."

"Kenya baby I can explain."

“Lindi sweetheart, let’s go home. You are pregnant with our child.” Eric looks like he’s about to die. He’s even sweating, I think he needs to do something about sweating, it’s too much.

“Eric leave me alone! Go back to your boring wife! I don’t want you! I never wanted you!” Lindiwe has lost it.

“What about everything I did for you? What the car I bought for you yesterday? We even bought a ring. Baby we are getting married. Let’s go. We are going to have a baby after we lost the first one.”

Lindiwe laughs as if she’s possessed.

“You are a fool! You are the biggest fool ever! You are an idiot.”

I laugh as she turns to look at Kenya.

“We broke up. I don’t want him. I love you.” She says.

Right then Eric falls to his knees. “Sweetheart please let’s go home. I love you. I can make you happy. I can give you all the money in the world.”

Wait... Is he crying?

I carefully look at him and laugh.

“Wow! I never!” I exclaim clapping my hands.

“It’s hot in here.” Lerato says laughing.

“Ladies and gentleman, you all see. She’s not the woman I thought she was. You are a home wrecker with no respect in yourself. You stand here and deny him, but yesterday you were with him spending his money. I’m sorry but I can’t marry such a disgusting woman.” He says walking away. Lindiwe rushes after then grabs his arm.

“No wait.. Please wait. I don’t love him. I never did. He’s not important. Baby please.. Let me fix this. You can’t do this to me. My family is here.. My friends. Please Kenya.”

“You should have thought about that before you decided to be a whore. I can’t marry such nonsense. You are so pathetic right now, begging me to stay with you even after all the revelation of your doings.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m not God.” He says then looks at me. “Are you coming with Khanya?”

“Me?” I’m shocked.

He chuckles the smiles. “Yes you.”

“Haaaiiii wena? Who’s going to eat the food then? We can’t be wasting food. It’s wrong. I want to eat, you can go but I’m staying.”

“I agree.” Lerato chips in. “We need to eat. Someone call this man an ambulance.” She says pointing at Eric who’s just lying on the ground then starts laughing.

“Kuthi huu shem!”

TWELVE

We all watch as the ambulance take Eric, unconscious Eric away. Lindiwe has already left with her friends though I think she should have stayed, to at least support Eric.

“Wow! What a wow!” Lerato says while busy on her phone.

I look around then spot Kenya. He’s standing with his brother and parents I guess. They look upset and I just hope they are not upset with him, him not marrying Lindiwe is a whole blessing.

“Let’s go to the tent, I’m hungry.” I tell Lerato.

“Yes, shem girl the video is going viral.”

“Are we now famous.”

She laughs. “Yes.”

We walk towards the tent and they are few people. I’m glad it’s a serve-yourself kind of wedding. We sit on a table which consist 6 chairs but we are only two.

“All this... Down the drain.”

“That’s karma for you.”

“I wish karma can do the same thing for Olwethu, seems like karma forgot that nigga’s address.”

I laugh. “Sorry friend.”

“I can’t believe that asshole is happy. His girlfriend is even pregnant.” I chuckle as I start dishing for myself.

“And how do you know all that? You broke up with that guy over six months ago, let him go.”

“I have, I just bumped into him. How’s the divorce going?”

“Lunzulu is going to set a day for court because Eric doesn’t want to corporate.”

“Lunzulu?”

“Stop! He’s a very nice friend of my brother.”

“And what did I say?” She feigns innocence.

“You—”

“Beautiful ladies!” A deep voice says from behind us. We turn and it’s Kenya’s brother with Kenya himself. Little meeting is probably over. They join us as I start eating. I’m really hungry, all the drama plus my own hunger, that’s x2 hunger.

“I’m Nkanyezi, you ladies are?” He says. He has a really deep rich voice. He doesn’t even have to raise his voice to be heard. Lerato is busy shifting.

"I'm Nokukhanya and this is my friend, Lerato." I introduce us when Lerato keeps her mouth closed. It's a first. She's never quiet, no matter how hot the guy can be.

"Nice to meet you, what a day!" He responds.

"Yeah.."

"Your friend doesn't speak?" He asks looking at Lerato who's about to die.

"Ohh.. Yes, she can't speak. She signs." I say making Lerato laugh while kicking me under the table.

"I can speak.. I just.. Well, like you said, it's been a long day." She says giggling.

Nkanyezi smiles licking his lips. I can see he's a ladies man. He probably has them throwing themselves at him.

I just shake my head and continue eating, I won't starve myself because of guy who looks like a player.

"Wanna take a small walk? View the lake?" Kenya asks as I wipe out my plate. I take the napkin then wipe my lips.

"Yeah.. As soon as I find somewhere to pack some food for my mom and daughter."

"You have a daughter?" Nkanyezi asks, he sounds shocked.

"Yeah.. She's five."

"Wow! You look so young." I smile.

"Thank you."

I look around looking for something to pack the food in.

"You don't want to take the food here home do you?" Lerato asks and I want to slap her. She was going to join me if it wasn't for Mr drop dead gorgeous here who has her crazy.

"Amasimba angizwani ngawo. Leave me alone." I warn her standing up. I quickly cross to an empty table then quickly pour the fruit salad inside a casserole on some plate. I will have to take the fancy casserole, there's really nothing I can do.

Coming with it to the table I dish inside it.

"Wow! I like you."

"I'm glad Nkanyezi, Ku rough out here."

"The walk?" Kenya prompts.

"Ohh.."

He takes the casserole from me then start walking out of the tent. We meet the white lady by the entrance.

"Mr Gcabashe, I'm afraid you can't take —" she starts but Kenya raises her hand stopping her.

"I will return it." He says and his tone communicates that what he just said is final. She nods then steps out of our way. I lead Kenya to Lerato's car while taking the car keys from my purse.

I unlock the car then open the passenger sit.

"You can put it here." I say pointing at the seat.

"Ok." After he carefully puts it there I close the door then lock the car.

"Shall we?"

"Of cause." I say then start walking by his side. Most people are gone. He walks with me round the lake till I can no longer see the venue no more.

"This place is so calm."

"I know. Why didn't you tell me?" I look at him then start taking off my shoes. I sit on the rock putting my legs inside the warm water.

"Because it wasn't my secret to tell, I had no business telling you."

"When did she start sleeping with your husband?"

I sigh. "Years ago."

"And you stayed all along." His tone is judgemental.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because I loved him."

"You don't love him anymore?"

"I do but not that much. I love him because I loved him for 12 years, 10 of marriage."

"Wow!"

"It's life."

"I'm glad you are leaving him. I can refer you to a very good lawyer."

I smile politely. "It's ok, I already have one and either way, I bet your lawyer is so expensive."

He chuckles. "Yeah but you don't have to worry about that."

"I do, I don't have money till month end and my lawyer is good."

"If you say so." He says then takes off his shoes and fold his trousers. Carefully he dips his legs inside the water sitting besides me.

"Your brother is hotter than you." I tell him laughing.

He rolls his eyes chuckling. "I'm the focused one."

"I figured. Do you all look alike?"

"Yeah but not that much."

"Where were they?"

"Busy with their lives."

"Too busy for your wedding?"

"I told them not to come. You look so beautiful today. And your hair is growing."

"Thank you."

"So that other guy..."

"Which guy?"

"The one with the Chinese eyes."

I laugh. "Lunzulu doesn't have Chinese eyes."

"Whatever, who's he to you?"

"Ohh he's my lawyer."

"That's your lawyer?"

"Yes."

"Wow!"

"What?"

"I thought he was your man."

"Kenya I just got out of a long term relationship, it's too early for me to do those things. Lunzulu is just trying to be a friend."

"He likes you."

"What?"

"He likes you, I can see it. I'm a man too."

"Do you like me?" I ask staring at him.

"If I do?"

"Go back to Australia."

He laughs. "Wow!"

"I'm serious."

"Do you have plans tonight?"

“Yeah...”

He nods then looks at me intently. “I don’t think I’m going back to Australia any time soon.”

•

“That was the best meal I have ever had.” Lunzulu says drinking his juice. I laugh standing up so to clear the table.

“You are welcome, thank the girls too.”

“Thank you girls!” He says making Khosi and Anaya giggle.

They click like house on fire and I can see that my daughter has really found a friend. Anaya doesn’t make her feel weird or bad about her appearance.

I really applaud Lunzulu and his wife for raising such a beautiful daughter. I finally saw the picture in his house, a family picture consisting her, Lunzulu and Anaya. She’s really beautiful and they look really good together.

He stands up then helps me to clear the table.

“Oh no, don’t worry about the dishes. Someone does it.” He says as I attempt to start washing them.

“It’s ok, I can—”

“No, leave it. It’s fine. Let’s dish desert.” He says taking out the ice cream from the fridge.

“Why don’t Anaya’s mother stay with you guys?” I ask.

He places the ice cream on the kitchen counter then takes out the small bowls.

“Because she passed away two years ago.”

My hand lands on my mouth.

“I’m really sorry. I just..—”

“It’s ok. I kept that picture because Naya loves it.”

“I’m really sorry.”

“It’s ok. We all have a story to tell.”

“I guess.”

“Wanna dish?”

“Yeah..”

“How was the wedding?”

“Fantastic.”

I take a spoon then start dishing. Yesterday I had to cancel the dinner because of Lindiwe's rehearsal dinner so I scheduled the dinner for today. Lonzulu's house is really warm and beautiful. It has the family feeling and just being with him for the past few hours, I can tell that he really loves his daughter and now I understand why. They only have each other. After I'm done dishing we take the small bowls to the girls.

"Yey! I love desert." Anaya says.

"That's why I bought it." Lonzulu replies his daughter.

"Thank you," Khosi says as I give her her bowl. Her mood has slightly changed. I sit besides her taking her hand into mine.

"Honey what's wrong?" I whisper.

She shakes her head but I can see the tears in her eyes. I stand up.

"Uhh Khosi and I are going to to the ladies, we will be back." I say making Khosi stand up.

"Ok," Lonzulu responds sensing the mood.

I lead Khosi to the toilet, Anaya already showed us. Getting inside I scoot low.

"Baby what's wrong?"

"I want to go home." She whispers biting her lower lip.

"Why? I thought you were having a good time."

She shakes her head as her tears finally fall. My heart breaks, I hate seeing her cry.

"Why are you crying?"

"Because I embarrass you."

"What? Who told you that? You don't embarrass me. I love you so much. You are my life."

She shakes her head then breaks down. I hug her as she sobs. I'm really confused, I really thought dinner was going well. She finally stops crying and I wipe her tears with my dress.

"Who told you that?"

"Anaya said Daddy doesn't play with me because I look like an alien."

I take in a deep breath.

"You look nothing like an alien. You are so beautiful and you are a princess ok?"

She nods.

"Tomorrow I will buy you a beautiful dress with wings and a tiara. Do you want a tiara?"

She nods with a small smile but I know that she's just pretending.

"I will buy you one. I love you so much and if you are an Alien, I'm an alien too. I'm Queen Alien and you are Princess Alien. We will rule the world."

"Ok," her voice is tiny.

"Let's go home."

I say taking her hand into mine. We walk out of the bathroom then go back to the dining room. Anaya and Lonzulu are sitting and not eating. Lonzulu stands up as soon as we approach them.

"Hey.. Uhh Khosi and I have to go."

He smiles. "Anaya has something to say." She looks at her father then stands up.

"Khosi I'm sorry for what I said."

Khosi just nods and before I know it, Anaya has her arms wrapped around Khosi who seems frightened. I sigh.

After a while Naya lets Khosi go.

"Well thank you for inviting us." I say taking my handbag from the floor then hug Anaya.

"And thank you for being a wonderful host." She just smiles.

Lonzulu decides to walk us out. As soon as I unlock my car, Khosi gets inside.

"I'm really sorry about Naya." Lonzulu says.

"It's ok. She's a child. We should do this again. It was wonderful seeing Khosi happy."

"We will."

"Ok, have a good night."

"You too."

I get in the car then start the engine.

"When we get home we will watch Barbie, would you love that baby?" I say reversing out of Lonzulu's yard and start the journey back home.

"Yes."

"We can also watch Rapunzel and Elsa." She giggles.

"Frozen Mommy!"

"Yes, I mean that. We can even watch Madagascar and Lion king."

"And Monster's vs Aliens. I'm Suzie Mommy!"

I laugh. "I'm the cockroach then."

She laughs even harder. The whole journey I keep her distracted. Getting home she gives Ma a brief hug then rushes to my room to get my laptop.

“Wow! I was expecting you a bit late.” She says putting her bible aside.

“We had to leave, Anaya, Lonzulu’s kid called Khosi an alien.”

“She cried?”

I nod. “Next term I’m planning to put her into home schooling. Mama my daughter is never happy. I just want her to be happy.. Is that too much to ask?” I say as tears escape my eyes.

•

I fix my jacket as I walk to the reception. She gives me a smile.

“Morning, I’m looking for Eric Khumalo. A man who came here on Saturday late in the morning because he had fainted.” I explain.

“Uhh oh I remember!” She says then directs me to his room. Walking there I’m contemplating what I’m going to say to him. Arriving I walk right in without knocking. He’s lying on the bed with a drip connected to his hand.

“Good morning.”

“What are you doing here?”

“I came to see you.”

“Leave before Lindiwe arrives.” I laugh.

“Wow! I will be quick. Mr Smith called me late on Friday, you are no longer the CEO fortunately.”

“What?”

“You heard me. And starting from today, you can’t use our resources till the divorce has been finalized.” I say giving him the letter.

“Meaning if you don’t have money under the house somewhere.. You don’t have anything. The hospital bill needs to be paid again. They called me yesterday. Seems like the suger diabetes they have diagnosed you with will have to be treated at a government hospital since you don’t have your own medical aid. You were always under mine and you won’t be under mine. So you better move to a government hospital.”

“Well you think you have won Nokukhanya. I’m taking you to court for Khosi’s custody.”

I laugh. “You are pathetic. You have been a bad father. The court will see it.”

“I wonder how they will feel when they find out that Khosi broke her arm in your presence or the time you burnt her with oil.”

“You wouldn’t dare!”

“The court will see that both of us are unable to take care of her then she will be taken.”

“Fuck you! I hope you die!”

THIRTEEN

"So my brother have to move to a government hospital just because you are selfish?" She says budging in my office.

I take in a deep breath. "This is my office!"

"So? After everything he did for you?" I get so angry as I stare at her. I feel my blood boil and all I see is red.

"What exactly did your brother do for me?" I shout. "What? I did everything for that good for nothing son of a bitch! I did everything for your ungrateful pathetic poverty stricken family!"

She laughs shaking her head. "Wow!"

"Get the fuck out of my office!"

"You won't get away with this."

"Eric get the fuck out!" I say throwing the file I'm holding at her. "Get the fuck out you bitch!"

"My brother is going to fix you."

I laugh, I'm beyond angry. I can't even breathe. I'm shaking with anger.

"Your brother won't fix me. I'm on top of the game you.... You.. Lose thing! Go get contraceptives, that vagina must be tired of pushing out babies... And just so you know, allowance to you has been cut off. You better go and look for a job."

She glares at me then walk out.

1 2 3 4 5 I count trying to calm down. So much for my day. I take a while to just calm down and when I do, I don't feel better. I'm still angry but calm.

I take my phone which is ringing from my bag then sigh when I notice it's Sma.

"Sma.." I answer.

"Hey, are you ok?"

"No, Eric's bitch of a sister was here. I'm so angry."

"That bitch needs a slap. Don't mind her."

"I want Eric to get nothing! I wish a car can just hit him so that he can end up in a wheelchair then he fucken eat sand with his pathetic family."

"You want that?"

"More than anything!" I take in a deep breath. "How are you?"

"I'm fine. I will be out next week or the other."

"I'm so happy. You are going to stay with me right?"

He laughs. "Do I have a choice?"

"No! I'm so happy. I miss you."

"3 years ain't nothing."

"It is. Can you believe Eric wants Khosi's custody just to fix me because I won't put him under my medical aid?"

"What?" He's angry.

"Yeah. I hate that man so much. The little love that was left is gone. I hate him so much!"

"He won't do anything."

"The time the oil fell on Khosi's arm, he says he will let the court know. I'm so angry."

"Just calm down. I will take care of him. How's she?"

I sigh, since the Anaya saga she doesn't even want to go out.

"She's ok."

"Look I have to go. I will call you."

"Ok."

"I love you. Take care."

"I lost the baby."

"Ma told me.. Noku I'm sorry."

I laugh. "It's ok. I just can't believe it. I know it's not my first pregnancy to lose but this one.. I just thought.."

"Maybe you need to see those people."

"Which people?"

"The ones you talk to."

"I'm fine. I don't need a shrink."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah.. I will get over it."

"Ok, I will call."

"I love you too."

He chuckles. "Good."

And the line is dead. I feel slightly better after talking to him. I don't know why I let Erin get to me this much. She shouldn't even bother me. I stand up then pick up the file I threw on the floor. Maybe my day would be better if I didn't see Eric. I should have just come straight to work. As soon as I sit down I continue with work. My day gets worse when I have to deal with Siamese twins and I lose one of them. Natalie keeps barking her opinion till I threaten to remove her off my team. I can't wait for the interns to arrive, I'm definitely going to throw them at her.

The way the twins were conjoined one had to die and I'm not even sure if the alive one will make it.

I buy Khosi's favourite pizza on my way home and a new big teddy bear but when I arrive she's already asleep.

"You came a back a bit late today." Ma says as I throw myself on the couch.

"Had a surgery I had to perform."

"It's ok, you look exhausted. I will warm your food."

"Thank you."

She strolls to the kitchen only to come back after a while with my food.

"I have to go back home." She says handing the plate to me. I sit up straight, I am not ready for her to go back. Having her around makes me not to worry a lot especially about Khosi.

"Why? Sma will be here next week or the other week. Why go back?"

"Khanya I have a home too. You know that."

"I know but you know what I'm trying to say."

"I know sweetie but I too have a life."

"Mom! Please.."

"I can't just sit here and do nothing Khanya. My blankets still need to sewn. My backyard garden.. My home needs me."

"We can get the blanket to come here and someone to water and keep your garden in a good position till.. You get back."

"Khanya..."

"Mom! What about Khosi?"

"She will come with. I can take care of her."

"I know but... I don't want to be alone."

"Then hire a nanny."

I put my food down then sigh.

“Eat. You had a long day.”

“How can I eat after.....” I take in a deep breath. “It’s ok. When do you want to leave?”

“Tomorrow in the evening.”

“Hawu Ma! Tomorrow?”

“Yes baby.”

I stand up grabbing my bag.

“Where are you going now? What about your food?”

“I’m going to sleep.”

I say walking away.

Getting in my room I undress then take a a quick shower. I feel so emotionally tired. My heart is just heavy. Every minute keeps getting worse. I put on my night gown once I dry myself then just curl my body on the bed. I close my eyes trying to fall asleep but my phone starts ringing.

I slowly open my eyes I take my phone from the floor.

“Kenya.”

“Hey, sleeping already?”

“Yes.”

“How was your day?”

I sigh. “I don’t even know anymore.”

“Want me to come over?”

I chuckle slightly. “And do what?”

“Comfort you.”

“No. Don’t but thanks.”

“It’s ok. I will see you at the coffee shop then tomorrow.”

“And who says I’m going there?”

“You love that guy’s coffee and muffins.”

“His name is Julias and he’s my friend whom I like.”

“I figured. I will see you there?”

“I won’t be there.”

“I will follow you to work.”

“Whatever.” I say then hang up.

I close my eyes again. In my dream that night I dream that Eric is dead. Waking up the following morning I’m annoyed it was only a dream.

Looking over at my watch, it’s 06:00. I quickly get up and bath. I have to be at work in a hour. I put on the first dress I see and shoes. Applying my makeup I try to get my swollen eyes to normal.

“Morning baby..” I say giving Khosi a kiss getting in the sitting room. She’s awake and is busy with her new teddy bear while watching cartoons.

“Morning Mommy.”

“Should I make you breakfast?” Ma asks joining us.

“No. I have to go to work.” I hug her.

“I will see you later.”

“Ok.” She replies as I take my bag and head for the door. Opening the door I freeze. I haven’t seen this man in a while but I know it’s him.

“Nokukhanya.” He says and I’m more than convinced. Memories of him supporting his brother on leaving my mother are still fresh in my head.

“What do you want?”

“That’s no way to talk to your Uncle.” He quickly reprimands.

“In my house, I talk to you however I want and secondly who says you are my Uncle?”

“Ntombi really didn’t teach you manners.”

“Don’t you dare talk about my mother! What are you doing here?”

“I came to talk to you but seeing that you are very disrespectful you—”

“I what? I’m not related to you in any—”

“Khanya!” I hear Ma’s voice from behind.

“No Ma! I want this man to leave my house!”

“Your father is dying and you are here being disrespectful! Is this what you raised Ntombi?” He roars.

“You know what? Leave my house!”

“You—”

“Leave my house dammit!” I shout startling him.

“Leave and never in your miserable life ever come back! Old hag!”

He gives me a long stare before walking away. I hate my father’s family and I won’t even hide it.

“Khanya..” Mama starts softly.

“I’m going to work.” I say ignoring her. I get in the car then quickly drive to the coffee shop. I can’t even explain my mood. I’m angry.

“The usual?” Julias asks as I reach the counter.

I sigh. “Yes please, make the coffee a little strong.”

“Rough morning?”

“You don’t want to know.”

“Your order coming right up!” He says walking away.

“Morning.” His voice says from behind me. I don’t have to turn to know it’s him.

“Hi.”

“Sorry I’m late.” He apologizes making me turn.

“What?”

“For being late.” He says shrugging.

I shake my head. “You are something.”

“And you look beautiful.”

I look down on myself. Great! Why didn’t I notice this dress earlier on? It’s too short. One of the dresses Lerato bought for me sometime ago. At least it’s flared but the fact that it’s Tuesday and I’m wearing a dress that reaches my mid thighs and is sleeveless doesn’t look good on my position. But I can’t change. The white coat will have to cover it.

“You look angry are you ok?”

“Strong coffee and a muffin!” Julias says. I turn already taking out some coins from my purse. I count them then hand them to him before taking my order.

“I’m fine.” I tell Kenya.

“Who is it? That little pathetic man? He looks like he has a small dick.”

I chuckle. “He does but no. I just.. I will be fine.”

He smiles. “I heard a hug helps.”

“No I’m fine. I will be fine.”

“You are stubborn.” He says taking my coffee and muffin from me.

“Kenya!” I yell but he doesn’t seem to care. He places them on the table nearby before pulling me in his huge chest, enfolding me in his arms. I’m frozen for a second as my heart leaps in my mouth.

“Relax..” He whispers holding me tighter. My body slowly relaxes and I just exhale. He smells so good and feels so warm.

“What’s going on here?” A voice screams. A voice I know very well. I push Kenya away then face angry Lindiwe.

It keeps getting worse.

FOURTEEN

I give Ma one last hug then sigh.

"I will call you when I arrive." She says.

"Ok."

"Bye Khosi.."

"Bye Grammy." She says as they hug.

"Grammy will visit again soon."

"Ok."

We step back as we watch her get inside the quantum.

"Wanna get ice cream before we get home?" I ask Khosi as we walk back to the car.

"Yes.."

We get inside then I drive us to the nearest mall. I have had a long exhausting day and I just want to relax tonight.

"Come let's go." I say after parking the car. It's just after seven so we quickly walk towards the ice cream shop. Khosi giggles excitedly as she gets her corn.

I also get mine then we walk back to the car.

Khosi giggles. "Mommy it's melting."

"Then lick it quickly."

She giggles again trying to lick it while walking.

I help her inside the car then get on the driver's seat.

"Quickly eat so that we go. I don't want you messing the car."

"Ok Mommy!"

I quickly eat my ice cream then decide to call Lerato. She tried to call when I was at work but I was too busy to answer.

"Hey Khanya!"

"Hey, sorry couldn't take your call earlier on. I was busy, had a busy day."

"I figured. I'm with hot bae."

I sigh. "I can't believe you."

"Nkanyezi is the thing girl!"

“Don’t call me when it’s over.”

She laughs. “I really like him.”

“You know how guys like him are. I can’t do anything to him if he hurts you.”

“I know I know but... I like being mistreated.”

“I wouldn’t want that for you or anyone else. I met Lindiwe today.”

“What did that bitch want?”

“I was with Kenya in the morning, had a morning from hell then let him hug me. This thing caused a scene screaming what am I doing with her man.”

“What?”

“Nx.. Can you believe it? I just left though.”

“Good.. I like Kenya but that nigga has too much drama following him around.”

“I liked him.. Just a bit but not anymore. I’m tired of being played. I just want it to be only me and my daughter. I want to give her everything she desires, all the love. I want her to grow up knowing she’s worth the love and care. I just want her to grow knowing she’s beautiful the way she is and she’s worth happiness too.”

“Mommy goals!”

“Yeah so no more Kenya or whatever it may be. We are moving to the greener pastures. Happiness is within us and I’m just going to find my happiness. I just want to be free. To be me.”

“That’s the spirit.”

I chuckle. “Yeah.. End of month I will get myself a nice car. I don’t need anyone deciding my happiness for me, not even a man.”

“I like the new Noku... She’s feisty, sexy and is ready to tackle on the world.”

I laugh. “Oh I’m so ready. We can do lunch tomorrow.”

“Definitely then we can discuss this niggas dick game. Bitchhhhhh!” She screams making me laugh. When God blesses you with the most craziest.

“Whatever bye..”

“Bye, say hi to Khosi for me.”

“Definitely.”

She then drops the call. Looking at the backseat Khosi is done eating.

“Can we go now baby?”

“Yes!”

“Ok..” I put my phone away then start the car. No sound. Nothing. Shit.

I try again. Still no luck.

“Mommy the car won’t start?”

“Yeah..” I say trying again but it just won’t start. I groan then clamber out of the car and walk to the bonnet. I open it then just stare at things I don’t even know. I don’t even know where to touch.

“Need help Mam?” A voice says startling me that I jump.

“Shit sorry..”

I laugh looking at the guy who just spoke. “It’s ok. I just..”

“Need help?”

“It won’t start.” I tell him. He looks nice enough.

“Maybe I can take a look at it.”

“Please..” I’m glad it all happened at a parking lot. There are a lot of cars still parked and there’s someone to help. He walks over to the bonnet then looks at it for a while touching a few things.

“You need to get your car at a garage but for now I can jump start it.” He says.

“I would appreciate it.”

“It’s ok. I’m Thabo.” He introduces himself.

“Nokukhanya.”

“Nice meeting you.”

“I wouldn’t be more glad to meet you.” I say laughing.

The process of him jump starting my car isn’t long, a few minutes later my car is running.

“Thank you so much Thabo.”

“You are welcome, take care.”

“You too..”

He gets in his car then drive away. What a relief. I get back in my car and Khosi is now sleeping.

I reverse from the parking lot then start the journey home. As I drive my phone starts ringing. My eyes skim over to it but when I see the caller ID I immediately look back at the road. The embarrassment Lindiwe put me through in the morning was just enough to have me back at my corner. I don’t like the drama that comes with Kenya especially Lindiwe. He might be a nice guy and Khosi might like him but I can’t be dealing with his drama on top of my own drama. I already have a lot going on. Lunzulu has managed to get a date in court and we are making our first appearance in two weeks. I’m glad the procedure is starting because I’m sick and tired of Eric and his family. They still think they can abuse me but what they don’t understand is that I’m way past that stage. As soon as the divorce has been finalized

I never ever want to see Eric again. My phone starts ringing again and this time I don't even bother looking.

My car suddenly stops running before I even get anywhere far.

"Ohh shit!" I exclaim. The reason why Lerato wasn't using the car is because it has been giving her problems. She even had to buy a new one. Now I don't blame her for buying the golf she's using. I try starting it but still nothing. I really need a car end of month.

I take my phone then swipe the missed call notification and try calling Lunzulu. His phone rings till it leads me to voicemail.

"Uhh hi.. It's me. Look my car kind of stopped running. I'm stuck.." I look around and all I see is a bush and darkness.

"I'm stuck in the middle of nowhere. Please call me as soon as you get this."

I hang up then stare at my phone. I can't just sit. I call Lerato who's phone doesn't even ring, it's off. I'm sure she's getting some dick from Nkanyezi.

I look at his name, I don't have an option now. I really need help. I click his contact and his phone starts ringing immediately.

He doesn't take long to answer.

"Khanya.."

"Kenya hey, I'm stuck. My car just stopped running. Can you please help me?"

"Yeah.. It's ok. Where exactly are you?"

I tell him in which road I am and he tells me he's on his way.

"Give me 20 minutes."

"Ok, thanks."

"It's ok. Do you have Khosi with you?"

I sigh, more of a reason why I want him to hurry. "Yeah.. Please hurry."

"Ok." I drop the call then exhale. Looking around all I see is darkness. My heart skips making me lock all doors. My phone makes a battery low sound making me curse under my breath. Couldn't this happen at home? Couldn't it just wait? You know the devil is working overtime when such things keep on happening to you.

A bang on my window startles me making me scream so loud that Khosi wakes up. The person bangs on my window roughly and that moment I know it's not Kenya.

"Mommy.." Khosi says when we both hear the door being fiddled with. I try starting the car again but nothing. I'm shaking.

"Mom!" Khosi screams when there's a bang on her window too. We are surrounded by three people.

“Baby... Come.. Come!” I say dragging her from the backseat. She’s now crying.

“You are going to listen to me ok?”

She nods and I feel my own tears cascading. God why?

“When I say run.. You are going to run as fast as you can ok?”

She nods. “Don’t turn. Keep running and don’t ever stop. Run as fast you can. Ok?”

“Will you come?”

I nod. “I will. If I don’t, I’m in your heart. Forever. Mommy loves you.” I take my phone then put it in her jacket’s pocket.

“Take this. It’s your key. Don’t lose it.”

She nods and suddenly my door opens and I’m being dragged out. She screams as I get dragged down on the road. Looking over I can’t see his face. He’s wearing a mask.

“What do you want? You can take the car.” I say trying to fight him off but then the other one joins him and slaps me so hard I see the stars.

“Shut up!” He shouts. I’m beyond scared. He starts tearing my dress and right that moment I know my fate. I know what awaits me. Khosi is still screaming.

“Run! Baby run!” I cry. “Run!”

She leaps out of the car then take off. She runs right into the bush.

“Fuck! Follow her!” The one undressing me screams to the other guy, the third one who’s just standing there.

“Run!” I scream so loud but I’m immediately silenced by a hard slap and my left ear losses hearing.

“You fucken bitch!” The guy roars then starts banging my head on the ground.

I feel unexplainable pain seeth throughout making me scream. Over and over again he bangs it on the ground.

He lets my head go then tears off the remaining of my dress such that I’m left half naked. He takes off his mask and I come face to face with the monster. Half of his face is burnt and he looks so scary.

“Surprise surprise bitch!” He says in a menacing tone that I feel my body turn cold immediately. He takes out a knife and I know better than to do what I’m not supposed to do. This man doesn’t look scared to kill. The one holding me places his hand on my mouth as the monster tears my panties with a knife.

“Look at that..” He says and I feel more tears leave my eyes. When I woke up today in the morning this is not how I imagined my day. I could never had imagined it was ever going to go like this. He forcefully separates my legs and there’s no amount of fighting, I know I can’t win. The guy holding me is so strong, he’s literally pinning me down. I can’t scream, all my screams are being held back by his hand. The monster quickly pulls his pants down and I feel my soul leave my body as he forces himself on me. With

each thrust I lose me as I silently cry. He keeps groaning as he forces himself on me while slapping me hard. It's like I'm stuck in a nightmare but only this nightmare is reality.

It feels as if my soul is being dragged out of me till I'm just left dead. After a while I feel warm liquid splash on thighs followed by a hot slap.

"Bitch!" He screams on my face and I can only close my eyes. They switch positions. All I'm praying is that they don't get my daughter. I would die if they touch her. She's still young. She doesn't deserve to be violated. She deserves to be happy.

I slowly succumb to numbness when I feel the other guy ripping me apart. By the time he gets off me I know there's no more me. Whatever is left is just a shadow of what was once there. Nokukhanya is gone. They let me go but I can't even stand. I lie still in silence. My tears long stopped streaming and my heart doesn't leap in my mouth when the monster takes out his gun looking at me.

"Don't worry.." He says. "I'm doing you a favour." He says with a smug then points the gun at me.

"R. I. P bitch!" He says.

BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG!

The gun goes off. I gasp in shock and pain.

"Say hi to Michael Jackson." I hear him say before I taste blood in my mouth.

I hope Khosi makes it.

The last image in my head is my daughter smiling before I fall into the forever darkness.

FIFTEEN

I slowly get off the bed trying not to wake him up and he just stirs but remains asleep. Not getting over just how good looking he is I stand right there and just stare at him. I wouldn't mind being wifed by a guy like this but then again, he has a girlfriend and I do have a feeling she's not the only one. He's too good looking to have just one girlfriend. I pick up his shirt from the floor then pad out of his room and go straight to the living room. Before I can make a grab for my phone which is on the couch my eyes fall on his wallet. I reach for it then open it. There are several bank cards, he's really loaded. I take out his licence. He is 31, but then he said Kenya was his younger brother. Kenya is 32, Noku told me. I roll my eyes, he lied. I place down the wallet then recruit my phone. I switch it on sitting down. I wait for a few seconds and there are notifications which spring up. There's a voicemail from Smanga. I'm surprised because he never calls me and I don't blame him with what happened between us. I click on it then listen.

"Lerato can you call Khanya, it's urgent." He says, his voice so clipped I even get chills.

I dial Khanya's number and it leads me straight to voicemail. I try again but no luck. It's so unlike her and I can't help but have an unsettling feeling. Maybe she's already asleep because either way it's only a few minutes before midnight.

"Hey!" His voice startles me making me drop my phone.

"Opps!" He says. I stand up after picking up my phone and look at him, at least it's not cracked. This nigga is a whole sexy God. Those muscles. Just everything about him is so hot. He's a whole Daddy.

"It's ok. I'm just trying to call my friend,"

"Who? The thick one?"

I look at him then nod. "Yeah."

"Maybe she's asleep. Like you should be." He says making me chuckle.

"Yeah but.. I just can't help but worry.. I'm sure it's nothing though. It's late either way, she must be sleeping. She respects bed time."

He shrugs. "You never know. In my life I have learnt something, instinct is a very strong aspect in life."

I chuckle. "It is?"

"Yeah.. Go with it because most of the time whatever your instinct is telling you is true. I regretted the times I ever ignored my instincts."

I look at him for a while then at my phone. My wallpaper which is Noku and I when we went for the wedding stares righttt back at me and I start shaking. Smanga's clipped voice makes my bones weak.

“Maybe I should get going.” I say walking back to his bedroom. I quickly take off his shirt then slip back into my dress and shoes.

“We can use my car.” He says. “It’s late, I can drop you off and you can always collect your car the following day.”

I contemplate on whether to take him on or not, he’s right. It’s late.

“Ok.”

He dresses up then we walk outside to his car. I try calling Khanya again but still it leads me to voicemail.

“Hey Noku, call me as soon as you get this, I’m on my way to your house.” I say then hang up.

“Why do you call her Noku?” Nkanyezi asks starting his car and driving out from his yard.

“Because her name is Nokukhanya and she hates the nickname Noku. She says it annoys her.”

“So you do it to annoy her?”

“Used to but I’m just used to it now.”

“How long have you been friends with her?”

“13 years.”

“Wow!”

“I know. We are more like sisters.”

“I figured. My brother really likes her.”

I shake my head. “Your brother has too much drama following him. Noku does not need that right now. She can do with some peace in her life.”

He chuckles. “You really love her.”

“She’s my sister. I would never forgive myself if something happened to her while I was...” I trail off not willing to acknowledge that feeling telling me something is wrong.

I take in a deep breathe to just calm down but my worry seems to be piling up with each second we pass. Giving him quick directions to her house my mind wonders off to her birthday which is coming next month. I have planned a little get away to Bora Bora. I’m positive that we will enjoy it especially with everything happening in her life including that hideous thing called Eric. There was a time I just wished to just have killed him, he never treated her right and he never deserved her. After everything she did for him I really get upset thinking about it.

“Wow! She stays here?” Nkanyezi asks looking at Khanya’s house while parking right in front of her gate.

I smile but my smile fades when I don’t see her car. The gate is closed but her car is not there. “Yeah.. She’s not home?”

“She’s not?” He asks stepping out of the car. I quickly clamber off almost falling then rush to the gate. It’s not there and lights are off. She always leaves all the lights on because Khosi hates darkness.

“She’s not home.”

“Maybe the car is in the garage.”

I shake my head. “She’s not home. She..—”

“Lerato!” A voice calls out making me turn. It’s Lonzulu, what is he doing here? My subconscious rolls her eyes at me. No matter what explanation I might give myself to at least loosen the guilt, the truth still does slap me hard across my face. I slept with him and it really is not going away. It might have been years back but still. I slept with Lonzulu, the guy who likes my friend right now and the guy who was my ex boyfriend’s friend, Smanga. I know I should tell Khanya but I don’t even know where to start. I lied about the reason Sma and I broke up and he never really told her the truth. I guess he saw just how much deep our friendship ran. Lonzulu gets out of his car which is parked behind Nkanyezi’s then rushes towards me.

“Where’s Khanya?” I ask him. I’m panicking.

“She left a voicemail earlier on telling me the car stopped running.” I curse under my breath, I shouldn’t have given it to her. It has 1 million problems but she was desperate.

“So where’s she now?”

“I don’t know, I have been looking for her. Her phone is off.”

“Maybe.. Kenya!” I scream then look at Nkanyezi.

“Call Kenya, he might know.”

“Ahh.. Yeah!” He takes out his phone then calls his brother while we watch. Every second that pass seems like ages.

“Yoh bruh.. Uhh do you have Khanya with you?” He asks and I walk closer to him.

“Shit shit shit!” He says rubbing his face. He stays still listening then finally drops the call.

“Is he with her?”

“No... He’s looking for Khosi.”

“What?”

“Apparently something with her car, she called him asking for help but he got delayed a bit and he arrived late.”

“What the hell do you mean he arrived late? Where is Noku?”

“She was shot and Khosi is missing.”

I feel my whole world disintegrate before my eyes. I can’t think properly nor can I compose myself. The cold breeze suddenly gets too hot for my skin.

“Shot?” I whisper as tears glide down my cheeks. “Please tell me this is a joke and she’s at home.. And... And she’s fine. That she’s sleeping. Please..” I can’t hear my own voice as I beg.

“Lerato.. She.. She’s gone.” He says and I lose it.

•••••

“You are going to listen to me ok?” Her voice ring in my head as I run. She’s crying. Mommy never cries. Mommy doesn’t like it when I cry but Mommy was crying.

“When I say run.. You are going to run as fast as you can ok?” She continues in my head and my feet keep moving. They keep moving forward where there is nothing but darkness.

“Don’t turn. Keep running and don’t ever stop. Run as fast you can. Ok?” I run faster, my feet stomping hard on the ground. She said I should not stop. Teacher Mathew said I should listen to Mommy because Mommy knows best.

“Run! Baby run! Run!” She screams in my head.

“Run!” She screams louder. Her voice keeps on playing as I run. I’m tired but she said I should not stop. I can feel her phone in my pocket.

“That’s your key. Don’t lose it.” I’m holding my pocket as I run. She said I should not lose it. She said it’s my key. I can’t see where I’m going but I keep running. I know those bad man are going to hurt me. Teacher Mathew said they hurt people. She said when we see them we run away. I hear nothing but my own footsteps.

“I will be in your heart. Forever.” Her voice is now soft.

“Mommy loves you.” It’s soft. She’s not screaming anymore. The same words keep repeating over and over again. I start moving to their rhythm.

“Mommy loves you.”

“Mommy loves you.”

“Mommy loves you.”

It sounds like a song now. I want to tell her I love you too, Teacher Mathews said we should always say that to our Mommies. She says that’s what good children do. I want to be a good child to make Mommy happy.

My foot gets stuck on something and fall. I keep rolling and I can feel the soil in my ear but I hold on to my pocket tightly.

“That’s your key. Don’t lose it.” I hold it tightly when something sratches my leg. It’s so painful but I’m still rolling. Soil gets in my eyes but I don’t move my hands from my pocket.

“That’s your key. Don’t lose it.”

I stop rolling and everything is still. I hear a sound, it sounds like a bird. I listen carefully and there are a lot of sounds. They are different.

“Run! Run baby! Run!” Her voice screams. I open my eyes then rub my eyes with one hand. I don’t let her phone go. She said I shouldn’t lose it. I squint my eyes and still I see nothing but shadows of trees. I stand up slowly because my leg is very painful. I feel my trouser get wet and I know it’s my blood. Teacher Mathews said when we hurt ourselves we tell Mommy so to help us. I want to go back to Mommy. I want Mommy. I feel tears warm my cheek and I can taste them on my tongue. Salty tears. I want Mommy. I try to move but my leg is too painful. I can’t move and my trouser keeps getting wet.

I open my mouth and I want to shout Mommy but nothing comes out. I try again using all my strength but still nothing comes out.

More tears warm my cheek. I want my Mommy. I leap with one foot then drag the hurt one with me. I want to sit down and wait for her. She said she will come.

I sit under a tree carefully. I don’t want to hurt my leg. The ground is painful to sit on and there are thorns. I slightly move to the side but to only cry silently. My leg... It’s painful.

I’m silent and hungry and thirsty.

Mommy left food at home.

She said we would eat after coming back from saying goodbye to Grammy. I miss Grammy. I like playing with Grammy because she always makes me laugh. She also watches TV with me.

Daddy does not.

Daddy does not like playing with me because he has to work.

Mommy said I should not disturb Daddy because it’s bad.

Like Uncle Lwandle. Daddy’s friend. He says I should never disturb Daddy because Daddy does not like girls who disturb him. He let’s me play with his snake toy. Uncle Lwandle sometimes rubs his toy on my private. He says it will make Daddy play with me. He says I shouldn’t tell Mommy because Mommy will not play with me anymore.

I slowly take out Mommy’s phone. It’s off. I press the button on the side which makes it switch on. It takes long and when it’s on I look at it for a while.

“That’s your key. Don’t lose it.” I quickly switch it off then put it back in my pocket.

I slowly close my eyes so that I don’t see the darkness anymore. My hands are cold so I put them in my pocket with my eyes closed. My leg is fine when I don’t move it. It’s not painful when I’m just sitting. I listen carefully in my head looking for her voice. When I find it she’s singing. She’s singing my favourite lullaby. I like it, it makes me fall asleep. Slowly I start feeling sleepy.

“Mommy loves you.” Her voice sweeps through cradling me.

“Mommy loves you.”

SIXTEEN

I wish I can say it was all dream, God knows how I wish to say it was just a bad nightmare I was stuck in.

I still remember his words, they still echo in my head so loud.

“She’s gone.”

For a while there I had just waited for him to say it was a prank but he never said it. It was all happening. Every second that passed as I stared at Nkanyezi that day I knew she was gone.

“Hey... It’s me.. Lerato,” I say taking her hand into mine. Her hand is so cold. The machines connected to her body are a lot and there are just beeping sounds everywhere. I smile.

“Today is another day..”

I don’t like the dullness in her room but I too have lost the strength of making it lively everyday. Each day that passes just continues to drain all the little faith and hope that I have. Faith continues to slip away from me as I watch her lying there lifeless. We had hope but it too can’t keep up. I bite my lower lip which is quivering so hard.

“Khanya...” Her name escapes my lips in a sob.

“Why? I... We had a lot of plans. Remember when we planned to go to Paris?” I ask her as if she can hear me. The doctors have lost all hope. They say she’s dead, the machines connected to her are just holding her by the corner but she’s gone.

“I still want to go to the city of love. We had so many plans... It’s too soon. It’s just too soon.” I can taste my own tears. The pain that is in my heart does not amount to anything. It feels so physical yet it’s just emotional. I squeeze her hand tightly.

“I would do anything for you.. I just want you to come back. To come back to me. To Khosi.. We are sisters. Remember that sisters never part? I love you.”

I cover my face then just allow myself to break down. I cry for all our years together. All the unconditional love we shared over the years. Why did God make us meet if it was to take her away from me?

“Remember when we met?” I ask her with a chuckle. “I think you hated me. Well I know you did. Do you remember that?”

I wipe away my tears with the back of hand. “Please don’t leave me. I need you please don’t leave me. I will do anything.” I sob refusing to taste the grief on my tongue. It’s so bitter and painful.

“Khosi needs you. Your Mom...” I smile. “Even Smanga. He needs you. It’s breaking him not being able to help you.” I kiss her cold hand. The person lying on the bed does not look like my strong Khanya.

“I’m leaving. I will see you later.” I look at her carefully then walk out. My heart is so heavy. The moment I walk out I gracefully walk into his arms. I can’t it help anymore. I have tried to be strong but today I allow myself to lose the battle. A whole month and no change.

“Shhh...” He says rubbing my back. He doesn't say the famous words, he knows too that nothing will be fine. It's never going to be fine.

“Why!” I sob on his chest. “Why? She's too young..”

He holds me tighter.

I collect myself then step away from him after a while.

“She will make it.” He says. His voice sounds hopeful but we all know it's long been over.

I shake my head. “There's only much she can deal with Sma. There's only much she can handle. Maybe she's tired..” I whisper.

“This world has been cruel to her from the first day.”

He nods then sits on the floor resting his back on the wall.

“I tried to always be there. I guess it was never enough.” He says.

“She's not coming back...” I whisper.

“How do you know that?” He asks, his voice strained.

“I dreamt her... She was fading away.. She was leaving me.” I say then smile.

“I think maybe she's at peace.” I say then look at him. “There's just a lot that happened. The pain.. The headache.. It was too much to deal with. She had the whole world on her shoulders. The world is too heavy Sma.. If she's at peace then I'm happy. She doesn't deserve the cruelty of this world and you know it Sma. It's too much. It's too painful.”

He rubs his face. “Everyone who did this her is going to pay.”

“You killed him?” I ask and he nods. He did.

“I saw the report in the morning.”

One of the guys who raped Noku was caught before he could get to Botswana. He has been under the police custody for a week and today morning he was reported dead. Apparently he fell and hit his head.

“Did he say anything?” I ask.

“Yeah..”

“Who?” I ask as my heart leaps in my mouth.

“Lesley.”

“Who's that?” I barely recognize my own voice.

“A hit man.”

“Who sent them?”

“He didn't say. I killed him too early but I'm going after every suspect.”

“I want justice for Noku..”

“And she will get it.”

“Hey..” Nkanyezi says joining us. He has been waiting for me in his car. It’s been a rough month, a rough long month.

Khanya was found close to death besides the road with the car burnt. Whoever it was ry tried to destroy all evidence. They left her to die, they probably thought she was dead. All the surgeries she had, they were meant to save her. The last surgery she had was for the head injury she had. It was a risk though Ma signed off the papers. None of those surgeries have helped in any way.

I look at Nkanyezi then give him a slight nod. “What about Khosi?” I ask Sma. She’s still missing. The police are still looking for her but they have lost hope.

“We are waiting for her to switch on the phone. It’s the only thing we have to find her with.”

“So we just wait? What if they are rapping her? What if she’s dead?”

“Lerato I hired 3 private investigators. I’m searching day and night for her. I’m doing everything I can!” His voice is clipped yet so calm.

“I’m going to fly the chopper again today with Kenya.” Nkanyezi says, he’s been supportive, especially Kenya.

“Thanks man..” Sma says standing up. He enters Khanya’s room.

“Want to grab lunch?”

Before I can respond I see Ma coming with two ladies. The poor woman has lost weight in the last month. She’s barely recognizable.

“Ma,” I greet her.

“My child..” She says. “I came to pray for her. To set her free. She’s in too much pain. I came to see my daughter free. She has suffered enough. I don’t know what I did to deserve this but whatever it is, this is the greatest punishment ever. God has surely touched where it hurts the most. He has ripped away my heart from my chest. He has destroyed me. He has taken the life out of me.” She says then enters Khanya’s room.

I know it’s over. Whatever that was left is over. It’s gone. Before I can join Ma I spot her. I literally run towards her and I have her neck in my hands as soon I approach her.

“Ahh!” She gasps.

“You killed her! You did it!” I scream as I squeeze her neck tightly. I know she’s the one. We all know she’s the one. Khanya never had enemies. She never had bad blood with anyone, she was always reserved. I feel strong arms pulling me from her but I grab her weave. She screams so loud but the arms are so strong they pull me from her.

“You murderer! You killed her!” I scream. My vision blurred with tears.

“You killed her! She didn’t do anything to you!”

“I didn’t kill Khanya Lerato.” Lindiwe says crying. “I can never kill a human being. I didn’t kill anyone,” she defends herself but it all falls on deaf ears. My heart is too misty and heavy. I’m too hurt to believe anything. She killed Noku with Eric. He must be happy now that he’s finally getting everything.

Her blood was shedded all for money.

Just what crime did she commit to suffer like this?

●●●●●●●●

“Come sweetheart..” She says. I don’t want to get up because Mommy said I should never talk to strangers.

“I won’t hurt you.. Come. Are you hungry? Your leg is hurt. Come..” She says coming near me. I want to stand up and run far away from her but my leg is painful. I can’t walk anymore. I shake my head no holding on to the bread I got in the morning from the nice house in the dustbin. It’s clean and I can eat it. Mommy said I should never eat from dustbins but I’m too hungry. I didn’t eat yesterday.

“I won’t hurt you. Do you want Mommy?”

She knows Mommy! I nod.

“Yes..” I whisper and I start crying. “I want Mommy and Grammy.”

She smiles. “I can take you to them. You want Mommy?”

I nod.

“Good.”

She walks towards me and this time I don’t move. She helps me up then takes off my jersey from my leg.

I flinch.

“It’s painful?”

I nod but it’s not bleeding anymore. It’s just a big wound.

“Let’s go. We will see Mommy then.” She says giving me my jacket.

She helps me walk to her car from under the bridge. I hate the bridge, it does not smell nice but it’s warm under there. And when it rains, of doesn’t rain on me. The lady helps me in the car. Her car is nice, like Mommy’s car.

As soon as she gets in the car it starts moving.

I’m going to see Mommy. I squeeze Mommy’s phone in my pocket. I still have it. I have never switched it on. I want to give it to Mommy.

“What’s your name?” The lady asks. She has a beautiful voice. I like her, she’s nice not like the one I met yesterday who pushed me to the ground.

“Khosi..” I whisper.

“Good. His old are you?”

“5.”

“Wow!” She says.

She finally stops the car but I’m sad when I see it’s not Mommy’s house.

“Where’s Mommy?” I ask her. I can’t hear my own voice.

“Don’t cry, she’s inside. Come...” She says stepping out of the car.

Mommy is inside.

She opens the door for me then helps me to get off the car and inside the house where Mommy is.

“Roxy!” A voice says, it’s scary and it’s a scary man. He has things on his body. I grip the nice lady’s hand tightly.

“What did you bring today?” He asks walking towards me. I immediately stop walking. I want Mommy.

I want to go home.

“She wants Mommy.” The nice lady tells the scary man and he smiles.

“Ohhh you want Mommy?” He asks and I nod. I’m too scared to talk.

“Don’t be scared.” He says. “I know where Mommy is.” He says smiling.

“Let’s go to Mommy.” He says then look at the nice lady. “Escort her to Mommy.”

“Yes.” She says then picks me up. She doesn’t stagger like Mommy sometimes. She just walks somewhere till we are standing in front of a huge box connected to a car, like the way Daddy does sometimes. The nice lady puts me inside then open the big box. There are kids inside. Kids like me. One is crying while the other ones are just sitted. There’s one just lying there on blood.

“We are taking you to your Mommies.” She says then picks me up and carefully put me inside. I move away from the girl who is bleeding. She’s just laying there not moving. I want to touch her but I’m scared.

I think we are all scared.

The nice lady closes the box with us inside and it’s dark. I can’t see anything.

“My name is Eunice,” a voice says and it’s from the girl besides me.

I don’t know if I should talk or not but I find myself opening my mouth. “Khosi..” I say. “My name is Khosi.” My voice comes off as a whisper.

“Where’s your Mommy?” She asks.

“They took her,” I tell her. “She said I should run and keep her phone. I’m going to give it to her.”

“You have a phone?” She asks immediately.

“Yes.”

“Call your Mommy. She will pick us up. Those people who put us here are bad people. They hurt Tanya. She’s not waking up.” She says. I reach for my pocket then take out Mommy’s phone. I have never switched of on since the day I last saw her.

She said it’s my key.

I press the button that switches it on and when it lights I hear murmurs.

“Shhhhhhhhh..” Eunice says silencing all of them.

“Call your Mommy Khosi.”

I look at it. Mommy taught me how to call Grammy and Aunt Lerato.

I can’t call Grammy. I forgot how but I call Aunty Lerato.

“5%.” The phone says.

“Your phone speaks?” Eunice asks.

“Yes.”

I put on my ear when Aunty’s phone starts ringing. Mommy said I should put it on my ear.

●●●●●●●●

I watch as Ma cries. I keep on wiping my tears. She doesn’t want to leave Noku and the doctors don’t kick us out. Tomorrow the machines are being switched off. I’m startled by my phone ringing. I look around then silently walk out from Khanya’s room while taking it out. My heart skips when I look at the caller ID.

“Hello?” I answer immediately. “Who’s this? Khosi?”

“Aunty..” Her small voice berates in my ears and I feel warm tears gush from my eyes.

“Baby.. Where are you? Tell Aunty. I will pick you up.” My voice is shaky. I hear a voice at the background then another voice.

“They hurt our friend.” It says. “Please help us.”

“Where are you?”

“They put us in a tank.” The voice responds then I hear Khosi’s voice again.

“Aunty I want Mommy..”

I take in a deep breath. “Mommy is looking for you. Just hold on.. Don’t hang up.” I re enter the room.

“Khosi!” I tell Sma and within seconds he has my phone in his hands.

“Khosi?... Mommy is fine. Where are... Khosi? Khosi?” He takes off the phone from his ear.

“What is it?” Ma asks from behind Sma.

“She hang up. We need to track her down. We will find her.”

15 YEARS LATER

SEVENTEEN

KHOSI

I draw a thick black eyeliner under my eyes staring at myself on the mirror. After I'm done I run the black lipstick on my lips.

"Madame Zhanna, Sir Sebastian is calling you." Irin says standing behind me. I raise my hand and wave her away. She quickly nods then walk out of my bedroom.

I slowly stand up taking my cigarette from the dressing table. Lighting it up I walk out, taking the stairs one at a time. I'm not in a hurry.

I puff out the smoke as I walk inside the big elegant sitting room. There are three man sitted, I don't recognize them and I really don't care. I walk towards Sebastian who has his little greedy eyes on me.

"My beautiful Zhanna.." He says taking my hand and kissing it. I look over at the men and they are staring at me.

"This is beautiful Zhanna..." He says, his Russian accent strong and heavy. He's squeezing my thighs and I don't wince in pain. The pain feels numb, I want my fix.

"Hello.." The other man greets. I recognize the British accent. He looks scared.. Ahhh bad move, the worst thing you can do is show Sebastian that you are scared. That he scares you.

I give him a nod smoking.

"Honey.. You can excuse us now." Sebastian says and I walk away. I know there are marks all over my body but Sebastian doesn't mind. He likes them. He likes disciplining me so he always whips me whenever he feels like it. I walk back to my bedroom and quickly take off the six inch heels. I'm shaking. I rush over to the dressing table then spill sachet and make lines. I roll a paper then start snorting.

"I want you to please my guest!" Sebastian roars as he enters my room. I continue snorting quick trying to escape from the itchiness and uncontrollable shaking.

"Make them very very happy." He says pulling my hair. I scream.

"Fucken let me go!"

He pushes me to the ground then start taking off his belt. I start laughing. It doesn't get new. I'm used to it now.

"You think you are funny my darling Zhanna?" He says slowly, his voice so deep and menacing.

"I don't think I'm funny Sebastian.. I know I am." I tell him and he whips me hard with the belt on top of yesterday's bruises and marks.

"Let's see how funny this is!" He says whipping me harder. I writhe in silence, not showing him the pain he's inflicting on me. He soon stops and he's breathing hard.

"They don't call me Sebastian for no reason Zhanna." He says. "Go and entertain our guest. Make him very happy before he meets his maker." He walks out. I stand up slowly then look at myself on the mirror. I'm wearing close to nothing. Just a panty and bra. He likes me like this. He's always liked me like this. From young age. I chuckle when I remember the first day I arrived in this house. The nightmare that was inflicted on me. You never know pain till you wish you can just die. I feel tears warm my cheek and I harshly wipe them away. I'm no damn cry baby. I'm Zhanna Mandeleev, and Zhanna doesn't cry. Zhanna the sex toy. Zhanna the punching bag.

Who cares about all that shit though? No one cares about no one.

Life ain't no fairy tale.

I finish my cocaine and I feel so good. I love cocaine. It makes me feel so good. I put on my shoes then walk out of the bedroom and go down the stairs. The British man is all alone drinking a glass of whisky. Does he know that's the last thing he's about to drink? Why do they associate with the devil?

"Hi.." He says. He's a big man with rugged features and red hair and I really don't miss his worried expression. He should be. He should be very worried. Sebastien is the Russian devil. He doesn't fret nor does he play. He means business.

"What's your name?" I ask him.

"Kennedy."

I laugh. "I'm trying to put behind your death. You look like a... Well.. Human." I tell him.

"I can help you." He mouths. I laugh even harder.

"You? Ohh please!"

Help me? No one can help me. I can't even help myself. I have tried. When I turned 8 I tried to run. He caught me and gave me a very hard beating that I was unconscious for a week.

When I tried again when I was 10, he had 5 man have their way with me the whole night. I tried again when I was 16 and he tortured me till I was just begging for my death. It's a waste of time. He will catch me before I even take 2 steps.

"Do you have a family?"

I ask him and he nods. "I have the FBI behind me. I can help you if you let me."

"Did you hug your kids and tell them you loved them before you came here?" I ask him.

"Zhanna is not your real name. We want to help you."

"You should have hugged them." I tell him sourly. I wished I did. I wished she came after me. She never did. No one ever does.

I laugh. "Now let's see were this takes you. FBI agent found dead. That would make quite a headline but ain't you like a secret person. You work undercover don't you? You are a dumb cop. No one will ever catch him." I say taking off my bra.

“Not even God!”

I walk towards him then kiss him but only for him to push me away. I laugh.

“You are an interesting man.” I whisper. “God would make you a real asset.”

“I can help you.”

Bang! Bang! Twice and he’s still.

That was too quick.

I look back and it’s Antonio. Sebastian’s right hand man. Poor FBI agent. I pick up my bra then walk away leaving him dead. I’m not shocked. A lot has died like that before my eyes. At first I used to get nightmares but soon enough I realized that the nightmares were simply my life. That’s why I love cocaine. I don’t really care when I’m high. I feel good and happy when I’m high. So much happy. I walk back to my room then grab the bottle of vodka on my bed and take a gulp. I chuckle when I remember what day it is.

“Happy birthday to me...” I sing laughing. “Happy birthday to fucken me!”

I hate this day. I curse this day for I was born on this day. She could have aborted me.. Oh how I hate her! How I hate her for giving birth to me. How I hate her for not coming after me.

“Mommy loves you.” Her voice swirls in my head. I clutch my head with one hand. I hate it when she gets in my head like this or when she starts screaming Run! I hate those nightmares.

“Madame Zhanna, Sir Sebastian said wear something nice. He has guest in a few—”

“Get out!” I scream throwing the bottle at her. It meets the wall and smashes into small pieces. She doesn’t jump in fear but quickly bends down and start picking everything up. Bloody useless maid!

I sit still then stand up again. I undress then wear the fucken uniform! I’m a slut. Sebastian’s slutty whore!

A slutty whore of a drug addict.

Going down the stairs again, the dead man is gone. No FBI is ever going to find him. He’s a gonna. Next time they will play far from the ruthless Russian devil.

There are two man now. My eyes are stuck on one because of the way he’s staring at me. He looks as bad as Sebastian only he’s black and he doesn’t look moved by Sebastian goons which are standing by the stairs and at the door.

“Ahh sweetheart..” He says and this time I know what I’m required to do. At some point I preferred only him sexually abusing me rather than being the whole world’s sex slave. Sometimes I wonder how much I was sold to him for.

“These are my business partners.” He says pointing at the two black man. I just nod, I can feel myself slipping out of it.

“This is Zhanna, our entertainer.” Sebastian says smoking. I guess that’s why he let me do cocaine today on my free will. I wonder if I’m supposed to sleep with the two man. I need heroin, an overdose if I’m going to. Something to throw me off quickly.

“Turn around sweetheart. Give them a show.”

I turn slowly. I unzipped my dress slowly doing what he asked. If I don’t oblige he will beat me— again. In front of them. They like it, the guest. They always like it when he whips me then he let’s them fuck me. The dress falls to my feet and I kick it away with the tip of my shoe.

“Stroll around for us baby.” He continues. I do what he asks, parading in my thong only.

“Lose the thong.”

The man with the impassive look just stares at me and I see something flick in his eyes, something not lust but pity. I felt my blood begin to boil. How dare he pity me?

A painful lash across my back make me take off the panties quickly. I know once Sebastian starts hitting me, he won’t stop. I’m left naked with red and purple marks all over my body. Sebastian likes me like this.

“Touch yourself.” He whispers from behind me. I lie on the ground and touch myself. I don’t feel any pleasure with sex. Even when I do it myself. I start faking moans. Sebastian likes the fake moans. How I hate this man. If I could I would just kill him but that’s a whole mission impossible.

I catch Sebastian licking his lips as I continue. I have to fake my orgasm too.

“Good girl!” He says.

‘Gentleman.. She’s all yours. My beautiful rose.’ He tells them then leaves us all alone. I want to stop him, to yank him back here because he’s going to the new small girl that was brought here last night. I saw her by mistake and if Sebastian finds out I know, he will have me unconscious for more than a week. It won’t be the first time.

She’s too young, like I was. I was too young too. I bite my lower lip as the memories threatens to take me down with. The other man, not the straight face one, he stands up and walks away. I wonder where exactly he’s going because chances are that he won’t comeback. I lie on the ground unsure of what to do or say.

“What’s your name?” He asks. I can taste arrogance from his voice. By the time his soul arrive in heaven, all the arrogance would have long been thrown.

“Zhanna..” I tell him standing up.

“Your real name.”

I chuckle then repeat, “Zhanna.”

“You are a prostitute?” He asks and I smile.

“Yes, wanna fuck?”

"I don't fuck prostitutes."

I laugh. "Who asked you?"

He chuckles, definitely not a friendly chuckle. He's scary but I have seen worse.

He clicks his tongue then stands up. He's really tall. He can't leave, Sebastian will be very upset. He will burn cigarettes on me or do something I can't handle.

"Is there something you would like me to do?"

I ask him. He can't leave.

"No."

"I can make you very happy."

"I don't fuck with prostitutes."

"I'm not a prostitute."

He stares at me for a while. "What's your name?"

Damn! What's up with that question? "Zhanna."

"Isn't your name Khosi Khumalo?"

I stop breathing. No one knows my name. No one. How does he know?

Who's this man?

EIGHTEEN

I look at him and I can't hide my shock. How does he know me?

"Am I right?"

I swallow. "You are wrong."

He chuckles. "Suit yourself." He says then walks out. I want to run after him but my feet won't move.

My heart is beating so fast. I push my feet up the stairs to my room then lock the door. I don't care about the consequences I'm going to face. They are going to be very harsh but I'm not concerned. I pull my bra from the closet then tie it tightly around my arm. My hands are shaking. I grab the needle. The last one. I know Sebastian won't give me more. He's going to be very angry but I inject myself blocking the memories. I fall to the ground and feel the heroin hit me hard. Sebastian is going to be very upset. He's going to be very very upset. I lie still on the ground then start laughing. I laugh so hard. Everything is just funny. My life is funny. My pain is funny. Sebastian is funny. My mother is funny.

Mommy.

I giggle.

"Mommy Mommy!" I say softly. Mommy is funny.

I hear a loud bang on the door making me laugh even harder.

"Zhanna!" He screams. I lie still. I just can't move.

"Zhanna!" He roars again and I hear something banging the door. I slowly stand up then walk to the closet. He won't find me in here. I start laughing. Of course he will find me and he will kill me... Or maybe not. I hear footsteps and I know he has managed to get the door open. Since I met him he has just been a heartless man. He killed Eunice. I remember Eunice. My friend. My only friend. He killed her. She was bleeding a lot. He had old man rape her then he killed her. He killed her then made me dig her grave. I laugh when the closet door opens. He's fuming with anger. He grabs me by my hair then drags me out.

"Dirty bitch!" He roars throwing me on the floor. He's really angry but I don't care. I feel free.

He pulls me up then leads me to the bathroom. I feel my intestines knot when I look at Irin who's in the bathtub full of water, water which has now adopted a red colour. Before I can hold it the little food I had yesterday makes its way out right into the bloody water.

My cheek burns, he just slapped me. I feel blood oozing from nose.

"Disgusting dirty bitch!"

"Irin.." I whisper. She's been with us for a few months now. She didn't do anything. Sebastian grabs a handful of my hair and dips my head inside the bloody water I just threw up in. I hold my breath closing my eyes tightly. When I start feeling as if I'm finally giving in he pulls my head out.

“Bitch!” And again. This time I swallow the water and when he pulls my head I’m gasping for air while coughing. He hits my head with the gun he’s holding making me fall with a scream.

“You bitch!” He starts kicking me. The pain is unbearable. Over again he kicks me hard. I try by all means to protect my face. He may hurt me anywhere else but not on my face. Finally he lets me go then walk out. I can’t get up. My body is too sore to do anything. Before I know it, he’s back and he has the shambok.

“I’m going to teach you a lesson you will never forget.” He says dragging me out of the bathroom. At this stage there’s really nothing I can do rather than just lying there in silence and let him have his way.

He starts whipping me. Hard and hard that it feels as if my skin is peeling off. I don’t make a sound but just hold my breath with my eyes tightly closed. He keeps on cursing me and by the time he stops I’m rarely feeling anything. My body is slowly dissolving away. I take in a deep breath then just let go. I hope this is death. I hope I’m finally dying. I’d rather die than live the way I’m living. Even prisoners don’t live the way I live. Even sinners in hell, I’m sure the torture is not like this.

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“Madame Zhanna,” a voice says softly. I’m being dragged from my place of peace and I’m welcomed by pain into reality. My body aches. Everywhere just aches.

I lie still and look at the lady wearing a nurse uniform.

“How are you feeling Madame Zhanna.”

I’m Madame Zhanna because I’m Sebastian’s slave. More like his property.

I feel so lightheaded.

“I gave you morphine, it should help ease the pain.” She says trying to keep an impassive look but I can see whatever she’s looking at has her concerned. Since Sebastian killed Dmitri, his personal doctor, he has to settle for new comers and I know he hates it. I hope she doesn’t open her mouth and leaves whatever that happens in this house behind or we might as well start planning her funeral.

Sebastian is not scared to kill anyone, he enjoys killing people.

“Thank you.” I tell her and she just nods then quickly walk out. I know I’m looking thoroughly beaten and I also know he’s not done yet. He will be done the day he kills me. I hear a scream. It’s a child. I feel tears well in my eyes, he has her. He’s hurting her. Maybe if I behaved he wouldn’t be touching her.

Sometimes I too can hear my screams in my head the first day it happened. It had only been a week and he had been showering me with love and food. He told me he would take me to Mommy and Daddy. He did everything till one day he just decided to destroy me. I was still a child. I didn’t deserve it and the little girl screaming doesn’t deserve it.

Then we say there’s God.

Where’s God when innocent souls are destroyed like this?

Where's God when innocent souls suffer like this?

What kind of a sin did the innocent soul commit?

Where was God when I needed him the most?

Where is he as I suffer like this?

The tiny voice keeps screaming and a sob escapes my lips. I want him to stop hurting her. I want to cradle her in my arms and protect her. I want to hold her tightly in my arms, the same way I wished someone could do for me. The same way I wished someone could do for Eunice.

15 years all gone.

The pain that is endured just too much. No amount of drug can help me forget. No amount of alcohol can help me forget.

The pain. The heartache. The hope that someone would come. The faith. Holding on. The prayers. Nothing helps. Nothing helped. I can't forget. I find myself getting out of bed. I hiss at the pain but I don't stop. I walk to the door and open it slowly. My feet are slow but I feel myself closing in on the noise. The moment I approach stairs I feel a hand on neck.

"Where are you going?" He asks.

Antonio. I want to fight him but I have no strength.

"Stop.. Please go and stop them. Take me instead." I beg crying.

"I will do anything. I will do anything. Let her go."

He grabs my arm roughly then pull me back to my room. The moment we arrive he throws me on the bed.

"If you know what's good for you, you will sit here and not go anywhere!" He says then walks out closing the door behind him. I sob loudly.

I can't do this anymore.

Before I can think about what to do, the door opens and the nurse walks in. Her face looks pale, shocked and horrified. From her expression I know the little girl is dead.

She clears her throat. "Do you want anything Madame Zhanna?" She asks. I chuckle.

"He's going to kill you too." I tell her. She looks at me and we both know I'm right. Sebastian won't hesitate killing her, she's a loose end and he doesn't like loose ends.

"You entered the Lion's den and no one is going to save you." I whisper. "No one will come for you. You will leave this place dead. I hope you don't have a family."

She starts crying. "Don't cry, its useless."

"I have a 6 months baby." She manages.

"So far I have had 6 abortions." She regards me with a shocked expression.

“Don’t worry. Death is better than torture.”

She sits at the edge of the bed silently crying. I just stare at her. They are always scared. I’m not scared of death, matter of fact, I just want to die.

“I don’t want to die.” She says.

“Let me take your place.”

The door abruptly opens and she immediately stands up. It’s one of the guards. I forgot his name.

“You! Come!” He says pointing at the nurse. She starts crying louder. He walks in then drag her out as I watch. I hear her cries as they further away from me then just lie still on the bed.

And wait.

If Sebastian don’t find the good nurse enough I’m next. So I wait. The same way I do all the other nights.

I lie still and I know time is moving. There’s no gadget in this house, everything is hidden away so that I don’t even try trying something.

Hours pass and I finally close my eyes. I know it’s very late. I seek her voice in my head, I can’t sleep so I look for it. I always hear it the same way. I wonder if she made it. Or not.

I feel tears wet my cheek when I think about the worst. She’s only one who’s ever loved me. She loved me.

My eyes slowly open when I hear nothing but silence. I wonder if he’s here. I slowly get off bed, my wounds are very painful. I walk to the door then open it, glad that it’s not locked like most nights I quickly step out and close it gently behind me. I walk to the stairs then take them slowly. I’m in too much pain to hurry. Getting downstairs I almost die when I see two man wearing all black taking Sebastian’s painting from the wall. He loves that painting and it has a security alarm. I once overhead him talk, the painting is worth \$200 million. The painting is also the reason for the guards.

“Fuck!” The other one swears looking at me. I stand still as they both look at me.

“Help me..” I finally say. “Please help me.” I beg. I fall to my knees ignoring the pain. “Help me.”

The other guy removes his musk. It’s the guy I saw earlier on. The one who just walked away.

“Dragon I told you!” He says harshly and I know the guy who said my name is dragon.

“So?” He responds taking off his own musk.

“We can’t leave her.”

“Uya hlanya!” He says, his voice so clipped. He’s so cold. Just like Sebastian. He’s going to kill me if he finds me here. I start walking away.

“Wait!” The other guy says and I slowly turn.

“I’m sorry. I’m going to sleep.”

“No.. I’m Zankuhle..” He says.

"We are not taking her. Do you know what they will do to us?" Dragon fires.

"Not everyone gets a chance to get saved. They will kill her."

"And how's that my concern?"

"I'm saving her."

"Then you are staying behind. You can save each other perfectly." He says then walks out holding the painting.

"It's ok. I will be fine." I tell Zanokuhle.

"He will kill you."

"You too.. If he finds you here."

He looks at me for a while then walks out. I bite my lower lip then force myself up the stairs.

I feel stupid? What was I thinking?

I get in my room then crawl on the bed.

Not everyone gets saved, some we are meant to suffer.

NINETEEN

I can't sleep. I'm shaking. I need my fix. Now that Irin is dead I don't know what I'm going to do. My body is aching. At this stage I don't know about anything else except my fix.

I get off the bed then head to the dressing table. I know there's nothing left but I can't help it but look. The itchiness is getting too much. The door abruptly opens freezing me to the spot. Sebastian wouldn't like this. I wait for that Russian accent to berate through the room but it doesn't come. I stand up slowly.

"Are you ok?" He asks. Is he ok? What is he still doing here?

"Look Zano what what.. You need to leave."

"I'm not leaving without you." He says his voice full of adamance.

"Are you well? I'm not going anywhere! I won't get far. He will torture me. You need to leave."

The itchiness is starting to get unbearable. Dammit Irin for getting killed! She's still in my bathtub I know. Fucken stupid maid!

Stupid bloody mud!

"You need to come with us. We can help you."

"Help me?" I laugh. "No one can help me. There's nothing to help anymore. Leave!"

He walks towards me then picks me up suddenly. I squeak, what on earth?

"Put me down! He will kill you! I don't mind death but I think you do.

"He's not here."

He says hurriedly then flies with me down the stairs. I keep quiet, maybe this time when Sebastian finally finds me, he would kill me, surely. I'm sure this time he would. Last time he was very angry.

I sigh when I feel cold air hit my face. I don't get such most of the time. I don't get nothing most of the time.

He walks with me to some black car. I wonder where Sebastian is.. Or where the guards are, or even where Antonio is. He's as ruthless as his boss. As ruthless as the devil himself.

Zanokuhle places me at the backseat and I groan at the pain of my fresh wounds.

My eyes are on Dragon, he's at the front seat on the driver's seat.

Shit! I rub my hands together. I want my fix.

Zanokuhle sits with Dragon and the car starts moving. I can't open my mouth. All I want is my fix. I want it now.

"Uhhh are you ok?" Zanokuhle asks.

“She’s a druggie.. That’s how they behave.” Dragon says. I want to tell him I’m no druggie, I’m just trying to get through the day. But he can possibly help by giving me some poison.

“She needs her fix!” He continues. He sure right I do!

I start rubbing my face as my body shakes. I’m over the edge and it won’t stop. It’s going to get worse. I look out through the window and the car is still moving. I don’t know where we are, I’m mostly locked up inside the house most of the time. Zanoluhle leaps from the passenger seat then joins me at the backseat with a bottle of water.

“Water?” I nod. I want to get back. I want Sebastian. He can help me. I know he can help me.

He opens the bottle then helps me drink. I don’t want water. I want my fix. I groan pushing the water away.

“She needs her fix. That’s all, not water.” Dragon snarls. He doesn’t like me but I really don’t care. I hate myself so much it even hurts.

“Dragon come on.” Zanoluhle says, maybe they should throw me out of the car. I should have never asked for their help. I should have just waited for my death in that house.

Suddenly the car stops almost throwing me forward but Zanoluhle’s arms holds me in place.

“Dragon and nou?” Zanoluhle asks. My door opens and before I know it Dragon is trying to suffocate me with a cloth smelling something. I know I shouldn’t inhale it but maybe this is my way out. I relax my body then breathe in. It takes only a few seconds for me to fall into the pot of darkness.

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I can hear voices arguing. Whatever the argument is, it’s so heated. I slowly open my eyes and I’m lying on a small bed. My body’s needs rings in so loud in my head.

“I’m not taking her anywhere with me! Why would I?”

“You know her family is looking for her Dragon. She just needs help.”

“Ehh wena Zanoluhle this girl is dead. It’s useless. She will never recover from whatever she’s been going through. If she doesn’t commit suicide you will be very lucky but I think drugs will do the job.”

“Ntwana I know you are heartless but for females in your life, help her ntwana. Imagine if it was Thuli. The least we can do is just hand her over to her mother. She’s still looking for her daughter.”

“Maybe if she looked enough she would have found her.”

“Mommy..” I don’t recognize my voice but I know I have spoken. They both turn and look at me.

“Mommy? She’s.. She’s alive?”

Dragon scurries out of the tiny room I’m in leaving me with Zanoluhle.

“She’s alive?” I ask but I don’t feel that spark of hope I thought I would feel. It doesn’t come.

He sits besides me. "Before we came here we did our research. Pretty much to know what exactly we were going to be dealing with. That's how we found you."

"Mommy.. She's alive?"

He nods. "Yeah and we will take you to her." I start shaking my head. I don't want to be taken to her. I want Sebastian. I want to go back. I just want to die.

"Look Khosi you.."

"Zhanna! My name is Zhanna!"

He nods. "OK.. Zhanna, we can't go back all together now. We have to part. I'm going to leave for SA while you go to London with Dragon."

I shake my head.

"No. I want Sebastian. Take me back." I say trying to scramble out of the bed. I wince at the pain but I'm actually surprised that the itchiness I felt last night is not that much anymore.

"We are saving you."

I laugh.

"Saving me? Saving me from what? You can't save me if there's nothing to save."

"My sister died." He says. "There was nothing to save because she was dead. You are alive."

I laugh harder. "Alive? Is this how alive look like?"

"Your mom is alive, she's looking for you."

"You can't save me. I don't want to be saved. I want my fix. I don't want her! I hate her! I hate her!"

Just then Dragon walks back in and he's holding a small bag.

"He's already looking. We need to get out of here."

"He's already looking?" Zanoluhle asks.

"For her. He thinks she's the one."

I laugh. "You really have signed my death sentence didn't you? Let me go, he's going to kill me either way, he might just do it sooner. The sooner the better right?"

"Kuhle vaya. We will talk when I get to Paris." Dragon says then walks towards me and tears my dress into two pieces. I don't bother looking down on myself or screaming. I used to scream but then I realized it was useless. There was no need to scream if there was nothing changing. I just stare at him as he makes me wear a jean and a long sleeved top. I don't see the lust I always see from the other man who has stood on his position. I see disgust. Pure disgust. The same disgust I feel for myself.

He makes me wear a wig then a beanie.

"Let's go!" He says pulling me. I wonder what changed his mind. I look back at Zanoluhle.

"It doesn't get better." I tell him. "It never does!"

I see tears in his eyes before I'm pulled out of the room. Tears. I wonder how many of those I have wasted over the years.

We get in a car which is waiting for us just in front of the building we were in. It looks like a lodge or less. The moment we get inside, the car starts moving.

"Your name is Vanessa June, I'm Mathew June and we are married." He says giving me a passport. I open it and it's a woman. She doesn't look like me. Her eyes.. They are not like mine, they are not dull.

"My teacher was Ms Mathews." I say absentmindedly.

"We are going to the airport. Don't mess this up."

"Why do you care?"

"Because you are a loose end."

I laugh. "This is not how you should deal with loose ends." I tell him.

"You kill them." I whisper the last part.

He doesn't say anything for a while. "Mess this up and I will give you a gun. You might as well do it yourself."

I chuckle as I run my finger on the woman on the passport.

"Give it to me now."

The car finally stops at the airport. We step out and he holds my hand. Walking inside the airport there is security at every corner. I wonder how long it will take for Sebastian to get us. He never loses.

"Keep a neutral face." Dragon whispers then puts his hand around my waist.

He then leads me to the counter, I look around hoping to see Antonio or one of the goons.

"Good morning Mam," he says to the lady on the counter. His accent has changed.

"Morning Sir, how can I help you?"

"We are checking in." He says handing her our passports and the tickets.

I'm just staring at her wondering how long it will take her to catch us. She looks at both of us for a while then at the passports.

"You can take your bags there." She says pointing at the other desks.

"Thank you." He says receiving our passports back. We walk over to where the hand luggage is being checked. Dragon looks so calm.

He hands them his small bag as he kisses my forehead. I can feel the itchiness starting. The shaking. I'm relieved when we walk away headed to the immigration.

"I want my fix." I whisper.

“You behave, I will give you something.”

“I want it now!”

“Cause a scene and you won’t get anything.” He threatens. I really don’t care about his threats but I want my fix. Getting to the immigration he hands the passports over to the man behind the glass wall. I try by all means to keep still. I want my fix, I have to behave.

The immigration officer looks at us for a very long time then back at the passports.

“She had a plastic surgery. She wanted a pure face.” Dragon says laughing while kissing my forehead.

The immigration officer nods then looks at me. I fidget for a while then smile. I need my fix, I have to behave. “There’s no harm in wanting to look like Kim Khardashian.” I say rolling my eyes.

The man just nods then hands us back our passports.

Walking away I hear him sigh. “That was close.”

“You are going to give me a double dose.” I tell him.

“How old are you?” He asks as we start walking to our terminal.

“Why does it matter to you?”

“You are 25 and you were born in Colombia. We met in Ohio, we were both tourist. We have been together for five years, we got married when you were 20 and we have a daughter. Her name is Aliyah and she’s 3. She’s with your mother in Colombia because we are travelling.” He says and before we take another step we are stopped.

I hold my breath then look at Dragon.

“Stick to the story, mess up, no fix for you.” He whispers then take my hand and we turn.

“Sir?”

TWENTY

I take in a deep breath. There are two officers. I'm not scared, if I get caught then so be it but what about my fix?

"Sir?" Dragon repeats.

"I would like you to come with us." One of the officers say.

"Of cause, anything wrong?"

"No, please follow us."

We follow after them. I try keeping still but I just want to rip my head off. It feels as if I'm having a seizure. We get in an office then sit down.

"We are asking for your passport please," the other officer asks. Dragon hands them the passports and we sit still as they look at the passports then at us.

"Take off your hat." The officer commands. I look at Dragon who gives me a slight nod. I carefully take off the beanie then look at them.

"It says here you are Colombian."

"Yes," I answer.

"You look 20, how old are you?"

"I'm 25," I answer. "I'm sure that's written on the passport."

"It is, only I don't think this passport is yours."

I laugh. It's not because what he says is funny but because it feels as if things are crawling on my skin. Sometimes Sebastian lets me just suffer and doesn't give me anything. I rub my hands. "Then who is it if it's not me?"

"That's what I would like to know."

"I think we are wasting time. Our flight leaves in 10 minutes and we are here while you accuse my wife of being... Fake? What sort of nonsense is this? Is it because I am black?"

I stay still as Dragon speaks. He sounds angry. I start picking on the skin around my fingers trying to focus on it not on my body.

"Behave, you will get your fix. Behave. Behave. Behave." I chant to myself under my breath.

"We are just—"

"I think you are racist. Matter of fact, I think you have a problem with me because my wife shares the same skin tone as yours."

“Mr June, please calm down.”

“I don’t have time for this!” Dragon says standing up. He takes my hand then leads us out.

“Don’t turn.” He says.

“I need my fix dammit!” I say through my teeth. He leads us to our terminal and when we arrive, our flight is being announced. Only five minutes left.

“Sit here. Don’t move.” He says pushing me on the bench. I sit down.

“If you move, forget your fix!” He says then walks away. I grip my jeans tightly. I’m trying to stop my hands from scratching my skin. My wounded skin. My eyes move around and I see some people. They are all sitting either busy on their phones or kids. I gasp when I see a lady with a girl child. They are laughing at something but it feels like they are laughing at me.

My breath catches and I stand up. My knees feel so weak they almost lead me to the ground but he has his arms around me before I can fall. He makes me sit down slowly and I know it’s only because people are staring.

“Where were you going?”

My hands are shaking. “Please.. Help me.” I beg.

“Take. Eat!” He says giving me a burger. I don’t want food.

“Please...” I beg him.

“Ear first.”

My hands can’t hold the Burger properly so he takes it from me then helps me eat. On the third bite it feels as if it’s coming back.

“Don’t!” He warns and just then our flight gets announced.

He helps me up throwing the burger away. I feel tears wet my face. Why is he doing this to me?

I want to go back.

I want Sebastian.

The moment we get in the plane he makes me occupy the sit on the window and him besides me.

He takes out a syringe from his pocket then grip my arm tightly. He injects me with one hand while the other tightens its hold on my arm. I close my eyes tightly and wait for the feeling to kick in. I won’t even question how he managed to get with the syringe in the plane.

“Good morning and welcome on board on flight 747. I’m going to ask you to please switch off your mobile phones and put on your seatbelts.” The air hostess says but I can barely hear her. I can feel it calming me down. Just what I needed. He lets my arm go then pull the the seatbelt on me. I close my eyes as the extraordinary feeling takes over. Oh how I love this feeling.

The air hostess announces something again which I don’t quite hear but I know he’s listening.

Soon the plane takes off.

“What’s your real name?” I ask him opening my eyes.

“Shut up!” He whispers and I can tell he’s annoyed.

“Just tell me. I will keep quiet if you do.”

“Forget your next fix.” He whispers again and I start laughing.

“You are so.... Like all of them. You are just like them.” I say then close my eyes. He’s just like them all. I wonder when he’s going to want to have sex. Today? Tomorrow? The day after tomorrow?

Or when he’s going to want to hit me.

I’m sure Sebastian would have started by now. He would have already done unbelievable things to me. Probably had his friends have fun with me or let his guards have their way. It won’t be the first time.

“Take!” He says making me open my eyes again slowly. He’s holding a glass of juice.

“I don’t —” I starts but he cuts me short.

“I don’t care what you want or what you are thinking.” He whispers aggressively. “Drink it!”

“I wish you had left me.”

“I’m glad we agree on that.”

“You hate me don’t you? I hate me too.”

He looks at me for a while before he puts the glass on my lips and forces the juice on me.

I swallow then push the glass away.

He smiles then kisses my lips briefly. I look at him lost. What was that?

I start laughing.

“You are so funny..”

Looking at him I notice quite a crowd is staring.

I bury my head on his shoulder blade trying to hold in my laugh.

•

“Good Evening Sir, how can I help?” The receptionist says.

“I’m Mr Smith, my wife and I booked here last night because of the Oriented business meeting we are attending this evening, can we please be led to our room.”

The receptionist looks at her computer then us.

“I’m afraid Sir, there was no bookings made under Mr Smith.” She says.

"I did, my PA did it. She made the reservation under Mr and Mrs Smith."

The receptionist smiles politely. "I'm afraid Sir you will have to—"

"Such incompetence!" He says. He sounds mad.

"I can't even enjoy the hotel I partly own. What a disappointment. I should have listened to you Valentino, this was a poor investment I made."

The receptionist now look very alarmed. "Uhh Mr Davis Smith and Valentino Smith, my apologies. We will give you one of our best suites. Please forgive me Sir." She quickly says.

"Valentino is tired, we had a long journey."

"Oh please, do you want anyone to help with your bags?" She asks eying Dragons small bag.

"No but I would appreciate our access card."

"Right! Of cause," she gives Dragon the access card then smiles. "Bienvenue!"

We ignore her then walk towards the lift. The moment he summons it, the doors open and we get inside.

"Why did you lie?" I ask as the elevator whisks us up.

"Did you have a better plan?"

"I'm just asking."

"I told you to shut the fuck long time ago. You made a whole scene in the plane."

I giggle. "I'm sorry."

He doesn't say anything. The moment the doors open he walks out pulling me with him. He swipes the card on some door and it opens.

Such a big room. I walk to the bed then sit down.

"How many more hours do we have till we are caught?" I ask as he places his bag down.

"We are leaving here first thing in the morning."

"Mr and Mrs Smith arriving? The real Mr and Mrs Smith?" I ask taking off the shades and wig. He takes off the artificial mustache together with the wig too.

"Yes."

"Are you a thief?"

"No. I'm a taker." I just nod then lie on the bed.

I start humming. Slowly trying to think of when I will get my next fix. Maybe he will give me tonight. I don't want to wait till it's too late. I hate it when I'm shaking and feeling itchy.

"What's that?" He asks making me look at him.

“What?”

“That song.”

I close my eyes. I can hear her sing it to me.

“Lullaby.” I whisper. “She used to sing it to me.”

“When did you get sold to Sebastian?”

The memory starts playing in my head. He said he would call Mommy. He said he was my new Daddy and he would play with me. He would play with me like how I wanted Daddy too. He was nice and he gave me ice cream. He said I made him happy till.. Till...

“Hey!” His voice is loud now.

I look at him. “When I was five. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15... 15.” I count then laugh.

“Do you want to have sex?” I ask him.

“No.”

“Ok, want to whip me? That would make you happy wouldn’t it?” I say standing up. I take off the top and the red and purple marks are marked on my skin like a top. There’s a cut on my stomach and there’s a little blood. I know how these marks turns them on. How my blood turns them on. There are purple marks on my breast.

“Stop!” He says when I start trying to take off my jeans. “The fuck are you doing?”

“I know you want to have sex!”

“Do you ever use protection?”

I laugh. “Do I ever use protection? Do they?”

He shakes his head. “Put on your clothes.”

“You want to whip me? Or make me do things?”

“Fuck it! No! Shit! Dress!” He looks frustrated. I pick up the long sleeved top then put it on. He walks to the ensuite and I just lie on the bed. If I don’t give him sex, how am I going to get my fix?

He comes back after a while holding a towel. It looks wet. He pulls my top up just to expose my stomach then starts wiping the blood off my wound. I just lay still taking the pain silently. It really doesn’t matter if whether he cleans the wound or not. Nothing ever does.

“Can I get a fix? I will let you do whatever you want with me.” I laugh after I finish my sentence. Why am I saying it like I have a choice? I’m prostitute. A Dirty one.

“No. Sleep.”

“Please..” I beg.

He stops trying to clean the wound then pulls the top down and walks back to his bag. He comes back after a while holding a pill.

“Swallow this.” He says.

“What’s that?”

He forcefully opens my mouth then put it on my tongue.

“Swallow!”

I swallow it silently then just continue lying on the bed.

I start feeling drowsy. He drugged me.

I chuckle. “What’s your real name!” I ask him with the last energy I have.

I close my eyes finally as I start feeling the weakness consume me.

“Sthembiso..” He answers and his voice sounds so far away.

•

“Ey! Wake up!” He says loudly while shaking me. I open my eyes slowly and I look at him. He’s packing his bag and he looks like he’s in a hurry.

“What’s going on?” I ask.

“They are here.”

I’m confused. “Who?”

He walks towards me then pulls me off bed. I flinch, it’s still painful.

“Sebastian. Let’s go.”

He says dragging me to the door but a loud bang stops us.

He’s really here.

TWENTY-ONE

I stay still as he presses his ear against the door. My heart is racing. How did he find us so quickly?

I want to laugh, this is Sebastian. He's always one step ahead.

"Mr and Mrs Smith are here." He announces walking over to the balcony.

"What?" I whisper.

"We have to go, come."

I stand rooted in the middle of the spacious room.

"Look, it's either we go to jail or we leave through here," he says pointing at the balcony. "And one thing I'm sure about is, we won't even reach the police station because Sebastian's goons are here."

"So we what? Run?"

"Do you have a better idea?"

"Yeah.. You can go."

He angrily walks back inside the room then drag me to the balcony. They are still banging the door. I look down and we are almost six blocks up. If I fall I die.. Death wouldn't be so bad.

"There's a window just below here.. I'm going to jump off then break the window with my legs and get inside the room. You follow after me, legs first so that I pull you in."

He jumps over the balcony bars before I can comprehend what he's saying and I hear glass shutter. The banging on the door has stopped and I'm pretty sure they are getting a spare access card. The moment Dragon's hands disappear from the balcony burglars I know it's my turn.

"Come!" He says. I look down and I can see the roads and cars moving. I will probably die before I land on the ground.

"Dammit it come!" He says again trying to keep his voice down. I slowly put my foot over the burglars followed by the other, my heart is beating so fast, there's nowhere to step on.

"This is hotel security and we are opening the door." I hear a voice scream before I'm pulled down. I yelp as I lose hold of the burglars and pulled right through the window. I land on the ground with a groan.

"The fuck were you waiting for?" He yells pulling me from the ground. Looking around, we are in another room. This one looks a bit different from the one we had occupied.

"Security at the door, look out for two people, a man and a woman looking very suspicious." A voice says and I know they are standing at the balcony. Dragon pulls me to the door.

"Your name is Alexandra Sam. I'm Bolton Andrews," he says then opens the door. We run through the passage to some other door. Getting inside I realize we are headed for the emergency entrance. We start taking down the stairs though he's too fast and my body is aching. I can't really keep up.

“Fuck!” He swears then waits for me. The minute I approach him he picks me up then throws me on his shoulder and start taking down the stairs. I hold my breath as I feel my intestines twist. He puts me down the moment he’s done with stairs and the small food contents I have in my stomach make their way out.

I stay still for a while then finally wipe my lips with the top I’m wearing.

“We are catching a train to a small town right now, are you good?”

I nod.

“Good.” He takes my hand then leads me to the door. Opening it, we walk right into the road.

“Is Sebastian here?”

“Yeah.. His goons are. They are inside looking for us.” He says stopping a cab.

The moment it stops he drags me with him across the road then we get in.

“Bonjour, gare ferroviaire s’il te plaît,” he says.

The driver just nods then the cab starts moving. I take in a deep breath then just listen to my body ache and the uncomfortable feeling which is overwhelming me. I need my fix, just one.

The moment the cab stops Dragon hands the driver our fare.

“Merci,” he says getting off the cab. I follow after him and he takes my hand and lead me towards the train we are supposed to take. There are lot of people moving around but he never lets my hand go till we get inside the train. I sigh as I sit down with him besides me.

“Can I have just one fix.” I whisper trying to make the man with the thick dreadlocks not hear a word.

“What?”

“Please,” I beseech.

He looks up when a drunk man enters stumbling as he goes while cursing.

“Pardon!” The woman he almost falls on screams.

“Désolé..” He mumbles sitting besides her.

I look back at Dragon.

“No.” He replies.

“Please.. I will behave.”

“No.” He says again. I want to scream and yell. I know he’s doing it on purpose, like Sebastian. Maybe he’s off to sell me. I laugh, that would be interesting.

The train starts moving and as it goes we leave behind the city.

“What are we doing in Paris?” I finally ask.

"It's non of your business."

I nod then look at his finger. He's wearing a ring.

"You are married?"

He doesn't answer but I know he heard me.

A small smile creeps on my face. "It must be nice being married." I mutter.

"Take!" He says making me look at him. It's a bread roll. Food. I'm not hungry.

"I'm not hungry."

"I thought you said you would behave?"

I sigh then take it from him. Taking the first bite it tastes horrible. I want to spit it out but I have to behave. I'm already fidgeting. Maybe if he had given me a double dose yesterday.

"Did he ever give you food?"

I nod forcefully swallowing the bite I have just took. "Sometimes."

I chuckle. "Sometimes he would give me food.. If only I behaved."

"Eat!" He says looking away.

"Why don't you like your name?"

He looks at me looking confused.

"Your real name.." I say.

"Do you ever keep quiet?"

"Do you want me to keep quiet?"

"Yes."

"Ok." I say then keep quiet. I scratch my hand then open the window.

"Mommy loves you." Her voice plays in my head.

"Mommy loves you." I focus on the voice while squeezing the bread roll.

•

He injects me while holding me tightly. I can't stand on my own. I sigh when I feel it working wonders.

"Do you plan being a drug addict for the rest of your life?" He asks.

I look at him then smile. "What else do you suppose I be?"

"Don't you want to get better?"

“Getting better is for other people... Not me.”

“Let’s go.” He says walking away from me. The small town looks like a small deserted one. There are no cars or people moving around. I follow after him slowly. At this stage I just want to pass out and not feel anything. We don’t really walk a long distance.

“You stay here? In a yacht?” I ask him in shock then giggle.

“It must be nice.”

He enters a code to his access gate, this looks like something Sebastian would really do. The gate opens and I follow him to where his yacht is berthed. I can’t believe he stays in the water. He picks me up then takes me up the stairs till we are at the main deck. He places me down then opens the door and walks inside. We walk right inside his living area. It looks fancy and nice. He pulls the wig off my head and my curled hair bounces on my shoulders. The curls are tangled but I don’t care.

“Come.” He says then leads me up the stairs. He opens a door and I shriek when I realize it’s a bathroom. My body cringes.

“You can bath.” He says.

“Uhh no. I’m good.”

“You need to bath and clean your wounds so that I can give you pills.”

I laugh. “I’m not in pain.”

“I know but you need to bath.” He says pushing inside the bathroom.

“If you behave, I might give you your fix sooner.” He says.

I walk further inside the bathroom. It’s not big and there’s no bathtub, just a shower. I gasp when I raise my head and I’m staring back at myself. I walk closer to the mirror and I stare at the disgusting being. She’s so disgusting and ugly. Her red tinted hair is so long yet it makes her so ugly. I scream in anger and I feel heart seething agony rip me apart. I look at the mirror, I’ve just hit the mirror and it’s broken. I stare at myself on the broken mirror and I see nothing but my cracked reflection. I look down on my hands and I’m bleeding. I giggle. It feels nice. The pain feels nice. I kneel down on the floor then grab a piece of a broken glass. I stare at my bleeding hands and my blood keeps gushing out.

I dig it in through my skin biting my lower lip suppressing the pain. Blood gushes out as I dig in much deeper.

It feels so good.

I feel a calming feeling wash over me.

“Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! Shit!” I hear his voice, panic lacing it.

Suddenly I’m in his arms and he’s caring me out of the bathroom. I close my eyes as reality kicks in and the calm feeling leaves me.

“Shit! The fuck?” He says placing me on a comfortable bed.

He takes off his T-shirt then wraps it around my bleeding hands.

“What on earth are you thinking?!” He roars.

“That you can throw me in the lake and forget about me completely.”

“Are you ok?”

I smile. “Do I look ok?”

“Look if you wanna take your own life do it, but do it far from me.”

I close my eyes. “You could have left me.”

“I damn well should have!”

“Is my mother happy?” I ask. I just want to know.

“I don’t know,” His tone is clipped.

“You ran a background check on me.”

“So what?”

“Is she happy?” I ask opening my eyes.

“She’s still looking.”

I nod. “She should stop.”

“Look you don’t have a child so—”

“Why would I have kids only so they suffer?”

He’s silent. “Either way, Sebastian made sure that I never have kids ever. I’m grateful.”

“He removed your womb?”

I nod. “Yeah. It was for the best.”

He doesn’t say anything.

“He’s going to find us then kill you and your wife and everything you care about. He will kill them in front of you and you will watch. He will probably have men pleasure themselves with your wife while you watch then he will kill you at last.” I say slowly. “Then he will torture me so much that... That I’m left praying him to take my life. He will probably put me in a brothel so that men feast on me for free.”

“He used to do that to you?”

I look at him then down at his bloody T-shirt.

“Maybe the question should be, what did he not do. You need to leave and go wherever you stay then run. He doesn’t lose. He never loses.” My voice sounds so far away in my ears.

“Khosi—”

“Zhanna. My name is Zhanna. Khosi died a long time ago. She’s dead and she’s never ever coming back. She’s dead. Zhanna is here to stay.” I whisper.

TWENTY-TWO

He carefully bandages my hand slowly trying not to inflict any pain on me.

“Why are you doing this?”

He looks at me then back at what he is doing.

“Because the lake is too clean to dump a body inside.”

I chuckle. “Funny.”

He stands up after he is done. “You are going to take a bath, I don’t know how you will do it and neither do I care. After bathing we are going somewhere.”

“Somewhere? We are already leaving this place?”

“No, we are going for a wine tasting event. Go and bath. And try any funny business, you won’t get anything. No fix.”

He says then walks away. Looking around I notice that this is actually his bedroom. I stand up slowly then walk to his dressing table. As I attempt to pick up a gold necklace on the table he walks in.

“The fuck are you doing?”

I turn and look at him. “I just wanted to see.”

“See what? I said go and bath.” He’s angry.

“Ok.”

Getting back in the bathroom he has cleaned up the mess but the mirror is still broken. I smile, some things can never be fixed. They are like mirrors. If cracked, they will always be cracked. Nothing will ever fix the broken mirror.

I take a shower trying so hard not to wet the bandages. The water feels so painful on my skin. I wince and flinch as the water hits my wounds and bruises. I stand still under the water not willing to rub my body. I finally pick up the soap and squeeze it on my hands then block my senses completely as I rub my lathered hands against my skin lightly like further strokes. The dark patches on my body don’t surprise me, they have grown to be part of me. I hold out my hands after a while letting the water wash away the lather. The moment I walk out of the shower I grab a towel on the rail then wrap it around my body. I chuckle, for the first time ever it feels good to be clean.

My hair is dripping wet. Sebastian always had my skin and hair taken care of. I guess it was the fact that he just didn’t want to accept that I wasn’t white. So far I have had two plastic surgeries and I look like a normal white lady.

I look at the door when I hear a knock accompanied by Dragon’s voice. “I have placed your clothes by the door. Change into them. Be quick.”

I stand still for a while before slowly walking to the door. I open it and look down. There's a maroon silky gown with glittering details, panties, bra and shoes together with a fur scarf.

I pick them up then walk back in the bathroom with them. I quietly change into the clothes remembering the time Sebastian had me looking good. He didn't tell me anything but just brought a lady who had a gown, a beautiful gown for me. She had taken some time making me look representable and I know he killed her. She had asked about my bruises then went on to tell me she could help me.

I will never forget that night, the same way I will never forget most nights were I was tortured like an animal all for a fix. The red gown fits me perfectly, I wonder how he knew my size but don't they all just know the size? The dress is a long sleeved dress, it perfectly hides my bruises and it's long. No slit or exposed back.

I put on the shoes then loosely throw the scarf over my shoulders. Walking out he too has changed and he's wearing a three piece red suit. He has changed again, he's no longer the man I was with a few minutes ago but then again he always changes character.

He looks at me for a while before motioning that I sit down. The moment I sit down he comes with a blow dryer and connects it then start blow drying my hair. After 20 minutes my hair is dry and the curls are still there but they no longer look the way they looked a week ago.

"Can you curl it?"

I nod and soon enough I'm trying to fix the dying curls.

"Sure you don't want a mirror?"

I shake my head no. I don't want to see the disgusting girl.

I stop when I think I'm done and the way he doesn't say anything makes me stand up.

"How soon can I get my next fix?"

"When we come back."

I sigh.

"I'm Nathan Macbeth and you are my girlfriend, Jordan Levins, we are wine lovers, that's how we met—in case they ask."

"Why are we always changing identity?"

"To have a clean sail." He says handing me lipstick.

"Put this on your lips."

I just nod then open it and run it over my lips.

"Let's go." He says after I put the lipstick down.

•

We enter the venue and I'm met by a lot of people who are dressed fancily like me. This were the kind of places Sebastian sometimes took me, he would be there for his business while I would be there as an entertainer to his business partners.

"Champagne?" A waiter asks as soon as we walk inside. Everyone is holding a glass of champagne, it's pink.

Dragon gives her a smile as he takes two glasses and hands one over to me. I eagerly gulp half of it and it has a bitter sweet taste on my tounge but I really don't care. I wonder if they have strong things too.

We walk through the crowd till we are headed somewhere, to some basement of some sort. There are people there, a crowd of about 10 people. There's a bar there too.

"Oh welcome! Bienvenue! Up for the wine tasting?" The bartender asks, if I didn't know better I'd say he's gay.

"Yes," Dragon responds and the bartender pours two glasses for us. Dragon takes a sip then nods.

Sauvignon blanc.." He says making the bartender smile.

"Perfect guess.. You can try it too Señora..?" The bartender says looking at me. I take a second to remember my new name.

"Jordan."

"Here," I put my empty glass of champagne down then take whatever that is in the glass.

"Ah-ah.." The bartender stops me with a smile. "Wine virgin?" He asks Dragon who just nods.

"Ahh let me help."

"I will be back." Dragon whispers before walking away leaving me alone with the small crowd together with the bartender who looks more than glad to be offering his services to me.

"There are basic steps that needs to be followed. First, sight, smell, taste, then lastly swallow or spit." The bartender says.

"So firstly sight, tilt your glass then hold it over a bit." I look at him then back at my glass that I tilt a bit. It doesn't look like anything other than wine.

"You can't possibly see anything yet, it takes years to finally get the concept but it's ok. Sight is to see if the wine is youthful or old." He says. "I'm Roberto, what is your full name Señorita?"

I smile, it's forced but it's still a smile. "Jordan Levins."

He smiles as shock runs over his eyes followed by excitement.

"Thee Jordan Levins?"

I look at him then nod. "Yes."

"Nicky Levins daughter?"

Shit.

“Yes.”

“Wow! This is big! The boss has to know we have millionaire in the house though I’m quite surprised that you have brought a date after the messy divorce you went through.”

I blink then smile. “Refreshing myself.”

“I don’t blame you, he’s quite a catch. Such a man has that thing in him.”

“Yes.”

“Ok, then smell. Swirl the glass a bit then bring it up to your nose and smell.”

I swirl the glass then bring it up to my nose.

“Ah-ah.. Never hold it for long time on your nose. You will ruin the whole thing.”

I’m starting to regret giving him an ammunition of my non knowledge of wines.

“Now take a sip while sucking in some air then swish it around your mouth before swallowing. Do it slowly.”

I look at him then then take a steady sip.

“That’s right. Now guess..”

“Uhh blanc?”

“Sauvignon blanc, White wine though you do know this. I’m sorry Ms Levins, I’m just happy to see you.”

I smile then take another sip.

“This bottle is worth \$12k, Mr Gids always has the good stuff. He offers nothing but the best. You should really meet him.”

That’s not a good idea. “I—”

“Don’t worry Señorita, I will call him.” He says already walking away. He walks away leaving me standing there. I don’t waste time, I gulp down the rest of the wine then look at the other bartender serving some lady.

I raise my hand and he immediately comes to my side.

“Ms Levins, another tasting?”

“Yes please,” I say then extend my glass to him. He takes it gladly then replace it with a clean one in which he pours wine into.

“This one is classified under the reds.” He says handing it to me. I take it then bring it to my lips. Realizing he’s looking at me I immediately tilt the glass though I’m very eager to flush it all down my throat.

As I bring the glass to my lips again I’m stopped by a soft tap on my shoulder. I turn relieved that he’s finally back but I almost drop the glass when I realize who it is.

“Madame Zhanna,” he says, his voice scary as ever. I swallow hard then quickly drink the wine. He hands me a phone then gestures that I talk.

I slowly place the phone on my ear looking at Antonio.

I know it’s him but how did he find me?

“Hello?”

“Ahhh my sweet Zhanna.. It’s good to know that you have been.... Uhh getting some fresh air.” His Russian accent brisks through the phone making me swallow.

“And I’m glad you have had some time to yourself. You needed it. Now, quietly you will follow Antonio, I don’t want to hurt anyone but if you push me, I will gladly have a little talk with the creator. But I’m taken.. From Russia to France in such a few days. I’m impressed.”

I give Antonio the phone back.

Letting him take my hand he leads me away from the basement. As I take each step my brain swirls with everything that Sebastian ever put me through and I feel my heart get heavy. At this point I would choose death over the torture I’m about to face.

“Let’s go!” Antonio barks silently.

I look around and I can’t spot Dragon anywhere. He must have ditched me. I chuckle silently, good thing he ditched me because if not it was going to be a funeral of two.

We walk outside to some car with tinted windows. As he opens the door I hear gunshots, so loud and close then followed by noise of mayhem.

TWENTY-THREE

I stand still rooted to the ground as the noise of mayhem continues. I can hardly feel myself standing there. I look besides me and Antonio is on the ground. He's been shot.

"Let's go!" Dragon says coming from nowhere and dragging me away. I stagger for a while following him. We get to some car that we didn't come with then get inside.

"Who's car is this?"

"It's ours now."

He says starting it and driving away. My brain is still finding it hard to believe that he's really he's dead, that Antonio is dead.

"You killed him?" The question leaves my mouth.

"Yes."

"Why? Do you know what Sebastian is going to do?"

"I can guess, I just killed his son."

My world stop moving as I just stare at Dragon.

"What?"

"You didn't know?"

"I thought he was just bodyguard." And slowly my brain starts patching the pieces together. The resemblance was there but I never took it to heart. I always thought maybe it was just a Russian thing.

"He's going to kill us. I talked to him."

"I know."

"You know?"

"Yeah."

"How? You were not there."

"I gave him the trace that you were here."

"Why?" I'm confused. I thought we were running from this man.

"So that I can kill two birds with one stone."

"What do you mean?"

"You will find out later." He says then hands me his bag.

"Take out two passports." He says.

I open the bag then take them out. Fake passports. Again.

“Where are going?”

“London.”

“What? Why? Why were we even here?”

“It’s non of your business.”

I look at my passport.

Rebecca Johnson, 24 years old. This time it’s actually my face.

“Can I get my fix?”

“When we get in the plane. I don’t want trouble.”

I take a deep breath. For the past 15 years I lived my life for torture, I’ve seen the unseen, heard the unheard and experienced the worst but the rollercoaster that I have experienced the last days has completely left me breathless.

“Why did you take me with?” I finally ask.

“Because Zee wanted me to,”

“You are lying.”

“Look Khosi! You should be glad that at least you have been saved, other girls don’t get that privilege. They have been kidnapped and they never got found. Maybe they are still alive being tortured out there. Yes you have been through a lot, I don’t even know what fuck you have been through but I fucken know it’s deep and you are broken and what not shit. But appreciate the fact that at least you got saved. Zee’s sister wasn’t so lucky.”

“So me appreciating you saving me will make me better?”

He glances at me. “No.”

I bite my lower lip then smile. “I lost hope of someone coming after me when I turned 10. I thought no one was going to come for me. Well no one did but each single day all the small hope I had got crushed. I watched my life fade in front of me and I couldn’t do anything about it. Memories of my mother turned into my nightmares. The good memories I had turned into my nightmares. I lost all hope for me.”

“I don’t know what to say but I’m sorry you didn’t have it easy. I don’t think your mother ever stopped looking. She’s still offering \$2million for you. Dollars not Rands.”

“I don’t want to go back. I don’t have a life no more, there’s no use to go back.” I say dryly. I have no emotions left to display no more.

He doesn’t say anything but keeps on driving. The car finally stops and I realize we are at the airport.

“Are we married?”

I ask as we step out of the car.

“No yet. I’m your fiancé. They won’t ask though.”

I just nod then let him take my hand and lead me inside the airport. He checks us in though I do catch a few people staring at me. I don’t know why he didn’t have me change to normal clothes but I won’t ask. I’m already fidgeting.

He gets his small bag checked then we walk to the departure gate of our flight.

Arriving people are already moving.

Dragon mumbles something beneath his breath as he follows the crowd while holding my hand.

Getting in the plane I’m surprised when we seat at high class section.

There are no lot of people and I’m glad because the itchiness is beginning to get serious though I’m fighting scratching myself. Dragon makes me seat with him besides me.

“Dragon.. I’m.. Please.” I stutter.

He looks around taking the syringe from his jackets pocket.

“This is the last fix I have.”

He says injecting me. I don’t care, as long as I’m good for now though it won’t last.

“Everything ok Sir?” A voice says making me raise my head slowly. It’s the air hostess and I know what’s going to happen if she catches on what just happened.

Dragon smiles then gives me a soft peck on the lips.

“Everything is fine, my wife to be is just excited about our surprise wedding that is happening in London after we arrive.” She smiles, she has bought it. I try so hard to smile as she walks away.

Dragon doesn’t say anything else though he does straps me when the steward announces that we should.

I hold my breath as the plane takes off wondering what’s going to happen next. There’s always something happening.

“What were you doing when you left me with Roberto?” I ask softly to keep myself in check.

“Shut it.”

I giggle. “I feel free.”

“Khosi shut the fuck up!” He angrily whispers.

“Why do you call me that? I told you —”

“I will lock you in the bathroom and release you when this plane lands. Don’t try me.”

I laugh. “You are so grumpy.”

“One more word and you won’t get anything. Try me. Just do.”

I look at him then giggle looking at the window. "Do you see that?" I whisper dramatically to Dragon who looks beyond annoyed. I laugh, he's so funny.

•

"You are going to sleep. Tomorrow we are getting married." He says placing me on the bed.

My eyelids are too weak and I'm just too tired. I sigh then close my eyes.

"Run!" She screams so loud as my feet keep moving.

"Run! Run!" She repeats again and I can't seem to move any faster.

"Run!" She screams again and I scream back crying.

I open my eyes as my scream bounces through the walls back to me. I'm breathing heavily and drenching in sweat. Looking besides I realize maybe it's not entirely my sweat but water. I'm under the shower in his arms.

"You wouldn't wake up. Are you ok?" He asks and for the first time I see an emotion in his eyes— worry. Concern.

I nod then he puts me down. I stand still as water falls on us. I hate this dream. It's always the same. Over and over again it comes the same and just torments me. It never stops.

He finally walks out and when he comes back he closes the tap then hands me a towel and the hotel morning robe.

"Change." He simply says then walk away again, wet like me. I put the towel and robe down then slowly take off the dress. I want to tear the dress into tiny pieces but I just throw it at the corner then pick up the robe. It feels soft against my skin.

Walking out he's already dressed up. He's wearing a black suite, I didn't realize it at first but he's shaved and he has a new haircut.

"Where are we going?"

"We are going to get married."

"What?" I'm confused.

"Dress." He says pointing at the dress on the bed.

"Why?"

"You want to her married wearing a morning gown?"

"No why should we get married."

“Someone tipped off the police. Your good friend Roberto.”

“So?”

“We have to get you a permanent identity.”

“Then what happens after that?”

“Then we go to SA.”

“I said I don’t want to go back.”

“Look I have a son, he needs me. I can’t afford going to jail all because you won’t cooperate.”

“You can just leave me then you go back.”

“Are you fucking nuts? I’m already in for abducting you and faking of identity and holding a weapon in public. I need us to have to our story straight and legal.”

“Is it illegal to lie your name?”

“Yes, especially if you got a passport with your lies and not forgetting, you have no identity whatsoever.”

“What?”

“All you have is that Zhanna name of yours. Nothing to prove it’s really yours or to prove that you are Khosi. You have no identity certificate. You are more of an object than a human.”

“What?”

“You heard me. Dress.” He says walking out then peers back in.

“One more thing, you will get a double dose if you cooperate.”

My blood rushes. “I will?”

“Yes.”

“Ok.”

He walks out as I take the dress from the bed. It’s more of a lace than a real dress though it’s long. I quickly put it on and it clings tightly against my body. It has long sleeves and hides the bruises which some now are light purple. They are fading.

The door opens as I pick up the veil and expecting Dragon some lady walks in. Mid thirties or so. She’s a brunette, reminds me of the small girl Sebastian killed a few days ago.

“Mr Dlamini told me to help you with your makeup, I’m Rosemary.”

I give her a nod then sit down. She walks towards me then sets her small bag down. Sighing I just let her paint my face. She even does my hair, just fixing the curls.

She hands me the mirror after she’s done. I blink then give her back the mirror.

“Ok.” She says then walks out.

Dragon walks back in seconds later.

“Ready?”

“Then I get my double dosage immediately?”

“Yes.” His voice rings with annoyance.

I stand up then let him take my hand and walk out.

“Your name is Khosi Khumalo. Your real name. Everything is true expect your age. I had to round it off. You are 21.”

“I hate that name.”

“I hate jail.”

There’s a cab outside. At least the dress doesn’t lick the floor though it is long. I get inside first then he follows. He tells the driver where we are going. I sit still in silence.

“We will get a divorce as soon as we arrive in SA.”

“The marriage is legal?”

“Yes.”

“Aren’t you married already?” I ask looking at his ring.

“I am. To my son.”

“Aww..”

I keep my eyes on my hands the whole journey. All I’m thinking about is my double dose.

“Thank you,” Dragon says paying our fair. He helps me out of the car then we walk to some building.

“Wait here..” He says as we approach some desk inside the building. I sit on the bench as he goes to talk to the lady.

“Let’s go.” He says walking back towards me after a few minutes. The lady is just looking at me and I can’t really read her. We walk in through some door.

“What’s happening?”

“We are getting married.”

“In court?”

“Kind of.”

“Ok.”

We walk through another door written MARRIAGE REGISTRATION in bold letters then walk to another desk and Dragon hands her a paper. She carefully looks at me then at Dragon before taking the paper he’s giving her.

“What a lovely couple,” the chubby lady finally says looking at the paper she’s been given.

“You know, my husband is from Tanzania, he’s such a romantic man. He once took me to Angola then Zimbabwe. The Victoria falls is still the best place I have ever been to.” She says with a childish giggle.

“Uhhh How do you say your name? Sthe....”

“Sthembiso Dlamini.” The coldness in his voice doesn’t extinguish the chubby woman’s excitement.

“This kind of weddings excite me. Wow Khosi, what a.. Lovely name. I can’t believe you are from Louisiana, you look like someone from New York. The skin and face, you look like an actor. Why is your name... Uhh it sounds foreign.”

I look at Dragon. He probably lied, I should have figured it out. We can’t just register our marriage if neither of us is British.

“Her father is South African.” He replies for me making the lady’s smile brighten.

“My husband’s friend who’s Ghanaian, he—”

Dragon fakes a smile. “I’m taking her to South Africa for the first time, our plane leaves in an hour’s time.” He says.

She blinks then smiles again. “Well in you go.”

We walk to another door written REGISTER ROOM and for a second there my brain tries to grasp on what I’m doing but the end result swiftly pushes inside the door.

•

Walking out I feel so sweaty and I can’t quite stand still though Dragon holds my waist tightly to steady me. When we pass the chubby lady again she just smiles and waves. Her face doesn’t fall when neither of us responds. I guess she’s just a natural happy person. I don’t remember actually ever being happy in my life.. Expect one time. When I tried to escape from Sebastian the second time.

I had successfully escaped the long walls and gates together with his security. Of cause I didn’t know where to run to but I just went where my feet led me. Each step I took I would hear my mother scream “Run!” over and over again. I had really gotten away till I met some woman. I told her everything in one breath and I remember how she looked at me as if she felt pity for me. When she offered to help I didn’t stop for a minute to think but just jumped in her car. Worst mistake ever.

As we walk towards the door, I notice two police officers standing behind the glass door staring at us with cold stone eyes.

My thoughts are too scattered and something tells me I should panic but I can’t place myself. I try to walk properly, not leaning too much on Dragon.

“We met two years ago in Nigeria. You came there on a survey on strikes that were going on in universities and I was there as a tourist. We just decided to get married because you are pregnant and also because your family won’t accept me because I’m black.” Dragon whispers.

As we approach the door, one of the police officers opens it then smiles, a cold irritating smile and I realize he's holding some papers.

"Are you Mr Sthe..ibisow D.. Lamini?" He asks struggling with the name. He looks at Dragon expectantly.

"I think maybe you should come with us to the police station, you too Ms Red hair." The police officer says cuffing Dragon. My brain is on a go slow, I can't fathom whatever that is going on.

"Mam, you too." The other police officer says. I slowly nod then follow them to their car. I sit with Dragon at the back as the two police men occupy the front sit.

"Don't worry, I'm American now. They can't do anything."

"Won't they know?" I whisper beneath my breath clutching my dress tightly. Maybe he should have given me my dosage when we were at the hotel.

"No. There's nothing to know."

He answers and some sort of relief washes over me but my hunger for my next fix is increasing. I don't want to start acting crazy, they will know and probably arrest me and him.

The moment the police car stops the police officers step out and drag Dragon out. You would swear he's a criminal like Sebastian, only that he is actually.

We walk inside the police station with me behind them. I'm trying to walk properly and I'm glad when we finally get in an office and sit down. The man sitting at the other side of the desk, dark brown hair and sharp eyes, he doesn't really scare but actually reminds me of the FBI agent that Sebastian killed.

"Mr Dlamini.." He says then licks his lips.

"You thought you were smart." He continues with a smirk.

Dragon chuckles. "I still think I am."

"You don't have a visa first—"

"This is my wife, Khosi Khumalo, she's American."

The dark haired man laughs then looks at me carefully. The two plastic surgeries that Sebastian paid for left me looking just like a white woman.

"Smart bitch ain't you?" The dark haired man groans making Dragon smirk.

"Care to uncuff me? I'm taking my wife for our honeymoon. I want us to catch our flight."

TWENTY-FOUR

"Are you free now?" I ask him making him nod.

"Not entirely that's why we are leaving now."

"What?" I can't comprehend what he's saying.

"You heard me."

"I told you I'm not going anywhere."

"You want your fix?"

I look at him and nod.

"You will get it in the plane." I shrink. Why does everything always have to come with demands.

"We are taking a straight plane from here to SA, I don't want to take a risks by going through Dubai or any other country."

He says as we walk down the street from the police station. I wish I was not wearing the dress. I hate it, a lot of people keep turning to look at me.

"I don't want to go, you have your son to go back for, I have nothing."

"Zano already is telling your mother that you were found."

"What?"

"Yeah."

"And you are getting the \$2 million?"

He chuckles waving down a cab that is passing us. It stops a few feet from us.

"No. I don't need your mother's money." He says taking my hand and leading me to the cab.

He opens the door for me. "Because I already have my own."

I look at him as he gestures I get in. I can possibly run but I know I won't get far plus I need my fix. I get inside followed by him. He tells the driver that we are going to the airport and I feel my stomach twist. The coffee the police officer gave me threatens to just exit my stomach.

"Your mother will be happy to see you and she will get you the help you need."

"I don't need help."

"Whatever that is that you need. She will give it to you."

I don't say anything. My mind is already not functioning properly. I have a lot of thoughts in my head but they are all jumbled. I don't hear whatever Dragon tells the driver as the cab stops. We are back at the airport again and for the first time with an identity that I recognize but don't even know.

When he checks us in, the man on the desk doesn't take long and he doesn't give us weird looks expect for my dress. Dragob gives his bag to the security and lets it get checked before we walk to our terminal point.

Reaching there are people already waiting and I fidget silently blocking out everyone.

"Should I grab something to eat for you or we will get something in the plane?" He asks making me just look at him blankly. His words don't even register in my head.

"Sit," he says making me sit on the bench. I look around and I catch some lady staring at me. She doesn't look away but just keeps on staring me as if she knows me. I feel Dragon's hands on my shoulder as the lady walks towards us.

"Hello, my name is Ellen." She says. "Are you ok?" She asks.

"She's fine." Dragon responds.

"My sister.. She was like you." She says softly making me grip my dress. I repeat a word over and over in my head trying to keep hold of myself.

"I think that's our flight being mentioned." Dragon says helping me up.

I stand up slowly then let him lead me where everyone is going leaving the lady with the black hair.

I sigh the moment I sit down in the plane. Top class, again. This time there's a small crowd, better than the crowd we had in the flight from Paris to London.

I rarely hear the words the flight attendant announces to everyone. I'm rubbing my hands together while panting.

I let out a deep breath of relief when feel him injecting me. Finally. I move in with the junk and feel it as it seeps through me. I wait for a while as relief just knocks me off. This is the best cure for my trouble. Nothing beats it.

"What's the name of your son?" I ask him staring at the sit in front of me.

"Alwande."

I nod then continue staring at the seat in front of mine.

Time feels as if it's dragging, I hardly feel myself sitting on the seat. For the longest time I sit still just staring at nothing. Dragon does forces me to eat so that I can get my next fix when we land. It doesn't surprise me no more that I do a lot of unexpected things in the name of the next fix.

"Khosi.." I hear my name though it's not so loud but it's accompanied by some shaking. I open my eyes slowly then look at him. He's up and staring at me.

I look around and I realize there's only me, him and an air hostess left. I stand up slowly as realization hits me. I have arrived on the same very place I never thought I'd come back to. I have always imagined how I would feel but I feel nothing. No excitement or any other emotion. Just nothing.

He takes my hand then leads me out. The moment we step out of the plane I want to fight so to go back. I want to scream at him. I want him to return me. But my mouth stays mooted as I follow behind him slowly.

A couple of people turn to stare but I don't bother looking back. The moment we step out of the airport fresh air fill my nose, fresh but cold. It's raining. Dragon takes off his jacket then hands it over to me.

"Wear this, I don't have an umbrella." He says.

I silently take his jacket then let him lead me through the rain till we are standing in front of some car. Some man steps out wearing a suit.

"Mr Dlamini, welcome back." He says.

"Thanks Josh," Dragon says giving him his small bag. Josh takes the bag to the boot as Dragon opens the front door for me. I step inside and I'm immediately welcomed by warmth. He closes the door for me then walks over to his door. Getting inside he starts the car and before I know it, he's driving from the airport leaving Josh behind.

"Are you hungry?"

I shake my head slightly and just continue staring at my dress as if it will talk. A talking dress will be much better than the voice screaming in my head.

I close my eyes tightly blocking anything that's running in my head. My heart is beating so fast and it feels like my soul is being dragged out of me. I feel intense anxiety mounting itself deep in me leaving me in unexplainable discomfort.

"Shit!" I hear his voice then his arms around me.

"Hey.. Relax. Breathe ok. Just breathe. It's ok."

My lungs feel so full and the voice in my head rings so loud.

"Breathe in. Breathe out. Come on.. Relax."

I forcefully open my eyes and I see fear.

"That's it. Deep breathe."

He says slowly and I inhale deeply then exhale. It feels as if I'm unlocking my lungs. It takes a while till I'm completely calm. This is the first time having one of these in the last 4 months.

"Fuck you scared me!" He exclaims then sighs. The car has stopped and he's at my side.

"I'm fine." I whisper and he shakes his head standing up.

"Fine. I will take you to my house till you are ready to face her." He says sounding defeated.

I just stare at him. It's not like his house will make any difference.

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His yard looks like a jungle. There are trees and green flowers everywhere. His car drives through the driveway till it's parked in front of what I think is the garage.

He steps out as my eyes scan the place. Opening the door for me he takes my hand then helps me out.

I have never seen a house like this. The yard is just extraordinary. The green covers everything accompanied by some white flowers and some trees with white leaves. Connected to the house there's a shade and some couches under the shade. It looks like a sitting area, just an outdoor sitting area with white couches. Then there's a pool right in front of the house. It's not that big but has an ok size and it is surrounded by white loungers which are on the wooden floor. There are three trees with the white leaves surrounding the pool.

"Let's go." Dragon says already leading me to the stairs which leads us to the pool. We pass it then get inside his huge wooden and glassy house. The floor is wooden but some walls are glassy. We walk through the passage till we get inside the living area I guess. There are white leather couches filling the room and a white rug in the middle. The white cushions with some brown design perfectly finishes the perfect look. I blink as I look at his huge TV. There was no TV in Sebastian's house. He always kept me away from the outside world. There are glass walls and I can see the back yard and it looks like there's a garden and a green house if I'm not mistaken.

Before we can pass the living room a young child, a young boy comes running towards Dragon.

"Daddy ntwana yame!" He says jumping in Dragon's arms.

"Skhokho!" Dragon replies and his voice has completely changed. There's no hint of coldness.

"I missed you!" He squeaks in his Father's arms and his excitement is so palpable, I can easily grasp it.

"Me too ntwana yame, I hope you were behaving."

"I was. What did you bring me Daddy?"

"You will see." He puts his son down then look at me.

"Skhokho this is Aunty Khosi," Dragon says and the little boy gives me a wide smile. He has two front teeth missing but he seems oblivious to it. I take a deep breathe then smile. I try so hard to make it real and it works.

"My name is Alwande Dlamini." He says making me swallow hard. Why couldn't I be happy like him when I was his age?

"Hi.." I whisper.

"Ahh Skhokho uphi uGogo?"

"She went to buy something. Aunty is at the back watering the flowers."

"Ok, go and take your books so that I see them ntwana yame."

"I got 10 out of 10. I am number 1."

"Ngena wena Skhokho same."

The boy runs off somewhere.

“That’s my son.”

I nod. “He’s... Lovely.”

“Yeah.. Come let me show you your room.” He takes my hand then we walk from the living room passing the kitchen on our side. It’s big but not as big as Sebastian’s kitchen that I never cooked in. We walk up the wooden stairs till we are standing in front of some door.

“This will be your room.” He says opening the door wide. He leads me inside and it’s like I have entered one of the hotels we were sleeping in. It’s beautiful and everything is white. The bed. The duvets. The walls. The curtains even the rug. I feel too dirty to be in such a room. I don’t deserve to be here.

“I don’t think I should be here. I’m too dirty for this.”

I say attempting to walk out but he stands rooted to the door and holds me in his arms.

“Look, it’s either you sleep here and stay here or I call your family.”

I shake my head. “No.. No.. You can’t do that.” And I feel warm tears on my cheek. I hate crying. I hastily wipe them and try to push him from the door making him hold my waist tightly.

“You are not leaving!”

I shake my head. “I don’t deserve this. I want to go. Let me go. Return me.”

“Go etsegalang mo Sthe?” A loud female voice makes me raise my head and stare behind Dragon. He also turns and we both face the boiling woman.

“Sthe you now bring white girls in my house? Huh?” She screams throwing her handbag at me that I gracefully dodge.

“Lekgowa le batlang mo ntlung yaka?”

“Anaya can you calm down!” He roars but she’s still breathing fire.

“Sthe you are cheating on me with white girls and you expect me to be fine?!” She screams attempting to attack me. What have I gotten myself into.

TWENTY-FIVE

I'm just standing still staring at the drama unfold. She's still screaming calling me by names but I'm not moved. I have endured a lot insults that they no longer move me. They are just words. Only words.

"Get this whore out of my house Sthe!" She screams. She really never gets tired of screaming.

"Khosi." He says making me cringe. "Her name is Khosi and she's here to stay."

She stops fighting then just stares at him.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean just that."

She's beautiful but I'm really not concerned. The shaking is starting and all I want is my next fix.

"Babe I thought we talked about us. I thought we fixed us."

"Anaya I'm not doing this right now. I'm not in the mood."

"Please my love, I love you. I love you so much and I will do anything for us."

"Anaya ngithini?"

"I know you are probably still upset. I didn't mean to, she doesn't mean anything to me. I was just drunk and —"

"Leave. I'm not doing this with you."

"So you want the white girl?" Her tone is icy.

"I don't want to call security on you but know that I will."

"This is not over. I'm going to fight for us! I'm not going to let this..." She eyes me for a while probably looking for an imperfection. "This red haired girl take you from me. You are mine!" She says then walks out.

Dragon slowly turns and looks at me.

"Sorry about that." He mutters.

"My fix.." I whisper.

"How about a bath first and a change of clothes?"

"You promised me a double dose."

He nods. "And I always keep my promises. Bath and I will give it you."

"Dragon please.."

“Bath.” He mouths making me just want to scream. He takes my hand then pulls me to another door in the room, an ensuite. Walking inside the huge bathroom I’m welcomed by my own reflection. There’s a huge mirror on the wall. I step out almost immediately.

“And now?” Dragon asks following me.

“I hate mirrors.” I tell him.

He sighs. “I will have it removed.” He says then walks to the bed and grabs the white duvet. He walks with it back in the bathroom and coming out seconds later he just stares at me.

“You may come bath now.” I slowly walk in back in the bathroom again and he has covered the mirror with the duvet.

“Better?” He asks from behind me.

I don’t say anything. “And please don’t try any funny business in my house. My son is here.”

He says and I know what he’s talking about. He walks out closing the door behind him. I look around the bathroom and I just stand still for a while. Take a shower and get a fix. I repeat the words over and over again in my head.

Slowly I take off the dress and everything else. I walk towards the shower then open the tap. Cold water hits my body hard but I stand still. I reach for the soap and like before I squeeze it in my hands to make lather then start rubbing my body.

I take a shower then I get my fix.

I don’t mind the fact that my hair is getting wet. After a while I let the water wash away the lather off my body then step out of the shower. I grab a towel, a fluffy white towel on the sink then wrap it around my body. Walking out I stop on my tracks when I come face to face with some woman, possibly mid or late fifties.

She smiles but her smile fades as her eyes skim my body. I know it’s the bruises. She’s not the first person to give me such a reaction.

“Oh nkosi!” She exclaims quietly.

I stand still just staring at her as she takes in my state. I want to tell her that it’s not as bad as it was but I can’t even open my mouth.

“I will get something for you.” She says then walks out. My eyes fall to the bed and there are clothes. I quickly put them on and I don’t even question the reason they fit so well.

I put on the hoodie and I relax a bit. No bruise exposed. The sweatpants feel so soft against my skin.

The lady walks back inside the room moments later holding what looks like body lotion.

“Oh.. You can apply this. For the bruises.”

I nod making her smile.

“I’m MaDlamini, Sthembiso’s mother.” She says making me sit down. Where’s he with my fix?

"She tells me you haven't eaten, I will quickly make something for you and don't worry, you are very welcome in this house." She says before walking out.

I keep quiet. I can't really comprehend on what's going on but I think I have an idea. The door opens again and Dragon walks in alone closing the door behind him.

"Hey.."

"My fix." I whisper. He takes out a syringe then walks towards me. He pulls the hoodie's sleeve up then injects me.

"This is not a drug. It's something to help with the withdrawal symptoms. I can't keep giving you drugs. I'm not about to be the one to destroy what's already broken."

I laugh. I laugh so hard till tears spring to my eyes. I want to cry but my throat feels clogged.

"You lied to me?" I whisper and he shakes his head standing up.

"I said I will give you your fix and I believe that was it."

"You are just like him!"

"I'm trying to bring you to sanity."

"And who says I need sanity? I want my fucken damn fix!"

"My mom is cooking."

I chuckle. "Fuck you!"

"Maybe we should dry your hair before you catch a cold on top of everything else."

"What's next? Are you going to have me sent to some rehab center?" I ask mockingly.

"If I could yes but that's not my decision."

"I hate you. I hate you so much. I. Hate. You." I say and walk out. The itchiness is still there and so is the shaking. Each step I take my legs feel so wobbly. So weak. I take down the steps and when I reach the living area his son screams.

"Aunty Khosi, want to watch my favorite cartoon with me?" He asks innocently. I just look at him as unexpected emotions take me by surprise.

Somehow I can still remember his face. I don't remember him ever smiling at me or him telling me that he loves me. I don't remember him ever showing any emotion to me. He used to ignore me.

The little hope I had in my eyes whenever I saw him, I see it in this little boy's eyes. The little hope doesn't open any room for disappointment. It leaves him so vulnerable.

I nod then walk and sit besides him. He giggles then holds my hand.

"You are white, like my friend at school. Her name is Stacy." He says smiling.

"Do you like playing? Daddy and I play soccer sometimes."

I clear my throat unsure of what to say. "That's nice." I tell him though I doubt my voice is audible.

"Do you want to see my game room. Come!" He says dragging me to some room up the stairs passing the one Dragon gave to me. He opens the door and it's big and full of toys.

"Come see my train, Daddy bought it for me."

"Uhh Alwande.. I—"

"See." He says pressing a small remote and it starts moving. His whole face lights up with pure happiness.

"Uh that's nice." I say.

"Come let me show you one more thing,"

He says dragging me out of the room. He leads me down the stairs back to the living area then goes and pick up a small vase. It's blue and very beautiful. He hands it over to me but before he can explain what it is, I hear a voice making me turn.

I stand frozen and just stare at him. I can hear his voice in my head no matter how much I try to block it.

"You want to play?" His voice berates in my head so loud and I can see myself.

"You can play with Uncle's snake," he says unzipping his pants. He has all the doors locked. He lies on the bed then gestures that I come and touch. I don't want to touch it but he said if I play with it then Daddy will play with me.

I place my small fingers on it.

"Rub it sweety.." He says encouragingly. "Daddy will play with you if you do." He continues.

I rub it but I want to just run away. I want to go to Mommy. It starts getting big and he looks at me with a smile then stands up. He picks me up and places me on the bed then pull my dress up till it's covering my eyes and I can't see him. I bite my lower lip as he takes off my panties, Mommy said no one should take my panties off if it's not her but I keep quiet. Uncle said if I tell then Mommy too won't play with me. I feel something on my private. It's uncomfortable but I remain still.

He looks at me with a smile.

"Hello," he says. His voice makes everything in me break.

Alwande's gasp makes me turn. I have dropped the vase.

"You dropped Mommy." He says and I catch some sort of worry in his voice. My head is aching and my heart is beating so fast.

"Ehh Vuyisile!" Dragon says joining us but everything stops when he stares at me then at the vase. I can't read his face.

"It's him." I whisper. "It was him. It was you." I repeat over and over again looking at the monster.

My heart is beating too fast and I can't help it.

"It's him."

"What did he do?" I hear Dragon's voice then his hands on me.

"He started it. He... He started it." The monster just stares at me in shock. I know he doesn't recognize me. No one will but I know him and I will never forget him.

"Come!" Dragon says leading up the stairs leaving the monster. As soon as we get in my room he just looks at me.

"He used to abuse me. Before... Before Sebastian."

"He what?" The coldness is back.

"He used to rub himself on me...." My voice trails off. All because I wanted my father to love me. All because I seeked attention.

"He.. Vuyisile?"

"Lwandle Vuyisile." I say his full name. I will never forget him. I can never forget him.

Dragons rubs his eyes then look at me. "He started it?"

I nod. "Please take me back. Or just let me go. Please. I won't bother you."

"Zano wants to see you."

His voice is soft. I shake my head. I don't want to see anyone. I want to go. I want to leave this place and never come back.

"Please.. Let me go."

He looks at me and I can't tell what's written on his face.

"I'm sorry." He finally says.

I shake my head as tears cascade.

"Let me go."

I hear voices. A lot of voices. They are so loud then followed by the stamping of the stairs. I look at Dragon as my heart starts beating so fast. The door abruptly opens and some woman throws herself inside. Her hair is long, like mine. The same way I have always known it to be. Her beautiful face hasn't aged, she looks like she's in her late twenties. I move back slowly as she stares at both of us.

"Baby is that you?" She asks and her voice, her voice is still soft. It cradles my heart, wrapping itself around my heart so tightly. I move back when she takes a step towards me and I see pain run into her eyes. She blinks and her tears fall.

"Baby.. It's me. It's Mommy."

TWENTY-SIX

My heart is beating so fast, I can't seem to control my emotions as she just stands there looking at me. There was shock at first then relief but now I can't see anything. She's just looking at me. I know it's her, I would know her from anywhere but I just don't understand what happened. What happened to her?

I feel another tear escape my eyes. I just want to hold her. Taking another step towards her she grips his arm using him as a shield. Against me?

I bite my lower lip trying to stop myself from breaking. I can't break down. Not today. Any other day just not today.

"Khosi baby.. It's me. It's Mommy baby."

"Maybe you should give her some.."

I stop Lerato, where did she even come from? I left her downstairs.

"She's my daughter! Mine! She's the only one!" I say.

I look at her again expecting to see something else in her eyes but I don't find anything.

"Honey.. Let's go home. Come with Mommy." My voice is breaking.

"Don't be scared of me. I love you. I would never hurt you."

"Khanya.." I hear his Kenya's voice from behind. I'm not leaving without my daughter. After so long, I'm not going anywhere without her.

In life, hope fade too soon when nothing happens, that wasn't me though. Having to have survived three bullets, the day I opened my eyes all I wanted to know was where my daughter was. It didn't matter how I had been raped, as long as my daughter was alive.

When I found out that I was pregnant with Khosi I had been excited. Just like the two pregnancies I had had before, the first one which I had aborted because Eric wasn't ready for a family and the second one which I had miscarried. I had been so excited, all I wanted was just a child and five years without giving my husband a child raised questions and it bothered me. I had found out in Eric's absence. He wasn't home. He had went for a business trip and was trying to get a very good client. I remember waiting for him to come back that following day and making us a special meal. The pregnancy was supposed to get us more and more close because even if I liked it or not, we were drifting. After 5 years of being married we were drifting and I somehow knew how the pregnancy was going to restore what was once a spark between us.

I remember sitting on the huge table with the whole house lighted with candles and waiting for him to come back. When he walked in, the scowl that he gave me told me nothing was going to go good.

“What’s the meaning of this?” He had roared. I didn’t even understand why he was upset, all I wanted was for us to be happy. That’s all I ever wanted because I loved him so much. I had my whole world laid at his feet. Every decision I made it was always centered around him. His happiness was my happiness.

“I made us dinner.” I told him trying to keep the excitement spirit and right there too, I had spilled it.
“Eric I’m pregnant.”

I held my breath waiting for his own happiness but it didn’t come. What came were insults and a beating. Insults of how stupid and useless I was and a beating on how I wanted to trap him with a baby. He was angry that night. Not that it was the first time he’d ever raised his hand on me but it was the reason that left me wounded. Maybe sometimes I deserved it but I couldn’t seem to understand how my pregnancy could cause so much turmoil between us. He gave me money to abort the pregnancy the following day. He had thrown it on my dressing table as I put on makeup trying to cover everything up. I hadn’t understood what he meant at first till he told me that he had already set an appointment for me.

I knew as much as Eric’s happiness mattered to me, I couldn’t kill my baby again. Not that it wasn’t enough that I had expected an apology for him hitting me, he just had to suggest that I kill our baby. So I did what I thought was right, I lied about it. He didn’t ask questions because he probably thought I had gone ahead with the plan till I was five months pregnant. He had beaten me, again and this time I woke up in hospital. I blamed myself for it, I had suddenly turned into that woman and that’s when I decided to move in back with Mama. I lied to Mama about the reason I was back home but everyone knew. And that was the first time Sma beat Eric. I was mad but Mama was calm. As always. It annoyed me but I guess then I just didn’t understand just how much I was stupid. I gave birth to Khosi at my mother’s house and as painful as it was, I would still go through the same thing if I could. I wouldn’t trade birthing my daughter for anything.

With all the trouble and challenges I went through with Khosi, her birth, taking care of her with Eric’s family constant hatred because my baby was an albino, I never gave up. I still loved her. Eric’s family treated my daughter and I like we were shit. I had met Eric when he had nothing. I also had nothing but as soon as I graduated and got a job, I took the role of being the man in the house. I paid every single bill in the house, took care of every duty Eric was entitled to. I took him to school. Took care of his family which was drowning in poverty but they never for a second stopped to think of that when they started treating me like I was nothing. It hurt more when Eric never stood by my side when his family ganged up on me.

He never stood by his own family which was Khosi and I but secretly discussed how much of a bad wife I was to him with his family.

Now waking up from 3 bullets and a gang rape only to realize the only thing I lived for was no longer there broke me. I was already broken but Khosi’s disappearance was the last nail to the coffin. When

they shot me I thought that was it from me, I never really thought I could wake up after 4 months of being in coma.

I had too many complications but my daughter missing topped the list. I had thought she got away. That she made it. The grief of losing a child never goes away but it's not compared to the grief of having a child and not sure if she's alive or not. For the first time in my life I realized depression is just depression. It couldn't compare to what was going on in my heart. It felt as if I had lost a huge part of me and Eric on the other hand was still rooting for a divorce. I had just lost the spirit of fighting, the loss of my daughter was simply the end of me. I looked for the best PI's out there, tried using every resource I could get my hands on to look for her. The only thing we had was the fact that she was sold and Lindiwe had done it. Sma told me. I didn't get a chance to confront her because she was already dead. He had killed her and for the first time in my life, I wished I had been the one to kill her. She had no right to involve my daughter in our personal fights. How could she? Not that it was enough she had planned my rape ordeal. She had wanted to destroy me and she had succeeded. She had taken it all. My daughter was too young, sometimes I would find myself imagining just how her death was and I blamed it all on Kenya and Eric. If it wasn't for them, no disaster could have happened. I hated Eric and Kenya so much. The police lost hope after 6 months of searching, they lost hope before I even woke up. When I realized that nothing was helping I put up a reward. R1 million. I put it up front. It was part of the money that I had gotten from the divorce because Eric managed to get half of everything.

Putting up a reward caused mayhem. There were just a lot of blockers and liars. After a year I put up every cent I got from the divorce as a reward but still no one came upfront. That's when I finally heard about my father's death. His death didn't move me but the fact that he had left everything he owned to Sma and I left me shocked. But not very shocked after the insults we started receiving from his family. They called my mother a witch all because no one got anything expect from Sma and I. I put up some of the money adding to what I already had then finally put up \$2 million as a reward for anyone who could find my daughter. I went to all the camps where the PI's suspected girls were held. I always went. I went to Nigeria when a number of girls was said to have been released by the terrorist. I went to Brazil where they suspected girls were being used as prostitutes. I went to Russia where I got shot on my shoulder but I never stopped looking and I never lost the irony.

In 10 years I think I had been everywhere in the world. I lost money but money was nothing compared to the void that was in my heart. I hated God. If this were his so called plan then I'd rather believed in no one. My daughter could have been anywhere, for all we knew she could have been dead.

That's when Kenya finally managed to get to me. That's when he finally managed to just help me breathe. He assured me that she was alive because if she had been dead, he said I would have felt it.

That left me with a bit of relief but not entirely. He told me I looked dead, I did. I was dead. I was dead inside and I didn't want to accept that she was gone and I was never going to accept till I saw her in a coffin. But that's when I just decided to live a little. I hadn't realized just how much I had pushed everyone away. I had Sma, Mama and Lerato and the rest had been pushed away, Kenya refused to be pushed away.

"I just don't give up. It's been 10 years but I don't think there's actually anyone for me. As long as it's not you then I guess it won't be anyone." He had said. Picking myself up was the hardest but the thought that maybe she was alive somewhere there comforted me.

I look at her right this moment, not believing that she's actually here and the only thing I want to do is collect her in my arms and never let go but she's just standing there. Staring at me. She doesn't look like my Khosi who had freckles all over her face, she looks completely different. She looks white. But her eyes, I know them. They are the ones. She's the one. I can feel it.

"Baby.. I won't hurt you. I love you so much. I just want to hold you and love you. I want to feel you in my arms. I love you. Mommy loves you. Please don't shut me out." I beg crying.

"I just want to hold you. Just once. Please.." I feel tears wet my top. I close the distance between us then hug her. For a while there's silence till I hear a muffled sob. The way she grips my top as she tries to hold in her sob makes me dissolve in a silent cry.

She's here. In my arms.

I don't know how much I prayed and wished for this moment. I feel so bare as she sobs on my chest.

"I waited." She sobs and I want to tell her I looked, I looked really hard. I looked everywhere but when I open my mouth a cry escapes my lips.

After a while we are on the floor and she's quiet.

"She's asleep." Anaya's dodgy boyfriend announces. I look at him then back at Khosi's slumped body.

"I'm taking her home." I announce kissing her forehead. I'm taking her home with me where she belongs.

Lerato kneels before her then move her hair from her face. It's so long and it looks so.. Foreign. The curls makes her white look complete. She's still beautiful or even more beautiful. I don't care what they did to her, she's still my daughter.

"Maybe we should get her to the car." Kenya announces from behind me. I nod then let him pick her up in his arms like a leaf. He doesn't struggle with her. I want to leave immediately with him but I do have to talk to Anaya's boyfriend. Lerato brushes my cheek before she walks out leaving me alone with the man who saved my daughter.

"I will have 4 million deposited to your account."

"No, it's ok Mam."

"I insist."

"And so do I."

I nod then look around the room and back at him.

"Your wedding with Anaya is in 3 months?" I ask.

“No.”

“I’m taking Khosi with me. I don’t want your drama surrounding my daughter so I’d really appreciate if you kept your distance from her.”

He chuckles shaking his head. “I want nothing from your daughter Mrs Zulu.”

I smile. “Good. I’m glad we understand each other. Good luck on your wedding.”

I say then walk out but I bump into Lwandle by the door and I don’t bother greeting him. He was one of Eric’s people who were making my life difficult as I searched for my daughter. I hope he didn’t forget greeting Eric in hospital today, he might just die any time soon all alone. He needs some support from his fake friends.

TWENTY-SEVEN

I look at her brushing her long soft hair. I don't know why it's red, it makes her look like a hooker. My intestines knot at at the thought. I don't want to accept the truth which is staring down at me. It's breaking my heart. The bruises all over her body makes me cringe. I know they were hurting her. I want to kiss each and every single mark on her body to chase away the pain.

"Still sleeping?" Lerato whispers walking in her room. Funny how I had a designed a room for her when I got in this house. I look around it and I wonder if she will like it. Her favorite colour used to be purple and white. Everything in the rood consist of only white and purple.

I nod then wipe away my tears. "I think she's tired."

She smiles. "She is. She will be fine, she's home now."

I shake my head then brush her hair with my fingers. "She's so broken. I can't find my daughter Lerato. She's so.. emotionless. I'm scared she won't ever come back."

"She will. She has you now Khanya."

"She waited. She waited for me and I.. I didn't come to her. I failed her." I sob silently. "They broke my daughter Lerato. They broke her and I don't know if I can fix her."

She wipes away her own tears then stare at Khosi. She knows I'm right.

"I spoke to Adelaide, she's willing to start as soon as you want."

"Not now. I don't think she would want that."

"I don't think it should be about what she wants, it should be about what she needs."

"I can't believe she's 20. My daughter is 20."

She smiles. "She's beautiful."

"She is and she..." I chuckle shaking my head. "And she's white. She's a white person."

"She will be fine. It will take time but she's going to be fine. Anyways I'm leaving. I'm going to pick up Nzuzo and Yandisa from the airport. We will come by later."

"Ok." I whisper.

"I spoke to Sma, he's on his way."

I nod staring at my daughter. Hearing the door opening then closing, I know she's gone and I'm left alone with my pride, my joy. I brush her cheek with my hand making her stir then open her eyes slowly. She looks at me for a while and I wish I could hear her thoughts. She blinks then sits upstraight moving from me.

"Hey, uhh.. Are you hungry. I cooked." I tell her smiling.

"I want to go." She says and my heart breaks. I take a deep breath in.

“This is your home baby. You belong here.. With me. Your mother.”

She shakes her head. “I don’t have a mother. I want to go.”

A tear escapes my eyes.

“Khosi I looked. I looked everywhere for you. I did everything. I love you so much and I would never abandon you. You are my life. I’m happy you are finally home. I’m glad you are finally here.”

She just stares at me then starts rubbing her hands. She’s shaking too.

“Are you cold?”

“Where’s Dragon?”

“He’s not here, you are home.”

She looks at me then raise her hand moving it to her head. She notices her clothes that I have changed her into. I had to get her a few things.

“I thought I could get you comfortable clothes. I don’t know if you like them. If you don’t.. It’s ok. We can always get what you want.”

“Please take me back. I want to go back. I don’t want to be here.” I stand up not able to control my tears anymore.

“I’m going to get you help. You will be—”

I stop when she vomits on the bed. Quickly I rush towards her and try touching her but she moves so quickly.

“No.. I don’t.. You.. Take me back.” She says moving backward to the door.

“I won’t hurt you.”

“I want to go.. I..” She starts scratching her head. I can see that something is wrong but she won’t let me come closer to her.

“Where am I?” She asks looking around.

“You want them to have me?” The way she asks the question throws me off. Them? Who are them?

“What —”

“Take me back to Sebastian. Now! Where’s Dragon? I want to go back. Take me to Dragon.”

“Who’s Sebastian? Baby are you ok?”

The way she’s shaking scares me. She scratches her skin harshly and doesn’t flinch in pain.

She jumps when the door opens. Sma walks in then looks at her. She moves away till her back is against the wall.

“Khosi?” He asks and she just keeps quiet. I wonder if this is how she was all along. She wasn’t scared of Anaya’s boyfriend. She didn’t look scared when I walked in on them. She looked comfortable with him.

“Khanya..” Sma starts.

“She’s scared of me Sma, I don’t want to hurt her.” I sob.

“Let me call Mama,” he says then walks out.

“Baby I don’t want to hurt you. I want to help you.”

“You can’t help me.” She whispers.

“You can’t ever help me. You daughter is not here. She’s dead.”

“I know you are there deep down baby.”

She laughs scratching her head. “Let me go.”

Sma walks back in with Mama who just stares at Khosi. I see shock reflect in her eyes then joy.

“Oh thank you lord. Thank you Father. He has done it, the lord has done it!” Mama says raising her hands as tears of joy leaves her eyes. “I praise you Lord!” She exclaims.

“Khanya,” Sma says taking my hand and leading me out.

“Khanya she’s a drug addict.”

“Huh?”

“She’s a drug addict.”

“Who?”

“Khosi. She’s a drug addict. She wants her fix that’s why she’s shaking like that.”

“What?” I’m confused.

“Yeah.. She needs help.”

“She.. But she was fine when I picked her up.”

“He was probably giving her drugs to keep her sane.”

“He wouldn’t dare!”

“Well you can’t blame him. There’s no way he was going to travel with him from Russia till here while she’s shaking.”

“What can happen?”

“It will get worse.”

“So what? We give her drugs?”

“No, but maybe bring a doctor to at least deal with the symptoms.”

“She’s scared of me.”

"It's been 15 years. That girl in there is not your long lost happy child you always protected. That in there is a broken girl. She's broken and she needs help."

"Lerato spoke to Adelaide."

"She needs to go to a center. Adelaide won't help her. If you don't help her, she will kill herself. Those marks on her wrist should tell you something."

I feel tears warm my cheeks. "So what now?"

"She needs to go to a rehab center."

"I'm not taking her there. They will keep her there!" I protest.

"They will help her Khanya and you will always go and see her. She needs help."

"Eric did this." I whisper.

"This is not the time. Focus on Khosi. She needs you."

"She hates me."

"It's normal. She probably hates herself too."

"I just want my daughter back."

"Then you will take her to a rehab center."

"Hey.." Simthandile says joining us. Sma's wife.

I give her a polite nod then walk back inside Khosi's room. She's lying on the bed still shaking. Mama looks lost.

"Khanya what's happening with her?"

"She wants drugs."

"What?"

I nod. "She needs to go to a rehab center."

"What?" Khosi's voice comes off as a whisper.

"Baby it will help you."

"You want to.. to..—"

"I want to help you."

"I don't want help. I want to go!"

I look at her for a while before I walk out. Sma and his wife are still standing by the door. I look away when she regards me with pity and quickly go downstairs. I grab my car keys from the kitchen counter then walk to the garage. I'm shaking with anger, hurt and pain as I get in my car. I start my car then reverse from the garage and drive out of the yard. I step on the accelerator speeding to the small dirty

clinic he's in. 20 minutes later I'm getting out of the car and walking right inside the clinic. I walk straight to his room and I'm grateful to find that he's the only patient inside.

He turns slowly and looks at me.

"Khanya," he whispers.

He looks almost dead. He has lost all weight and he can't do anything for himself. He looks like a skeleton with skin draped around it.

"You are here." He says attempting to smile. "I knew you would come around." He says struggling. His eyes have popped out.

"I'm so grateful. I know there's nothing you can do anymore.. The doctor said.. Only a month."

"You deserve everything happening to you and more!" I say crying.

"I loved you Eric and you hurt me. You hurt our daughter. She didn't do anything to you. She was innocent. You deserve this cancer."

He nods slowly. "I know.... I'm sorry."

"You are sorry? Is your sorry going to make things ok? Lindiwe had my daughter sold and all you can say is sorry?" I scream. "All you can say is sorry! You are sorry?"

He caughes painfully then silently cry.

"I know it's all my fault." He says so slowly. "I was selfish. I hurt you and our daughter. I deserve everything happening. I hope one day you find it in your heart to forgive me. I hope one day our daughter can also forgive me. I pray she finds a man who will show her what real love is. A man who will give her unconditional love. I give her my blessings. I pray she lives a very good life."

I laugh after he's done with his speech. "I will never forgive you. I will never forgive you Eric. You destroyed everything I had. You destroyed my life. You destroyed my daughter. She's broken all because of you."

He nods as tears covers his face. "When I die I don't think I will ever find peace. But I hope you do."

I charge towards him then grab a pillow and smother him. He doesn't move as I press the pillow hard against his face or even make a sound. I press it harder on his face remembering everything he's ever put me and my daughter in. He doesn't deserve to live. He deserves to die. I remove the pillow seconds later and he just lies there lifeless. I put the pillow down and just stare. My heart is beating so fast.

"Oh hello, time for his food." The nurse says walking inside holding a small plate with porridge inside.

She looks at him for a while then sighs sadly.

"He's dead." She says and I don't turn. I just stand still.

"Don't cry, he was already close." She says with a tiny smile then puts the plate down. She closes his eyes then walks out. Coming back seconds later she's with the doctor. He greets me then orders the

nurse to cover him up. As I turn to walk out I meet Erin by the door and she screams so loud making her small baby cry.

“God no!” She cries as I walk out. I walk to my car then get inside. Resting my head on the steering I cry. A cry for all the days I pretended to be strong.

What did I do to God to deserve this?

Loud screams makes me raise my head. Erin. She’s screaming so loud while carrying her child on her back.

“You killed him!” She screams. “You did it you witch!” She looks like a mad woman and I instinctively lock the doors when she picks up a huge brick. She throws it at my windscreen making bury my head on my thighs. A second later I hear the window shattering.

TWENTY-EIGHT

"Are you ok?" Kenya asks after I sit down on my bed.

"Yeah.. I'm fine."

He sits besides me then takes my hand into his. "You know how much I love you right Khanya?"

I stare forward and nod. "Yeah.."

"Look at me." He urges making me turn and look at him.

"I love you. I love you so much. I want to be there for you and our just found daughter. I know you are so overwhelmed right now but I want to support you. I want you to let me support you." He says making me bite my lower lip in attempt to hold my sob.

"Let it all out baby.." He says enfolding me in his arms. He holds me tightly against his chest and I sob. All I want is to be there for her. That's all.

"She won't let me in."

"It takes time." He whispers. "She will come around after she gets help. Sma is right."

"She thinks I'm sending her off."

He pulls me from his chest then tilts my head so I look at him.

"She might think like that now but you are doing this for her. The rehab center will help bring her back. It won't be the same but at least she will start living her life. That poor girl has been through a lot and I know you want to do everything for her, the first step is rehab. She needs help. Professional help."

I sigh then crawl to his lap resting my head on his chest. "Thank you for not losing hope when I had." I tell him.

"I just want you to let me in. That's all."

I nod then close my eyes.

"Rhea is coming tomorrow." He says softly rubbing my back.

I raise my head and look at him. "She is?"

"Yes, Mom will be here late in the afternoon."

"Maybe this is what Khosi needs." I tell him. "Her meeting her sister is perfect."

"I'm not so sure about that but if you think it's a good idea then ok."

I stand up.

"I'm going to check up on her."

He just nods and watches me walk out. Kenya and I got married 3 years ago, by then we already had Rhea. She was unplanned but I didn't regret her. She's not like Khosi when she was young, Rhea is loud and very bubbly.

I walk up to her room then open the door. She's sleeping. The doctor had to give her something for the symptoms. He says it will take a while but I have hope. I close the door slowly then walk over to her bed. She's sleeping quietly but still even in her sleep she doesn't look peaceful. She looks tormented and haunted. I sit on her bed moving her hair from her face.

"You look beautiful.." I say softly. "I'm never going to leave you. Ever."

I fix the duvet then kiss her cheek.

"Good night baby, I love you." I say then stand up ready to walk out.

"Mommy.." She moans making me turn. I pad over to her side and she's still sleeping but crying now.

"Mommy.." She says again, her voice comes off as a whisper but strained.

"Mommy.." Again then she keeps quiet. I walk to the ensuite then get a towel and wet it. Walking back at the bed I wipe her tears and her whole face.

She's sweating.

"Mommy is here baby... I'm not going anywhere."

I lie besides her cradling her in my arms. I smile as I hold her against my chest. This is all I wanted. Just to hold her in my arms. I blink away my tears and just lie still rubbing her back.

"Mommy is here.."

"Mommy.." She breathes then sighs audibly.

I lie awake for a very long time, I just want the moment to last forever. I want to just hold her in my arms forever. I finally start feeling drowsy and I let myself fall into a peaceful sleep. For the first time in a long time I sleep with no worry or ache.

"Khanya.." A voice wakes me up and opening my eyes it's Mama. She's holding a tray of breakfast in her hands. I don't miss her wide smile. I look down and my baby is still sleeping.

"I had brought her breakfast. She didn't eat last night." Mama whispers.

"It's ok." I sigh then slowly get up making her grab her pillow tightly. I take in a deep breath.

"You are smiling today."

"I slept so peacefully."

"So did everyone. Should I wake her?"

"No. Let's let her rest. She must be exhausted."

“How’s your hand?” Mama asks looking at my bandaged hand. When Erin through the brick a glass from the windscreen cut me.

“It’s fine.”

“I just can’t believe she accused you of being a murderer. Why would you kill an already dying man?”

“Mama what’s done is done. He’s dead, she should just accept it. I hope they don’t call me, I have no money to waste.” I say walking out of Khosi’s room to my bedroom. Getting inside Kenya is already done dressing for work. Strolling slowly towards him I take in this handsome man. He’s not aging but how can he if I’m the older one? I fix his tie smiling.

“Morning..”

He tilts my head then gives me a slow seductive kiss that leaves me panting.

“Morning.” He whispers.

My body reacts. I missed him. I have never been so relaxed like this moment.

I wrap my arms around his waist.

“I just want things to stay like this forever. Peaceful.” I say resting my head on his chest.

“It will, soon.”

“I can’t wait.”

“I have an early meeting. I will be back around lunch with Rhea and Mom.”

I sigh. His mother and I are not really that close, we are just ok.

“I can’t wait to see my girl.”

“Me too. Is Khosi awake?”

I shake my head untangling myself from him. “She’s still sleeping.”

“How did she sleep?”

“She kept calling for me in her sleep while crying. I really failed her didn’t I?”

“No. You tried your best. She’s here now. No need to dwell much on the past.”

“Do you think she will forgive me.”

He places his hands on my waist then kisses my forehead. “She will, it’s only a matter of time. I have to go. I love you.”

I smile. “I love you more.”

He kisses me one last time then grabs his briefcase from the bed and walk out. I sigh walking to the dressing table where my phone is ringing then smile when I see the caller ID.

“Nevaeh..” I answer.

“Hey.. Is she the one?”

“Yes.”

“Thank God! Now everything will go back to normal.”

I chuckle. “She’s not my baby girl anymore.”

“It takes time. You know how long my cousin took after she was found. Till today she’s not the same but she’s almost there. Don’t lose hope.”

“I won’t. I just.. I don’t want to fail her again.”

“You never failed her Khanya. Don’t say that. Look, take all the time you need at home. I will take care of things this side.”

“You are a God sent. Thanks.”

“Anytime.” She says then drops the call.

Nevaeh and I started our practice 8 years ago. At first it was just a small thing but it soon grew and now it’s a known surgery hospital. I walk to the bathroom undressing. I smile as I look at my reflection on the mirror. I’m grateful I don’t have wrinkles, it’s already enough that my husband is younger than me, wrinkles will make it only worse though I do tint my hair black from time to time again. I hate the fact that I’m close to 50 but it’s reality. Stepping away from the mirror I walk inside the shower.

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“She’s awake but not talking.” Mama says. I immediately stand up from the kitchen stool.

“I will go—” I’m interrupted by the intercom ringing. I press the gate remote and walk outside. A white BMW parks besides my car and the owner steps out.

“Good morning Ma,” he says greeting me. I nod.

“Good morning, how can I help you?”

“I’m here to see Zhann— Khosi.”

I look at him for a while.

“I’m friends with Sthe, we rescued her together. I was the one who called you.”

“Ohh.. How are you?”

“I’m fine Ma, is it possible if I see her?”

I nod. “Yes, come in.”

I say walking back inside the house. Ma is in the sitting room waiting.

“Uhh Mama this is the man who rescued Khosi.”

“Oh.. How are you son?”

He smiles offering Ma his hand. “I’m fine Ma and you?”

“After what you have done, how can I not be fine?”

He smiles shyly. I can see he doesn’t like the spotlight.

“It’s nothing, we did what any human could have done.”

“And for that you are blessed my son.” Ma says.

“Uhh he wants to see Khosi. I will take him.”

“Ok.”

I walk with the young man to Khosi’s room.

“What’s your name?” I ask as we approach her door.

“My name is Zanoluhle Phakathi.”

I nod then slowly open Khosi’s door.

Walking in I don’t spot her but I hear the shower running.

“I think she’s bathing. Give us a minute.”

I tell him. He walks out after a silent “yes Ma,” leaving me walking to the bathroom. I knock softly on the door. When I don’t get response I open the door and step in. There’s water on the floor. I rush to the shower then open the shower curtain. She’s not in. I close the taps and that’s when I notice water spilling from the tub. The taps are also open. I rush towards the tub and almost faint when I see the red coloured water. She’s inside at the bottom. I put my hands inside then pull her heavy body up. I use all my strength to pull her out of the bathtub.

“It’s going to be ok baby.. Mommy is here.” I say crying. I’m shaking as I perform the cardiopulmonary resuscitation. I don’t keep count as compress her chest. I try mouth to mouth trying to fill her lungs with air then go back to compressing her chest.

She starts coughing out water after a while and I hug her immediately pressing her against my chest.

“I’m here..”

She starts crying. Her cry is so deep it pieces through my heart breaking me into small pieces. I silently cry as she sobs loudly. I feel so helpless. I wish there was something I could do. I just want her to let me help her.

“I’m here for you baby.”

“Not when I needed you.” She sobs. “I waited.. You didn’t come.”

“I was looking. I kept on looking. You have to believe me.”

“Shit!” A deep voice makes me raise my head. Our eyes meet but his soon fall to Khosi who’s sobbing uncontrollably.

Before I can comprehend anything he’s already by her side. She willingly gets in his arms.

“Take me back.” She sobs.

I stand up slowly. I feel defeated. So defeated and hurt.

I carry my heavy feet out and leave her with him.

“Is she ok Mam?” Zanokuhle asks as soon as I walk inside her room. I nod walking out.

I take down the stairs and meet Ma in the kitchen.

“You are wet, are you ok?”

“Yeah.”

“Where’s Khosi?”

“With Anaya’s boyfriend. I’m going to take a walk. I need some air.”

“You are crying.”

I wipe my tears away. “I really can’t do anything for her. She’s safer with him than with me. She tried hurting herself in my presence. What kind of a mother does that make me? I couldn’t keep her safe when she was young. I wasn’t there when she needed me. She’s like this because of me. I failed her. I don’t know anymore Ma.”

“You can’t give up. You are going to fight to get your daughter back.”

“Mama she doesn’t want me. I’m the enemy! The enemy is me Mama!” I move back and sink to the floor.

“I keep on failing.”

TWENTY-NINE

"You are always doing funny things!" He says coldly bandaging my wrist.

"You could have left me."

He looks at me for a while then stands up.

"When did Vuyisile start?" He asks.

"Does it matter?"

"Yes."

I shake my head. "It doesn't. Why are you here? Shouldn't you be with.. I don't know who... Your son and crazy wife?"

"You need help."

I stand up taking my bedside lamp then throw it at him. He ditches it and falls to the floor then breaks into tiny pieces.

"I don't need help! What do you think I am? I'm not your responsibility! I'm my own person. Whoever you are looking for in me is not here! She's fucken dead! No one helped me when I needed help. They were out here.. Being happy while I suffered!" I feel tears wet my cheeks. I look around the room.

"I hate her, I hate her so much. She could have aborted me."

He sighs then sits down.

"The rehab center will help." He finally says and it looks like he's talking to himself.

"I'm not going anywhere. I'm leaving this place."

He gets up. "I have to talk to your mother."

"She's not my mother."

"Oskalayo she pushed you out of her vagina!" He says then walks out. I sit slowly on the bed wondering if Sebastian already found my replacement. I remember Laura. She was an American girl. Her friends invited her to a party where she was kidnapped at. She was nice but I think it's because she already knew her fate. She never cried, she always smiled through the torture. The night before she died she left me a letter. I read the letter as they killed her. She said she was happy in her letter. Till today I still don't understand how she was happy. She wrote she was happy because being sad wasn't going to help her in any way. It was not going to save her.

The following morning when I woke up I found her naked in the fridge with marks all over her body. I wonder if she was still happy when they killed her. She was later burnt. Sebastian forced me to watch as fire destroyed her remains. He laughed as I cried. He always found joy in my tears, in my pain and heart

ache. Each day he emotionally broke me and it made him happy. Sometimes I would wonder why he keeps me alive but I guess he was not keeping me alive, he wanted me to be the one to carry out the act.

The door opens and Zanokuhle walks in. He looks worried.

“Hey..” He says looking at the bandages. I give him a nod then just look at the wall.

“My sister was kidnapped.. Two years ago. She was from church when it happened. I just received a call telling me she was missing. At first it was kind of unbelievable. I mean, I had been with her earlier on that day. We were talking and laughing together. It felt surreal that she was suddenly gone.

“I looked. I looked everywhere I thought she could be. Every country I thought she might be, I looked. Deep down I knew that she was gone but I just couldn’t bring myself to accept it. She.. We lost our parents in a car accident. I was 8 and she was 5. Growing up she just became my child. We only had each other. We moved from one orphanage to another. When I was 18 they released me. They refused with Thuli so I ran with her. I couldn’t leave her behind. She was all I had.

“I started doing this and that, being a mother and a father to her. It was hard but I pushed through. That’s when I finally met Sthe when I was 22. Life was better by then. I really loved Thuli. Even when she started dating Sthe. So her going missing hurt. It broke me. And what hurt the most was that when I found her she was already dead. I didn’t get a chance to tell her just how much I loved her for the last time.

“Her body was beyond recognition. Sometimes I just wonder what they did to her. I’m not saying that you are better. I can see that though you are here, it’s just the body. I don’t know what you have been through for the past 15 years but I see my sister in your eyes. I have nothing that links me to her other than Alwande. He’s the only thing I have. I’m not trying to.. I don’t know pity you? I’m just... I just want you to get better. I know the journey is going to be painful but for closure, I just want you to get better.” He wipes his tears then walks out. He bumps into a small kid by the door. Why do they all look 5?

But she... She looks like me when I was young. She is normal though. She has a caramel skin tone and long hair held into two buns. She stares at me for a while as confusion runs in her eyes. She looks behind her to her... Mother. They look the same.

“Say hi, she’s your sister.” Her mother urges making the small girl smile.

She slowly makes her way to me then hugs my leg.

“Hi,” she says. She’s loud. I look at her then at her mother. I feel tears sting my eyes.

“Her name is Rhea.” She says softly smiling.

I just stare at her in silence. The little girl is happy. Such happiness that I yearned for everyday as I got rapped. At 5, instead of being bubbly like her, I was crying being rapped. At 5 I was being beaten in front of men.

“She’s happy.” I tell her. I have cried enough. Crying won’t bring back the lost. She looks at Rhea.

“Sweety why don’t you go play outside.”

She nods then rushes out.

“Khosi..—”

“I don’t remember ever being happy. You look fine to me. You.. You look happy to me.”

She blinks and tears fall. “Looks deceive. I always thought about you. After I told you to run they had their way with me. All I kept thinking about was that you run so far because I was never going to survive it if they hurt you. Even when they shot me. You were the last person in my mind. You are my life. Waking up months later in the hospital, you were the first thing I asked. And it broke me..” She wipes her tears. “It broke me knowing that you.. that you didn’t make it. That you were not there. I just wished the Lord had just let me die. You were the reason I woke up with the spirit of trying everyday. Each day that I slept not knowing if you had eaten or not bothered me. I couldn’t sleep. It was painful too. I stayed awake most nights. I felt so dead inside. I was just a walking dead and everyday became more and more unbearable. One day I just woke up ready to end it all. I tied myself to the ceiling.

“What hurt so much was the fact that they saved me. They had saved me to watch me die a slow painful death. That’s when I started looking. Every time I would hear something I would get in the first plane to where girls would be found or at places where it was believed girls to be there. I got shot here.” She says raising her top. There’s a huge scar just below her ribs. “I got shot but I still remember dragging my body to the small house where they said a body was as gun shots kept on being fired. When I got to that small house I cried. Not for the pain but because it wasn’t you. I had so much hope. Everyday that went, I felt myself lose you. I don’t know how many dead bodies I saw. I don’t know how many times I cried. I lost count. For 15 years I looked. I paid the TV channels to help me. I paid people of high ranks to help me. It never worked but I kept on looking. For the past 15 years I was just living. I was not happy. All this..” She says motioning around the room. “It’s just material. It’s not happiness. Money is not happiness. My happiness is you. It’s that small girl you just saw. I know you feel robbed but.. I’m just trying to protect the little I have left. I failed you. I know. I failed myself. I know and I will not justify it. I should have looked harder. I should have looked harder than I did.” Tears keep gushing from her eyes. “I know you hate me. I know it’s hard for you to look at me and I understand. Nothing will make it right I know. But just give me a chance. I just want a chance, I’m begging you.” She goes down on her knees holding my hands. “I just want a chance. Please.. I just want you to let me be there for you. I know nothing will ever be the same again but please.”

There’s a lot of things I’ve always wanted to tell her. I used to imagine her walking inside Sebastian’s house and saving me. There were one of the days I would just sit and wait. I refused to lose hope. I always told myself that she loved me and that she would come. But she didn’t. Everyday the torture got worse and she never came for me. I cried for her, begging God to bring her to me but she just never came.

“Sebastian is going to find me. Maybe this time around he will really kill me.” I say slowly. “He will kill me like he did Eunice. Or maybe he will torture me but I doubt. His son is dead because of me. He will definitely kill me.”

“He will have to kill me first.” I shake my head.

“She deserves her mother.”

“And so do you. I’m here and I’m never going away. Never.”

She squeezes my hands. "I'd rather die than to lose you again."

"He will take her and torture her."

"He won't." Dragon says entering the room.

I laugh. "You don't know him. You don't know Sebastian Zlatah."

"If he's dead how will he get to you?"

I gape at him in shock and I want to laugh but something tells me he's not joking. That he's actually serious.

I don't understand. This is Sebastian we are talking about. The mighty Sebastian. The unshakable Russian god. Many tried but never got anywhere because no one can kill nor stop him. He's unstoppable.

"No one can kill Sebastian."

"I cremated him alive."

"No!"

I'm beyond shocked. I can't bring myself to actually believe it.

"I did. Also Vuyisile."

"What?"

"They don't deserve to live."

"Who's Vuyisile?" My... Mother asks staring at Dragon. He looks at me then at her.

"Someone who's rotting in hell."

"You go around killing people?" She asks standing up. "You are a murderer." She says in a as-a-matter-of-fact tone.

"I'd like to think we are cut from the same cloth. You are no saint Mrs Zulu."

"I never said I was, but maybe you could have given me this Sebastian man." The hate in her voice is so strong.

"Don't worry, by the time I burnt him, most of his body parts were gone."

"You killed him?" I ask again.

"Yeah and I spoke to the rehab center Mrs Zulu, they are ready when you are."

THIRTY

She's looking at me closely as if there are words written on my forehead. Sighing she finally leans back on her chair.

"Day 14, still silent." She says softly. I don't like her.

"I don't like you."

She smiles. "I know, I don't think you like anyone."

I chuckle in silence. She finally stands up.

"This place is meant to help you. To try fixing what's been broken."

"You think I can be fixed?"

"I think you can be fixed... Only if you want to."

I don't reply making her smile.

"It's ok, you think you don't deserve to be fixed. You have self loathe. You don't think you are worthy to be fixed."

I rub my hands together. Day 14 of being in this hell. I didn't protest when Dragon and my so called mother said I needed help. As long as I was far from them I was fine. As long as I was far from everyone I was ok. The first day was hard. I couldn't sleep, withdrawal symptoms tormented me and they kept giving me the fucken damn medicine which made it a bit bearable but didn't make me feel better. It never does anything actually, just makes you feel numb.

"I'm going to give you this notepad." She says putting it on her desk.

"If you won't talk to me, then talk to them. The people who hurt you. Take the notepad and write. I'm going to give you some space to just talk to them." She says standing up. I don't like Patricia. Not that I have anything against her, no. I have absolutely nothing against her but she makes it sound so easy. She always does, even during the group discussions which I hate so much. She thinks talking will make it better, she thinks smashing glasses will make it better. It doesn't. It reliefs anger for that moment but it doesn't make the scar heal. It's like drugs. It only works for a particular time.

"I will be in the next room." She says then walks out. I want to yank the papers out of the notepad and tear them apart but I just sit still staring at them.

I grab the paper and pen. My hands shake as I hold the pen in my hands. Pointing it to the paper, my hand moves and there is his name. I've written it. My first heartbreaker.

I hate you. I write then repeat it over and over again. After a while I realize I have destroyed the paper. And I'm crying. All I ever wanted was his love, his acceptance. I was a child but I knew what rejection was. Every time he would walk in the house he wouldn't look at me. He wouldn't let me touch him. He

hated me. He never looked at me the way Mommy did. Or the way Grammy did. He'd walk past me even when I got hurt. He'd leave me. He hated me. He never loved me. He was supposed to be my first love but he hated me. He was my father but he hated me.

All I needed was your love. I start again on a clean page. All I needed was your acceptance. That's all. And you failed. You opened the doors for more hurt in my life. Seamless hurt. You opened the doors for pain. You made me feel unworthy of love, made me feel that I had to work for your love and affectionate. That I was useless. At some point in life I wondered if maybe you were right, and you were. You were right to act the way you did. You were right to not want anything to do with me. I'm disgusting and ugly. I know it. I don't know if I need to thank you or not but thank you. Thank you for opening doors for my worst nightmares. For my worst nightmares which indeed turned into reality.

I stop writing then tear the page out placing it aside and take out another clean one. My first abuser. I write his name. Lwandle. Where it really began. The first day still plays in my head when I sleep. The first time he took advantage of me. I was only a child but not to him.

I start writing.

I don't hate you nor do I resent you. Somebody had opened the doors so you can see me as a woman rather than a child. Somebody had given you the permission to think you could do as you please. I still dream of the first time. Funny how the first time felt more easier than the last time where you forced it in me with your hand on my mouth. The way you kept on grunting, funny how I can still hear you grunting in my head. Sometimes I wonder how it felt. Did it turn you on that you were pleasuring yourself with a child? Did it make you feel good that you had fucked a child? Maybe it made you feel like a man. Did it? Did it make you feel good when you got to your house that day? Were you happy? I bet you where. I bet you slept so well at night. I didn't. I was crying but nobody knew about it. I kept it a secret. The following day when you came home I held on to my mother's leg and you looked at me sharply. I remember how you looked at me, had you wanted to me to move, to go to my room? So that you have your way again? I think so. I think that's what you wanted. But I didn't move. I held on to her leg tightly and I didn't let go. So I guess you were disappointed. I think you may have been more disappointed because the following day Mommy finally left. I wonder if all men are like that, they must be. They must be just like you. I hope you have a good stay in hell, I might meet you there though.

I put the paper aside then take another one. I stare at it for a while then finally write her name. Nokukhanya. I still remember it. I remember it so well I can never forget. Mommy. The Mommy who I awaited on.

Dear Mommy.

The woman who I loved. I don't know what love is anymore but I still love you. I know. I know I do.

You hurt me. You broke my heart. Made me wait only to actually never show up. Do you know how much it hurt when Lexie hit me hard in my head after I called Aunty Lerato? I thought the phone call was going to help, Eunice said it was going to. But you never did come. At some point I started believing that maybe you just never cared. Like the rest of them. Maybe you hated me to a point that you let Sebastian hurt me like that. All I wanted was my mother's love, unconditional love but I got nothing hurt and pain. For 15 years I endured nothing but pain. I started hating you. It felt easier to hate you because then I didn't expect anything from you. I could sleep knowing that you were never coming for me. And that's why I didn't cry during the second surgery. What was the need? Nobody was coming so I thought why not embrace Zhanna. That's when Khosi was buried. That's when your daughter died.

I stop writing and laugh when I realize I'm crying. Why does it still hurt?

"Done?" Patricia asks walking in her office. I look at her then stand up.

"I want to go back to my room." I announce.

"It's ok, but there's someone here to see you."

"I don't want to see anyone."

"He won't leave."

I look at her for a while then nod.

"Before you leave, I want you to tear the papers."

I laugh. "Then what was the need to write in the first place? I thought you wanted to have something to write about today."

She shakes her head. "This was for you. Not for me. It's never about me or anybody else, it's always about you. I'm trying to help you. You might see me as the enemy because you don't think I understand but trust me, I understand. I have been through worse." She says softly then hand over the papers to me.

"Destroy them."

I snatch them from her then tear them into small pieces.

"We are on the healing road. It's not going to be easy but I believe we will get there. Broken isn't bad, broken can be fixed. You are a strong girl Khosi, one day you will stand out there and tell the story. It's not going to be now or tomorrow or next week.. But one day." She says softly with a small smile.

After a while I'm being led to the visitor's area where they meet us. I spot him first and he turns as the guard leads me to him. I sigh sitting down. I didn't expect to see him. It's been 14 days and I have been refusing visitors.

"What happened to your hair?" He asks as I sit down opposite him. It's short. Off the face short. I cut it two days ago. I hated it so cut it with a broken glass in my room.

"I cut it."

"And your hand?" He asks looking at my bandaged left hand. The glass I was using to cut my hair slashed my palm.

"Got hurt."

He looks at me carefully. "This place is supposed to be a safe place for you."

"It's a depression center." I say. I would have loved a rehab center. A drug rehab center nor a depression center.

"I hope you are not being troublesome."

"No."

"How are you?"

I chuckle. Is that a trick question. "I like it here." I tell him. "Far from anything. I think I'm going to like it more."

"I want you to get better." He says.

"I have nothing to get better for."

"I think you do."

I laugh. "No I don't. Go back to your house Sthembiso. You have a son and a girlfriend."

"You remind me of Thuli."

"I remind you of your dead girlfriend? Ironic."

"For closure." He says.

"You failed your girlfriend. I'm not her. She's dead and there's nothing about me to remind you of her. I never want to see you again. You won't find closure in me getting better because I'm never going to get better."

●●●●●●●●

"Maybe I shouldn't have sent her there." I say staring at nothing.

"You had to. You are helping her."

"She doesn't want to see me." I say and it breaks my heart.

"Khanya she's still settling, give her time."

"You haven't told him have you?" I ask her randomly. She blinks looking away.

“Lerato why?”

“What’s the point Khanya? You want him to leave me?”

I laugh. “Lerato you can’t do this. This is wrong.”

“I care about him.”

“But you still sleep with my brother behind doors? You are both married.”

“We love each other. I love him Khanya, I love Sma!”

“But you are married.” I point out. I thought she had stopped her little games with Sma.

“I know. I’m confused.”

“I am not doing this. Not now. Right now my daughter is my main priority Lerato. You are busy being a cheating wife, I hope it’s worthy it. I know how it feels like being treated like shit. I hope your husband survives it.” I say then get up. Walking out of the kitchen I bump into Sma by the door. I don’t say anything. I go up the stairs dialing his number. My PI. He answers as I get in my bedroom.

“Mrs Zulu.”

“Hey, anything?”

“Everything looks legit. His businesses are legit too.” I close my eyes. Of cause he would find that but I know a shady person when I see one.

“Sthembile is clean but there’s something more interesting that I found.” He says.

“What is it?”

“Your daughter.... She’s married to him.”

“What?”

“Yes.”

THIRTY-ONE

"....and that's when he tried killing me. He had an axe in his hands and was ready to slice me when his sister walked in. That moment I knew I had to run so I ran. I told myself I was fine and everyday kept getting harder and harder till I just decided to come here before I killed myself. At first it was hard. Everyone looked like an enemy before me. It took me time to accept that I needed help and when I did, I got it. That moment it finally clicked that here they were only trying to help." She says then sits down. We clap for her, Priscilla. Apparently she came here 8 months ago and today is her last day. Pat made her talk with us before she leaves.

"Exactly!" Pat says standing up from her mat. She sits in the middle of us while we sit in a circle. "This place is meant to help. I am here to help. That's all. I always tell you this, the journey to recovery might seem impossible but trust me, once you get there, you will realize it was never impossible. Who wants to share?" She asks with a smile. She's always smiling the warm smile no matter what you say to her. She never stops.

Her eyes fall on me and it's like she's silently asking me to say something. I told her I don't want to talk but I find myself rising. Slowly. My heart is beating fast and when I feel everyone's eyes on me, I wish to just die.

"Khosi, you can come and stand here. So that everyone sees you but if you are not comfortable, you can just stand there." She says softly. I look around and everyone is looking, including Mercy, the lady who tried burning herself in her own house. She's rude and always has something provoking to say. I walk to the middle and Pat gives me a light hug then goes and sit on my mat. I look at everyone then close my eyes. I don't have to look at them, this is my first time doing this.

"My name is.... Khosi. Khosi Ferguson. I'm 20 years old." I say then take in a deep breath and open my eyes. I fix them on Pat so that it feels like I'm talking to her.

"I came here five months ago. I was kidnapped when I was 5 years old. Well my mother and I were hijacked. She told me to run for my life. The only thing she gave me was her phone, she told me that it was my key."

I say and I hear her voice ring in my head. "When I say run.. You are going to run as fast as you can ok?"

"Don't turn. Keep running and don't ever stop. Run as fast you can. Ok?"

"I will. If I don't, I'm in your heart. Forever. Mommy loves you."

"Take this. It's your key. Don't lose it."

Pat gives me a nod while smiling.

"She said the phone was my key, she said I shouldn't lose it so when I got the chance I ran. I ran into the bush and never stopped moving. I was a child but I knew I was in danger when she kept screaming "run!" And I ran. I ran till I fell and hurt my leg. Then I couldn't move no more. The following day I got up and limped walking further away till I got to some houses. I didn't trust anyone so I started living my life

in the streets. Till today I don't know where I got the strength. I was only five but I knew I had to survive. I was five but I knew my safety was in danger. That's when I finally got kidnapped. I was sold to some Russian ruthless man who abused and tortured me for 15 years. He would kill people in front of me. He would order men to have their way with me. He would beat me till I got unconscious then he would laugh about it while giving me heroine or cocaine. Drugs helped me forget and deal with the pain. I knew there was no hope for me. I knew I was destined for pain. I was broken. He broke me beyond repair. When they found me it was too late. And here I am." I say then quickly move back to my mat while Pat stands up. She goes and sit on her mat then smile.

"Thank you for sharing with us Khosi." She says clapping her hands and everyone joins in.

"We all have somewhere to start. What's a story without a beginning? As I always say, broken is not bad. Broken can be fixed. Depression is a battle and it's by choice whether to defeat it or let it defeat you. Being happy is a choice and so is getting better. Anyone else to share?" She asks and no one says anything.

"Ok. I guess till the next group discussion. We may go, Khosi please remain." She says and everyone immediately stands up with their mats. They walk away leaving me and Pat alone.

"I'm so happy you finally said something. It shows progress. Five months ago you wouldn't even talk to me. There's progress, you might not see it but it's there."

"This place is fucked up but I like it."

"Because it helps you build walls from the outside world?"

"Yes."

"You don't need walls. We are not trying to work a miracle here Khosi, we are trying to work you getting better. You are too angry."

"I want to go." I say.

"Wanna write about it?" She says taking my journal and pen. She hands them over to me. She always carries everyone's journal for them because she says the journal is part of the journey. I take it from her then open the last page I wrote. A week ago when my mother came to see me. It has become much easier to think of her as my mother. She gave birth to me.

I open a clean page.

"Remember," Pat starts. "Everyday is a another chapter in your life. Writing it down makes it easier to open the next page. It doesn't leave no stone unturned."

Dear new chapter.

I start writing. I write about how I can't look at myself. About how when I woke up today, I decided no more mirrors because they disgust me. I write about how I woke up disgusted by myself after I dreamt of Sebastian. How angry I am. Angry at a lot of things. How difficult it is to look past anything and how Pat is annoying.

Whenever I start writing it becomes hard to stop. It becomes hard to stop the emotions. Pat always says we need to let everything out. To leave no stone unturned. So I write and when I'm done I hand it over to her. She smiles.

"You can go."

I stand up with my mat then quickly walk away. Putting my mat in my locker I walk past a guard then straight to my room. There are camera's everywhere, yesterday they caught Mosa, my roommate, trying to slash her wrist for the sixth time this month. She's quiet and sometimes when she starts talking, I get confused. Her mother abandoned her when she was 10 because she could no longer take care of her anymore then she was found almost dead on the side of the road. She has been in and out of foster homes and there, she got raped in every home she went to.

Sometimes she can just wake up in the middle of the night and cry but on the good days, she starts singing. She always sings that song on the good days. It's a sad cradle song. She will sing it till she passes out.

I get in our room and she's there sitting on her bed quietly. She's wearing her favourite dress. It's a long black dress.

"You are back." She whispers. Mosa has marks all over her body. Marks that she initiated on her body willingly.

"Yeah.."

"My mother came." She says with a small smile and I doubt she's talking to me. She talks to herself more than she talks to anyone. "She says she's sorry." She says then starts repeating the same thing over and over. I sit on my bed and as I lie down the door opens and some nurse peeks in. I hate her. She's the one who always treats our wounds.

"Khosi, you have a phone call." She announces. I stand up then follow her. Getting to the telephone I hesitantly take it then place it on my ear. I don't say anything and there's silence for a while.

"Hey.." He finally says. I press my lips together. He last called 2 weeks ago and I cussed him out. He keeps on calling and coming. I hate him for it.

"I thought I said don't call me."

"You have a running mouth." He says and I hear Alwande at the background though I can't really make out what he's saying.

"He wanted to talk with you. Please be nice to him, it's his birthday."

I nod closing my eyes. I hear his small voice after a while.

"Daddy I should talk?" He asks making me chuckle.

"Yes." Sthe replies though his voice sounds distant.

"Hello Aunty," he says and my heart skips. Why does he always get me emotional? Ever since I came here, I have talked to him at least five times.

"Hey A,"

"Today it's my birthday. Daddy says he is buying me a big big cake and a car like his." I smile.

"I'm happy for you." I whisper unable to speak out loud.

"Yes. Daddy said I can share my cake with you."

I chuckle. "Yes you can. I would love that."

"I will drive you in my big car."

I laugh. "And where will you take me?"

"I will take you to my house. Right Daddy? Aunty will stay with us right?"

I don't hear Sthe's response but whatever it is makes Alwande scream.

"Daddy says yes." He says excitedly.

"That's great."

"Ok, bye bye Aunty."

"Bye A."

I wait then I hear his voice.

"He wanted to talk to you."

"He's so happy."

"Yeah. How are you?"

"I am fine."

"I want to see you."

"No."

"Zano says he is coming tomorrow."

"I don't want to see anyone." I say resigned.

"Ok. I have to go."

"Ok."

"Bye."

I hold the phone to my ear and he does too. He doesn't hang up. I bite my lower lip for a while.

"Why do you call me when you don't care about me?"

“Who said I don’t care?”

“In Paris.”

“Things have changed.”

“What things?”

“It’s non of your business.”

“I’m sorry about Thuli’s ashes.” I finally apologize since he mentioned it two weeks ago.

“It’s ok. I guess it’s just a sign that it’s time to let her go.”

“I’m really sorry.”

“It’s ok. Can I come see you tomorrow with A?”

“Ok.” I agree then the call gets disconnected. I put my it away then let the guard escort me back to my room but before I reach, I’m told there’s someone here to see me. I don’t want any visitors but I find myself telling the guard that he can lead me there.

Reaching the visitors area I’m shocked to see her.

What is she doing here? The last time and first time I saw her she was being crazy.

“Khosi..” She says smiling as I sit opposite her.

“What do you want?”

“My name is Anaya.”

“What do you want?”

“I want you to stay away from my man.” She says with a serious look and her voice has completely changed. Her face too, she looks scary but I’m not moved. Not even a single bit. I have a lot of issues to deal with, she’s the least of my worries.

“You are a crazy girl, that’s why you are here. You are a rotten tomato, so rotten and smelly. You don’t deserve to be with normal people. You are so disgusting, no one would really mind if you end your life today. You are a waste. Stay away from my man, alien.”

I blink and the memory plays back in my head like a movie.

Wow!

“If you know what’s good for you, you will listen. This is the first and last time I address you. You think Sthe cares about you? He doesn’t. You just remind him of his dead girlfriend. Nothing more. He feels sorry for you. Your mother should have aborted you. Look at you now? So miserable. If I find out that you still talk to my man, I will ruin you so hard you will kill yourself in seconds.”

I laugh. “Did saying all these things to me help you in any way? Are you happy now that you have said it? What? Did you get thicker or thinner? What have you gained? Nothing. Zilch. Surprisingly all this for a

man who happens to be my husband. Seems like the Princess lost to the Alien. Go and take a back seat, the chairs I believe are not too hot for your flat ass.”

THIRTY-TWO

I smile as Alwande hands me a piece of cake on a serviette.

“Thank you.” I say.

He smiles brightening his face then sits besides me, almost on me. He doesn't want to leave my side so his father is sitting alone opposite us.

“So wena LD ntwana yam you have deserted me for a lady?” Sthe asks looking at his son who laughs.

“You are leaving your number one for a lady skhokho?”

“Daddy Aunty Khosi says I'm her only friend. I will play with you when we get home.” The innocence in his voice warms my heart. I take a bite of the cake when he looks at me then make a dramatic sound.

“It tastes nice.”

“Granny baked it.” He answers quickly.

“Ohh tell Granny I said it's nice.” I tell him then look around. There are few people here, nobody likes doing this. Picnics are for the normal people outside the gates of this center. I put the cake down then straighten my blue shirt. My uniform.

“How are you?” Sthe asks quietly as Alwande gobbles his cake.

“Your girlfriend came yesterday.” I say looking at the decorative cushions they brought with. When he asked to come with his son I thought it was going to be a normal visit. I didn't think it was going to be a picnic and I couldn't say no. Alwande was so excited.

“She told me.” He says. “She's crazy.”

“I know her.”

“You do?” The curiosity in his voice is palpable. I look at him then nod. “I have tiny bits memories of her and her father. I think he was nice.”

“He was.”

I stare at him. Was?

“He's dead?” I question.

“Yeah. A few years ago.”

“She needs help, book her here.”

“Her needing help is her own issue. I hope she didn't cause a scene.”

I shake my head recalling her shocked face that had soon changed into rage. She had wanted to attack me physically though thank heavens the security was there. She kept screaming insults as they led her out.

“No. I told her we are married because she was saying the hurtful truth.” I say.

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize for her. She did nothing wrong.”

“Your mother knows too.” He says. I know she does. She confronted me months ago and she was upset though she tried her best not show it.

“Aunty you are not eating.” Alwande points out. I wonder how it feels just being free. Just being a normal child with no worries. I brush his head smiling.

“I’m full. You can eat it.” I tell him and I don’t have to say it twice. He grabs it then starts eating.

“How did you get Sebastian?” I ask him, I have been wanting to ask but I always held it.

“Does it matter?”

I eye him then look back at the cushion. “Closure.” I mutter.

“I pretended I was his son, he didn’t know he was dead.”

“Then you what? Lured him here?”

“Yes. I told him I had you pretending to be his son so he came.”

I chuckle. “I bet he wanted to kill me.”

“It doesn’t matter, he’s with his creator now.”

“He still torments me even when dead.” I say recalling the nightmares I have sometimes.

“The tiny lady says you are doing good.” He says probably referring to Pat. She’s not tiny but she’s really short. Her heels make up for it most of the time but when she doesn’t have them she looks tiny.

“Whatever.”

“Aunty!” A screams jumping up. Looking where he was sitting I notice a tiny insert. If I had the energy I would actually laugh but I simply just take it and throw it away.

“You can sit now... It’s ok now.” I assure him but he leans over then whispers “I love you” in my ear.

“And then? Skhokho we are now whispering.” Sthe asks making his son blush.

I look at A then smile. I know what I’m required to say. Even if I don’t want to I have to.

“Me too.”

His giggles standing up then hugs me tightly. It feels do right but I really can’t get rid of the voice telling me how I don’t deserve being in his arms.

I hold him tightly too for a while then let go.

“Daddy said we are scattering Mommy today.” Alwande says letting me go. I look at Sthe and he nods.

“Yeah..” He confirms.

“Did he know her?” I ask him.

“He was young.”

I nod. Of course he was young. My mother told me that my supposedly Father passed on to cancer, I can still remember his face even though it's been 15 years. His death didn't move me though. Patricia says it's because I'm blocking my emotions.

“I have a group discussion to attend.” I tell Sthe standing up. “I don't want to miss it.”

“Aunty you are going?” Alwande asks, I can hear the disappointment in his voice. I look over at the big cake they brought then back at him.

“Yeah.. I have to go. You can take the cake to your friends so that they eat too.”

“Ok, bye..” His voice is sad and I want to sit and stay but I can't handle it anymore. The voice in my head keeps getting louder and louder. I crouch before him and hug him. He wraps his tiny arms around me. I sigh then stand up letting him go.

“You will call me,” I tell his sad face. “We will always talk.”

“Ok!” There's some hint of excitement. I look over at Sthe.

“Thank you for bringing him.”

“It's ok. I will be out of country for a while so I had to because no one will be in my absence.” He says, his voice displaying no emotion. I nod.

“You are going to be doing wrong things?” I ask, I don't want Alwande to know.

“It's none of your business.” He replies arrogantly and I just nod. Of course he's going to do illegal things. I wonder if he is going to help another girl like me.

“Ok, bye.” I say then wave at Alwande walking away. Walking back inside the building the guard immediately escorts me to Patricia. I have a session with her, not a group discussion. I don't know why I lied. Getting to her office she smiles as I step in. I sit on the couch I usually sit on and she comes and sits besides me.

“How did the picnic go?” She asks.

“Ok.”

“Just ok?”

“Alwande was happy.”

“And were you?”

I nod. "A bit. When he held me I was happy."

"You were happy when he held you?" She asks softly. Like she always does.

"Yes.."

"Do you know how you feel about him." I look at her remembering how he had easily said he loved me. I didn't deserve being loved. I was too disgusting and dirty to be loved.

I shrug honestly. I don't know how I feel about him.

"Do you miss him?"

I nod. "Yes."

"Then why did you leave? You had 30minutes with him though it was supposed to be an hour."

I blink then close my eyes. "It was too overwhelming. Him... His unhidden emotions." I whisper recalling how he didn't even bother trying to hide them.

"You love Alwande." She announces. "But you just don't believe you do because you believe a dirty person like you is incapable of loving. It brings us back to self loathing." She says.

"What do you expect? Me to love myself?"

"What do you expect?" I hate the way she always turns my questions back to me.

I keep quiet then I feel her warm hand on mine making me open my eyes.

"How are you feeling? After the picnic.... How do you feel?"

"Right now?" I ask making her nod.

"I feel sad. He was sad to watch me go. I hate myself so much for hurting him. I feel so empty apart from his little.... Heart. I feel so empty." I say.

"You feel empty apart from his little emotions?"

I nod.

"Are you suicidal?" She asks her voice still soft.

"I don't care."

"I'm here to help you."

"I don't think anyone can help me."

"How do you feel about Sthe, you have mentioned him before, a couple of times." We have never talked about Sthe.

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"How do you feel about him. You know you feel something for Alwande but you are just too scared to label it because you don't believe you actually have emotions. How do you feel about Sthe?"

I stare forward in silence. Her watch on the wall keeps ticking and I start counting each tick. "We are married." I tell her absentmindedly. "He hasn't said anything about the divorce. Mommy said she will sort it out once I leave this place."

"You are married?"

"We didn't marry under normal circumstances but I think our marriage is legal."

"Do you want the divorce?"

I look at her. "Yes."

"Why?"

I look back at the watch. "Because I don't want him tied to me."

"Do you think he cares about you?"

I shake my head no. "He sees his late girlfriend in me. He said me getting better will be the needed closure for him. He doesn't care about me."

"You think the reason he keeps coming is to get closure for his late girlfriend?"

"Yes, Alwande's mother."

"How do you feel about him?" She repeats.

"I hate him." I say.

"Do you want to talk to him?" She says getting a clean paper from the small table.

"He didn't do anything to me. I don't have anything to say to him."

"Ok." She puts the paper down.

"Do you see yourself leaving this place?"

I look at her in shock. "I don't want to leave, please don't make me."

She blinks then smiles. "We won't make you leave."

I visibly relax.

"So you want to hide here for ever?"

"Yes.."

She looks at her watch. "Time up! I think you did well today. Talking is progress. Talking helps." She says then stands up. "I see light at the end of the tunnel." Her office phone starts ringing. She quickly walks towards it then answers. The conversation is brief that after she's done she turns and looks at me.

"There's a phonecall for you."

"Ohh.."

“Wanna take it?”

I nod.

After a while the guard is leading to the telephone booth. Arriving I hesitantly take the phone then place it on my ear.

“Hello?”

“You ran.” His voice says making me swallow. His words ties my intestines.

“Huh?”

“You ran.” He repeats.

“Maybe you should stop coming back. Or calling.” I say.

“Do you want me to stop?”

“Fix things with Anaya.”

“You are not answering my question. Do you want me to?”

“Sthe...”

“Do you want me to stop?”

I swallow and I feel tears wet my cheeks. Why am I crying?

“You can bring the divorce papers.” I say.

“Why?”

“So that you can be set free.”

“I don’t think they are giving you help inside there.”

I wipe my tears. “What do you mean?”

“Why? Why would I bring the divorce papers?”

“Because you can’t be stuck with someone like me dammit!” My voice is raised.

“I’m not bringing them.” He says calmly.

“What?” I don’t think I heard him well.

“You heard me.”

“Why?”

“Non of your business.”

“But—”

"A is going with my mom. He stays with her."

"You don't stay with him?"

"I do but because I can't really give him the needed attention so stays with her but I do see him every weekend."

"So... He won't be coming back."

"Alwande is me and I am Alwande. You said I should stop coming."

"No.. I.."

"You?"

"Please come back."

"So you love my son and you hate me? How ironic of you!"

"I don't hate.... I... You..."

"You don't hate me?"

"Stop it!"

He laughs. "What? I'm not doing anything."

"What's wrong with you?" I yell. "Something is not well with you! You keep coming back here... I'm not.. You..."

"You are not what?"

"Fuck you!" I scream.

He laughs again. "It takes two to fuck.. Well normally it does."

I laugh. I can't believe I'm laughing. A real laugh.

"I don't possess the rightful energy in your life." I'm calm.

"Says who?"

"I know so."

"You are wrong. So when should I come back?"

"Alwande!"

He chuckles. "I said I am Alwande. When should I?"

I chuckle. "You are sick!"

"Want me to join you inside there?"

"No. You are sick, you need to be medicated."

“Then I’m moving inside there.”

“I thought you said you are going somewhere.” I point out.

“I did but not anymore. I’m coming tomorrow.”

“No you are not!”

“I am. You can’t stop me.”

THIRTY-THREE

"Are you going to leave me?" Mosa asks as I lie on my bed, it's late and I'm tired. I look at her.

"Why would I leave?"

"Because you are better now, are you going to leave?"

"No." I respond then look up the ceiling. "I'm not going to leave."

"But you are better now."

I don't say anything but just stare at the ceiling in silence. I don't want to leave. I want to stay.

"I don't want to leave." I say.

"Then we have to find a way to make you stay." She whispers. I sit up straight on my bed and look at her.

"What?"

"I can find a glass for you."

I'm shocked. "A glass?"

"Yes, to cut your wrist. Then they won't let you go because you won't be fit to leave."

I look at her considering her plan.

"No." I tell her.

"What?" She's surprised.

"No! No!"

"They will make you leave."

"No. You... I can't do that. He will be disappointed in me." I mutter.

"They don't care about you. People outside this walls don't care about people inside. They don't care about you. They don't want you."

I look at her. "They do. They care about me. Even if they don't, Pat does. I don't want to disappoint her like that."

She laughs. "She doesn't care about anyone. She's just doing her job."

I lie back on my bed. "I'm sleeping." I tell her closing my eyes. Mommy came today, she brought Rhea. I love Rhea, she's... She looks like the past version of me before the surgeries just that she's not an albino. She's a normal child. He didn't come today. It's the first time he misses our Friday meetings but he called. He said he had to pick up his sisters from the airport and that they are naggy. He has been

coming here everyday for four months now after Alwande's birthday. He calls everyday too. I didn't tell Mommy that, she doesn't like him that much because of Anaya. Mommy said when her father, lunuzulu, passed on, she became her mother. She legally adopted her because she had no one so legally she's my sister which makes it wrong for my legal sister's fiancé to be giving me undivided full attention. But then she's always disliked him. She said he's shady. I asked him if he was gangster and he said no though he admitted to be a artwork thief. He steals only over \$100 million worth paintings, nothing less than that. He said that they call him Dragon because the first biggest painting he stole was a Dragon but he hates the name. He doesn't have enemies all over like Sebastian.

I hold my pillow tightly allowing myself to drift away. I dream him again that night but instead of waking up with a smile I wake up feeling suffocated. My senses quickly kick in and I realize I'm being smothered with a pillow. I try fighting but she's too strong, I know it's her, Mosa.

Hearing the door open and voices I relax. Seconds later they are pulling her off me. I jump out off bed then stand at the other side. She looks scary as she screams.

"You can't leave me!" She screams repeatedly as they pull her out of our room. Pat enters and quickly walk over to my side and hug me. I'm shaken. Mosa has tried to hurt herself on different occasions but never has she tried hurting me.

"I'm fine." I mumble.

"Are you?" She asks looking at me carefully.

Am I?

"I don't want to leave."

She smiles.

"Let's sit." She says pointing to my bed. We sit down then she clasps my hand with hers.

"How many chapters have you written so far in your journals?"

"115 chapters."

"Those are the chapters of your book in here. At some point you have to write the last chapter and start a new book all together. Do you think there will be books in bookstores if authors kept writing and writing non stop? At some point you write the last chapter then you get a new book, open the first page then start writing. Writing something else. I know you are scared of what awaits you outside this walls but do you think what awaits you is scarier than what you went through in Russia? It's not. You are strong, you can withstand any storm now."

"I'm scared. I'm scared because I'm not the Khosi they once knew."

"You are not but you are this Khosi right now. What matters is the fact that you have accepted this red haired white Khosi. It's all about you, how can they accept you if you don't accept yourself? Have you accepted yourself?"

I look at her and nod. I think I have, I can't change what happened so I might as well accept it.

“Then the rest of the world shouldn’t matter too. It’s been 8 months. Do you think you are the same girl you came here as?”

I shake my head no

I’m not the same girl anymore though I still tint my hair red. Noma, the other girl in here plaits it. She likes plaiting so she always plaits it. Sebastian never had me plaited, he always had it applied things so to grow but Noma plaits it so that it grows. She says I may look white but I still carry roots of a black person.

“See? Then why do you want to censor your abilities by staying behind this walls? Fear is normal but don’t give it a chance to win you. You are stronger than that.”

I hug her tightly as I feel tears wet my cheeks. She holds me tightly too and we stay like that for a while. Letting her go she smiles blinking.

“We will still have our sessions though not here. So... What’s the plan after this? You said Sebastian had you home schooling?”

“Yeah. When I was six, I started home schooling. The lady used to come. She was British. For four years she came then one day she just stopped. I was 9 when she stopped. I knew he had killed her, she had started asking questions about my bruises and limping.

“A week later another lady came. Her name was Ifeoma, she was Nigerian. She stayed for two years then just stopped. They continued coming and going till I was 17, he just stopped bringing them anymore. I liked schooling, it gave me a moment to breathe and I would always give it my all. Not that good marks impressed Sebastian but because it made me feel some type of worthy.”

“Do you want to go back to school?”

I quickly shake my head vigorously.

“No!”

“It’s fine.. Calm down. It’s ok. One step at a time.”

“I don’t want to go to school. I’m 20.. Well 21 in a week.” I whisper the last part. My birthday never excites me. At some point I tried forgetting it.

“Your birthday —”

“I don’t like celebrating it.”

“I think you should love celebrating it, it shows just how far you have come from.”

I hear noise outside. His voice. I quickly stand up, they never let visitors get this far. How did he get here? He walks in seconds later in a suit. His eyes searches the room till they find me. They capture me almost immediately and next thing I know I’m in his arms. His comforting warm arms. I wrap my arms around him inhaling his cologne. He smells so good, he always does.

He let’s go then look at me carefully like he’s looking for a wound, a bruise or just something. They probably told him.

"I'm fine.." I start.

"How did this happen?!" He yells at Pat. "This is supposed to be a safe place for her."

"It is. We got hold of the situation quickly. She's not hurt."

"What do you mean she's not hurt? What about next time?"

"Sthe I'm fine." I say trying to diffuse the tension. "I'm fine. Don't shout at her. Please." He looks so frustrated. I have never seen him this frustrated and angry before. He is defending me. Someone is standing up for me. It feels good but I like Pat.

"I'm fine. Don't shout."

He looks at Pat who is smiling at me.

"I will give you a moment but not for too long. You are not allowed this side Sir." She says then walks out leaving me with an angry man.

"Are you sure you are ok?" He's worried. Worried about me.

"I'm fine. I promise." I smile moving back from him. I'm too close.

"How are your sisters?"

"They are fine. Nosy but fine."

"Alwande?" It's been time since I last saw him. A month ago.

"He's ok. He will be here next week for your birthday." My intestines knot. I don't want to talk about my birthday.

I smile. "Funny how your youngest sister is older than me." He has two sisters, Phindile who is three years younger than him but tend to think that they are twins according to Sthe. Then Phumlile who is 5 years younger than him.

"When are they discharging you?" He asks.

"Uhh... Well I really don't know."

"What do you mean?"

"I.. Uhh well they will release me once they think I'm good to go."

"Once you are good to go? I thought you were doing fine."

"I am.. But... It's just a procedure." He looks at me intently for a while.

"Is there something you want to tell me Khosi?"

"What? No! I'm not keeping anything from you."

"Then what's going on? Why are they not releasing you?"

"Sthe..."

"It's you isn't it?"

"What?"

"It's you. You don't want to leave this place."

I take in a deep breath. "I like it here."

"I figured. I have to go." He says already walking away.

"No.." I say grabbing his arm. "Please don't leave."

"What is this to you? A game?"

"No.. I.. I just.. I'm scared."

"What are you scared of? I'm here ain't I?"

"No you are not. This is just what you want to get closure for... Her! I.. She's the reason you keep coming back."

"Is that what you think?"

"It's the truth."

"I'm going."

"When is A coming to see me?"

He just looks at me then carefully takes my hand off his arm and walk out. I feel tears sting my eyes. Why does him walking away hurt?

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I look at my lunch, I have no appetite. My intestines are still in knots. I raise my eyes and look around. I'm on the table with Noma and Snegugu. I usually hang out with them. They are charting about something but my mind is far. Mosa is not here. I don't know where they took her.

"Khosi, you have a visitor." A guard says startling me. I look at her then nod standing up. I let her lead me to where we meet the visitors.

She's sitting there smiling.

"Again?" I ask approaching her.

"Sit.. Please."

I look around then sit down. There are people around at least.

"What do you want Anaya?"

“Mom said she told you.” She says.

“Mom?”

“Yes, Mom Khanya. You and I are sisters. I know the last time I came here I acted crazy and I’m so sorry. I have been so embarrassed about how I treated you. I’m so sorry, since you and I are sisters, I want us to have a strong bond.” I looked at her in nothing but confusion.

“I want us to have a special bond. And I know you will help me get back Sthe.”

“Get him back from where?”

“He called off our wedding. I love him, ever since I lost my Father he has been my pillar of strength. I can’t lose him, he’s all I have.”

“You are here not because you want to make amends but because you want to use me to get you back with Sthe. Wow!”

“That’s not true but as sisters we have to help one another.”

“You are sick. You think I’m stupid?”

“Look Khosi, I’m trying here.”

“You are trying to use me!”

“Who the fuck do you think you are?” She hisses.

“I think I’m something bigger than you seeing the fact that you are here begging me to help you.”

“You are pathetic, he doesn’t love you. He doesn’t love anyone.”

I chuckle. “Then what are you doing here?”

“Sthe and I are having a baby.” She says rubbing her flat tummy. “I’m two months pregnant.”

I stand up. “Don’t worry, I will be a good step mom to your child.”

“You fucken bitch!” She yells.

“Ah-ah.. Be nice to me. I own the crown. Respect your Queen.” I say then walk away. I press my lips together as I feel my heart clench. She’s pregnant... With his child.

THIRTY-FOUR

"You're a murderer!" She screams lying in a pool of blood. Her blood. "You are a murderer!" She screams again, louder. I move back from her with terror. She gets up then starts walking towards me. Her white dress is drenched with blood. She's crying blood.

"Murderer!" She screams louder closing the distance between us. I'm scared, she looks terrifying.

"Murderer!" She screams so loud making me put my hands on my ears. She quickly disappears and looking down on myself I'm her. I'm the one wearing the drenched dress. I look at my hands and they are bloody. No.. No! This is not happening to me. No!

I scream so loud, my scream pulling me from my dream. I'm drenching in sweat. I raise my hands and they are clean. Closing my eyes I throw my head on the pillow. I have been dreaming of her since we all found her dead in her own pool of blood a week ago. I don't know where they had took her after she tried smothering me to death but wherever they had put her at, she had escaped and had killed herself in front of our shared room. I can still see her bloody white dress. She hated the dress but she had worn it when she was killing herself.

I rub my eyes and try to fall asleep but sleep just won't come. I look at Noma who's sleeping. I was moved to her room after they found Mosa dead.

I can't sleep, I'm awake already. I grab my journal from under the pillow together with the pencil.

I open a clean page then start writing to me. It's been a week and he hasn't come to visit me. I miss him so much and there's a lot I want to ask, for instance Anaya's pregnancy. Mommy came yesterday. I can't tell her about him, I'm not comfortable with her but even if I was, I think I know what she might have said. She doesn't like him, not for me or Anaya. She says Anaya is so obsessed with him and she won't listen to anyone. Mom says Anaya's shrink said it's just a cry for her father. I'm sad that she lost her Father, at least he loved her. My father didn't.

Tomorrow is my birthday, Mom is excited and son is Rhea. I didn't tell her about how I despise my birthday, I didn't want to hurt her feelings so I just agreed to whatever they were suggesting. After a while I put my journal away. I don't know for how long I lie there but when Noma finally wakes up the sun is already out.

"Hey.." She says stretching. She came 6 months ago after loosing her mother to a car accident, the same way Lunzulu died. Mom said he died on Anaya's birthday.

"Hey.."

"How are you?" She asks. She's getting discharged in a few days, she's better now.

"I'm good."

"Well I know you hate this but happy birthday. I will unplait your hair then try styling it. It has grown, I think we can work out something."

“Thanks..”

I get up from the bed with her after a while. The day has started. We bath first though we bath being monitored. The first days I never bathed, who on earth would like bathing as another human being stares at you but I grew up from that fear.

After bathing we go for breakfast. Snegugu gives me a big hug before I sit down. I never really asked why she’s here.

As we eat a guard calls me. I quickly stand up hoping it’s a call from him.

“Uhh coming.” I tell them and they just nod. I follow the guard till we are standing in front of Pat’s office. I’m a bit surprised, it’s Saturday, I don’t have a session with her though we do have a group discussion later.

I open the door then walk in, she’s sitting on her chair smiling.

“Good morning..”

“Hey, sit.” She says pointing at the couch I usually sit on. I walk over to it then sit down. She stands up, today she’s dressed differently. She’s wearing really long heels and has a red coat around her. Her short hair looks nice. She walks over and sit besides me as usual.

“How are you today?”

“I had the same nightmare again.”

“Those nightmares are normal Khosi. All you have to remember is that you didn’t kill her. She killed herself. As I always say, getting better is a choice. If you don’t want to get better you will never get better. If you don’t want to be happy you will never be happy. If you don’t give yourself a chance then who will? If you don’t love yourself then who will?”

“I feel like I pushed her to it.”

“You didn’t do anything. Mosa pushed herself. You found her here, she didn’t want to get better. Khosi I feel like we are all wild flowers, wild flowers don’t have anyone to water them or to give them fertilizers or extra care such a pruning and thinning. They grow on their own. If a wild flower wants to survive then it has to fight too. Mosa had a choice to fight for her life, she did not. Not that I’m blaming her, I don’t know what she was thinking but Mosa was a wild flower, she chose not to fight. You are a wild flower too. You can’t stop fighting because someone has given up too. You are running your own race, and the finish line is yours alone.” She smiles chuckling. “When I was still at school, my teacher used to like saying, your mother gave birth to you alone and you left your mother’s house alone, you came here alone and you shall leave alone going back to your mother’s house, your friend is not going to come with you. She always said this to us and it applies to you too Khosi. You are here to get help too, if you can help anyone else then that’s wonderful. If they don’t take your help, you can’t force them because you are here on your own journey.”

I nod sighing. I don’t know how she always manages to say the correct things always.

“The reason why you are here... It’s time to go.” She says apologetically.

I look at her in nothing but confusion. Time to go? Go where?

“Go where?”

“Home.”

I close my eyes tightly as my heartbeat picks.

“We can’t keep you here Khosi. If we keep you then what was the reason for working so hard that you get better? Remember what we talked about a week ago? About starting a new book? It’s about to happen. You are about to start a new book all together. You just finished your race in here and you are about to start a new one. Life is not a bed of roses and sweets, you know this. We all know this. I won’t lie to you and say the journey you are about to start will be easy, it’s going to very bumpy but I know you will make it. I believe in you, do you believe in yourself?”

I believe in myself but I’m scared. I don’t know what awaits me outside this walls but it scares me. I already have a sister who hates me. I really don’t blame her.

“Yeah..”

“Good then fear can go straight to hell! You are going to make it. I know you will.”

“I love you.” The words leave my mouth before I can stop them. Her smile widens.

“I love you too.” She hugs me tightly. We stay like that for a while and when I let go she has tears in her eyes. I guess she’s human too.

“Uhh..” She clears her throat then smiles. “Someone will be here in an hour from your family so you can go and say bye to your friends.”

“Ok..”

“I have a gift for you.” She says standing up. She walks over to her table then takes a gift bag. She hands it to me. Opening it I take out the new journal she’s bought. It has my name printed on it.

KHOSI’S NEW JOURNEY

I smile at the title.

“Thanks.”

“It’s ok. That’s where you will write the new book. One day you will have to tell them where it all started.”

I nod then stand up.

“Thanks once again.”

“Welcome.” Walking out of her office I bump into some doctor. It’s the first time seeing him, I guess he’s the new doctor. Sne had told Noma and I about, she said that there’s a new doctor coming to help around. I chuckle as the guard leads me to where Noma and Sne are. I guess the new doctor got Pat all worked up.

They are sitting near the pool.

“Hey... What’s that?” Sne asks pointing at the gift bag.

“A journal.”

“What did Pat want?” Noma asks as I sit besides her.

“I’m leaving today.. In a hour.”

They both scream.

“Oh my God! That’s great!” Sne says.

“Yeah..”

“Noma is getting out in a few weeks and I in a few months. I’m so happy for us.” Sne continues. They both hug me and before I know it, they doing my hair. They quickly unplait me then hold it in a pushed up tight neat bun.

“I swear to God, you look so beautiful right now!” Noma exclaims. They don’t give me a mirror. I still don’t like them, not that I still feel disgusted about myself because now I know it’s all Sebastian’s fault but because I have no strength to look at my reflection. Pat says loving myself and putting myself first should always be my number one priority but then I haven’t looked at myself on the mirror for a very long time. It’s normal to be scared.

“I do?” I ask.

“Yes wena girl! O montle.” Sne says. Noma says she speaks Tswana. I know a few words she has taught me and a few words of my mother tongue. Sebastian never had me taught any other language expect English.

“Uhh there’s Pat!” She says pointing at the pool entrance. She’s coming our way together with the guard. She doesn’t struggle with her heels.

“Wow! She looks really beautiful.” Noma comments and I know I’m not the only one who thinks so. We stand up then do a group hug.

“Till next time right?” Sne asks.

“Yeah.. Till next time.” I respond smiling.

“Definitely!”

I turn and look at Pat.

“Ready?”

I nod then quickly hug Noma and Snegugu one last time before following Pat. We walk to my room and there’s a dress on the bed, a black dress with a floral black lace.

I look at Pat then the dress.

“Is this...”

“It’s yours. Wear it.”

I take it and it feels delicate in my hands, so soft. It looks too beautiful for me.

“I can’t wear this.. It’s..”

Pat smiles taking my hands into hers.

“You can, it’s beautiful and guess what, you deserve it! Wear this dress.”

I smile then quickly undress and put it on. It’s tight on my body. I don’t have to look at the mirror to know that my figure is all out there. A lot of times Sebastian called me fat. I’m not fat, I just inherited my mother’s body. The buxon figure comes naturally. Deep down I was relieved when Sebastian didn’t have me drinking chemicals to lose weight though drugs did it for me. My time in here brought back the body.

The dress has off the shoulder sleeves which are lacy too.

“Shoes!” She says pointing at the black heels on the floor. I sit on my bed then quickly put them on.

“You should see yourself. You look beautiful.”

I just nod not wanting her to push the mirror issue.

“Uhh let’s go.” She says taking my hand. I follow her till we are outside. It’s drizzling but the sun is out. He steps out of a car and my breath hitches. He’s wearing maroon sweatpants and a maroon hoodie. He walks towards me holding an umbrella. Pat hugs me one last time before stepping back.

“You look beautiful..” He compliments approaching me. I can’t help my smile, I’m happy to see him. He puts the umbrella over my head then smiles.

“Happy birthday.”

I nod, I don’t know what to say.

“I missed you.” He says and I want to say me too but Anaya comes forcefully in my head. He places his hand on my waist and my body reacts immediately. It feels like electric shock and like that I forget all about Anaya. He pulls me slowly to him till our bodies are against each other. My heart is beating so fast, I don’t know what he wants to do but my skin is burning. He his hand moves from my waist then up my back till my neck. He pulls me closer while leaning over and I know what’s about to happen. My heart is hammering hard against my chest, I swear he can hear it.

“Aunty Khosi!” Alwande’s voice screams making me step away from Sthe immediately. He comes running and throws himself in my arms prompting me to pick him up. He’s heavy but I manage. He quickly places a chaste kiss on my lips giggling and I catch Sthe rolling his eyes.

“I missed you..” Alwande says burying his head on my neck.

“Me too.. I missed you so much more.”

Sthe clicks his tongue then walks away with the umbrella leaving his son and I under the droplets of rain.

THIRTY-FIVE

I don't flinch when she hugs me, she's excited.

"I hope you don't mind, it's a small gathering, family and friends only." She says stepping away from me. My eyes scan through, it's Auntie Lerato and her husband, Uncle Sma and his wife, Granny, Uncle Kenya's brother, I have forgotten his name and besides him is some lady, his girlfriend. He divorced his wife two years ago, Mom told me. My eyes finally land on Zanokuhle, he's smiling at me and I swiftly return it. Besides him it's Uncle Kenya and Rhea.

I nod and smile.

"Come, let's all sit." She says then everyone takes their seat including Alwande and Sthe. Alwande and Rhea takes sit on both my sides.

"I like you hair," Rhea whispers making me smile. Her hair is held into tiny buns all over with colourful hair bands.

"I like you hair too." I tell her making her giggle.

"Mommy said since we are sisters, we can share my room. I told Mr Scrunchy about you. He likes you." I immediately get alarmed. Who's Mr Scrunchy.

"Who's Mr Scrunchy?" I ask trying to keep my voice even. Uncle Kenya laughs.

"It's the teddy bear."

"Daddy his name is Mr Scrunchy!" She says feigning firmness.

Almost everyone laughs.

"Well tell Mr Scrunchy I like him too." I say making her widen her smile.

"We can play tea after this." The way she regards me takes my heart away.

"I would love too."

She squirms with excitement.

"Then after that you can come home, Daddy said that you are my new—"

"Skhokho..." Sthe warns quietly making his son giggle then animatedly zip his mouth like it's a secret I shouldn't know about. Sthe nods approvingly.

"Well are thankful to everyone who's here to celebrate this day with us." Mom starts. "This day which marks the beginning of Khosi's new journey. Also marking that even after everything she's still here with us standing."

"Yeah, welcome back and just so you know, everyone around you is family and we love you. We hope to partake in this journey with you." Uncle Kenya adds.

“Agreed and cheers to that!” Aunt Lerato says raising her glass of wine.

“To new beginnings,” she toasts. Everyone expect Rhea and A takes their glasses including me.

“To new beginnings!”

Glasses click and there’s laughter. Throughout dinner there’s lively conversations taking place, everyone is happy and the mood is relaxed and serene. It feels nice, I have never felt so peaceful and happy before. I have never sat on a table with people who care about me this way. It feels new yet I love it. I love it so much I wish it can last forever.

“This was really good Khanya, thank you.” Uncle Sma praises. I put my fork down. It did taste good, she’s a great cook. All my life I have never cooked. I don’t even know were to begin if I were to cook.

“You are welcome, we will marinate the meet as you start the fire?” Mom asks standing up. She’s really aging like fine wine. She’s beautiful and when she laughs her whole face changes, she becomes carefree and loose. It’s that kind of laugh that makes you just want to make her laugh even more.

“Definitely,” Uncle Kenya’s brother says standing up too. The men all stand up and leave. Aunt Lerato takes the bottle of wine in the middle of the table and places it on her mouth. The whole dinner she wasn’t talking that much. She kept drowning herself in wine as if trying to erase her memory completely.

“Lerato stop!” Mom says snatching the bottle from Aunt. I’m actually glad Rhea and A disappeared somewhere in the house. I’m sure this is not something they want to be subjected to.

“Stop acting as if someone pushed you into this. You did this to yourself! Own up to it!”

“He wants a divorce.” Aunt sobs. I don’t know what they are talking about but I know it’s private. I stand up.

“Uhh maybe we can start with... Uhh marinating the meat. Is that ok Mom?” I ask and she gives me the look of relief. I think she too doesn’t want Uncle Sma’s wife and Uncle Kenya’s brother’s girlfriend to hear.

“Yeah, you are right.” Uncle Sma’s wife agrees standing up too. We all walk to the kitchen. Opening the fridge I stick my head inside letting the cold breeze hit my face to calm down the embarrassment of that I’m actually in the kitchen but I don’t even know what to do or where to touch.

“Uhh I’m Simthandile,” Uncle Sma’s wife says. I don’t know how I had forgotten her name. Simthandile.

“I’m Juliette... Juliette Maphoto, Nkanyezi’s friend.” She says as if we hadn’t figured it out yet. I close the fridge as I step back with a bottle of still water.

“Well I think we should start.” Simthandile says. She opens the fridge and takes out the meat. As they work I just stare wondering what to do with myself.

“Ladies!” Sthe exclaims entering the kitchen. They give him polite smiles but he’s looking at me. My heart starts beating so fast. The way he’s looking at me has me feeling hot.

“Can we talk?” He asks looking at me. I find myself nodding and he takes my hand and leads me out of the house. He leads me to the backyard.

“You look happy.” He says after a while. I nod.

“Yes,”

“I want to tell you something but first, I want to do this,” he says then grabs my waist pulling me unto him. I don’t have time to fathom what’s going on, his lips crush on mine. And I freeze. Exactly like a statue I freeze. I’m shaking like a leaf as he slowly claims my lips. He opens my mouth with his tongue then glides it in my mouth. I don’t know how but I find myself kissing him back. It feels different. It feels as if...

A scream makes me step away from Sthe immediately. I look behind him and there’s she. She’s burning with anger. I can see it in her eyes. She’s so angry. She charges towards us making me grab Sthe’s T-shirt. He stands right in front of me like a bodyguard.

“You are cheating on me!” She screams then starts hitting him on his chest trying to get to.

“I’m not going anywhere Sthe. I love you. I’m here to stay!” She sobs loudly.

“Anaya you—” she cuts him off.

“Don’t Anaya me! Is this why you cancelled our wedding? Huh? For this cheap thing.” She accuses making him laugh.

“I didn’t tell you to cheat, go look for your girlfriend.” He says and I’m shocked. Girlfriend? She cheat with a lady?

“I love you. It was a mistake. Sthe I love you. I’m not leaving. I’m your fiancé!”

“She’s my wife.” He says. She looks at him as tears cascade down her face. She looks so broken it breaks my own heart. Abruptly she goes down on her knees.

“Please, I’m sorry. Please don’t leave me, I love you Sthe. Don’t leave me. You are all I have. I love you so much. Please don’t leave me. I will do anything.” She sobs. I move back from Sthe. Besides everything else I see a broken girl before me. She reminds of Mosa. The dimness in her eyes. The sadness around her.

“If you leave me I’m killing myself.” She finally says and the finality in her voice makes my knees weak.

“You have started. The same sentence every time! Really now?” Sthe sounds angry.

“Sthe..” I start, he can’t ignore threats like this. These are type of threats which need to be looked unto. I wouldn’t want Anaya to kill herself. I wouldn’t want anyone killing themselves.

“No, this is her style. She does this every time. Not today. You don’t even love my son Anaya. You are always fighting with my mother. If it’s your father’s death then I’m sorry. Though please do see a therapist, you are getting out of control.” He says.

“I love you..”

“What’s going on here?” Mom asks joining us. She looks at Sthe then at Anaya who’s on the ground crying loudly now.

“Mom.. Khosi, my man..” She sobs and every single feeling of sorrow I was feeling for her is suddenly thrown out through the window. She’s so manipulative and she’s good at it. Right that moment I chose my side. She will do anything to make herself look like the victim.

“She’s crying because my husband doesn’t want her anymore. You need help and better get it before it’s too late. You are obsessed, obsession and love are two different things.”

She wipes her tears away then laughs.

“You think you are going to be happy?”

“Yes because happiness is a choice and I’m choosing it. And ohh, when are you seeing a gynaecologist?” I ask and Sthe looks at me.

“She said she’s two months pregnant and it’s yours. I want to be a hands on step mom.” I say not able to control my mouth, it’s running. I don’t know where the confidence erupted from. I feel fire burning my finger tips and I can’t stop it.

“I haven’t slept with her for a year now.” He says and relief washes over me. I don’t know why I’m relieved but I won’t look into it, I plainly ignore the reason leaving my subconscious with a look of really now?

Mom is just standing there, I can’t read her.

“Anaya go inside the house, I will see you.” She says. Anaya slowly stands up then walks back to the house, her heels clicking behind her.

“Wanna tell me what’s going on?” She asks and I know she’s not playing. Her face says it all. Right that moment I wish Pat was here. She always has the right thing to say every time.

“I thought we discussed this Sthembiso,” she says and suddenly I feel left out. What are they talking about?

“Honey you are still young for marriage, especially to someone you don’t even know or love. You are 21, and your journey is starting. You need to be stress free. I love you and I know at first I misjudged him and I apologize, I really do. But this.. This setup is wrong.”

“I haven’t forgotten.” Sthe says and I know they are discussing the divorce. I promised I would divorce him when I get released.

I hear the screams suddenly. Simthandile comes rushing.

“Gun!” She screams.

“Anaya...she... Gun.”

The word ‘gun’ rings in my head and before I can stop myself I’m running to the house. I hear my name being called from behind but I can’t stop. My feet are too fast. Getting inside the house everyone is just standing there frozen while Anaya holds a gun in her hands. Sthe and mom soon joins us.

“Sthe... You choose, either me or her. Right now! One of us has to die.” I look at her. She’s just too broken that she has turned into a manipulative human being.

“Anaya..” Mom starts.

“Don’t! Don’t even start Khanya.” Anaya says laughing. “You don’t care about me. You only care about your precious daughter. You never cared about me. No one has ever cared about me expect Daddy. Daddy loved me.” She whispers. Guilt tripping. I have to give it to her, she’s good at this game.

“I gave everything up for you Sthe. I loved you. I gave you my all and one mistake.. Only one mistake and suddenly you hate me. How many times have you ever cheat and I forgave you? I took in your shit, agreed to be second best to your late girlfriend but still... Still one mistake, one little mistake you already hate me. You never loved me.” She says waving the gun. “No one ever did. Expect Daddy so choose. Me or her.”

“Anaya please put the gun down.” He begs her. He’s falling right into her trap.

“Why?”

“Let’s talk about this.”

“No Sthe, choose.”

“I love you, put the gun down baby.” He says stepping forward to her. My heart breaks a little. She won’t kill herself, she’s trying to manipulate him and everyone else and she’s winning. Pat taught us about this. She really needs help.

“No.. You don’t love me..”

“I love you so much. Put the gown down. I love you only. I love you..” He says enclosing the distance between them.

“No..” She whispers as more tears leave her eyes. “You love her..”

Bang!

Once.

She has fired.

THIRTY-SIX

We all stare at her, she has shot the ceiling. Simthandile is crying loud now.

“I’m going to kill her,” Anaya says.

Shaking my head I start walking towards the stairs. I can feel everyone’s eyes on. I calmly take the stairs one by one and just leave the scene. I walk towards Rhea’s room. I know that’s where they are probably. Opening the door they are sitting on Rhea’s small pink table holding tiny cups. Alwande looks so bored and he’s not even hiding it but he’s just playing along. It’s cute to watch.

“Aunt Khosi!” He screams as soon as he notices me. I wonder if they heard the gun shot. I close the door then walk to Rhea’s bed which is decorated with a lot of teddy bears. It reminds me of my room. I don’t know how I still remember such details but I think it’s because I stuck them in my head so I never forget.

“Hey guys,” I say sitting down while taking off the heels. My feet hurts.

They all come and sit with me on the bed.

“Are you going to sleep with me?” Rhea asks and before I can answer Alwande has already chipped in the conversation. He’s too smart and forward.

“No! Daddy said Aunt Khosi will be my new Mommy if I behave and that she will stay with us.” I look at him shocked. Why would she tell him such a huge lie? The look in his eyes tells me he’s so excited.

“Are you going to be my new Mommy?” He asks. The way he’s so hopeful breaks my heart.

“Yes.. I will be your new Mommy! Only if you behave.” He starts jumping up and down on the bed making me laugh.

“Stop! You will fall and then I won’t be your Mommy.” He stops immediately then sits besides me. Rhea’s silence makes me turn.

She’s crying silently. Like I used to. Sometimes it was so hard to let the voice out. I would try so hard but nothing would come out.

“Hey, why are you crying?”

“You are going to leave me.” She says crying.

My lower jaw falls right to the floor.

What’s wrong with these kids? Is there a manual for dealing with kids? I need it.

“I’m not going to leave you or Alwande. We will always be together. I promise.” I say hugging them both.

After a while we are all lying on Rhea’s small bed, they both have slept and I’m just staring at the ceiling wondering if Anaya has left.

I don’t want to be part of her drama. I have my own going on.

Rhea's door opens slowly and Sthe gets in. He's still in one piece.

"Hey.. Everything ok?" He asks.

"I should be asking you."

"She left with your Uncle."

I shrug. "Ok."

"When did they sleep?" He asks pointing at the kids. I look at Alwande, he has his thumb in his mouth. He never sucks it when he's awake. He looks so cute, his new cut make him look like his father. A younger version of his father. I wonder where he gets the light complexion because Sthe has the chocolate complexion. Probably his mother.

"A few minutes ago, I guess they are tired."

"They should be."

I look at him. "Alwande says you told him that I'm going to be his new Mommy." I say. "I may be young but I know that some things we say affect the kids. He's so excited about it."

"Don't you want to be his mother?"

"I'm too young to—"

"Says who?"

"My age?"

"I think you are more matured than your age. You don't have to be with me to be his mother. He loves you. Kids loves you, it's natural."

"Kids love everyone. That's not what I'm trying to..." I sigh. "All I'm saying is that I don't want to disappoint anyone, him.." I say looking at him.

He walks towards me then pulls me from the bed making me stand in front of him. Without the heels I'm a bit shorter than him but not that much. I'm a tall girl.

"Why would you think you are going to disappoint him? He loves you, it's natural. No one expects you to be perfect. We are humans and we have imperfections. If I tell you mine, you will probably hate me. I have skeletons in my closet, but it's life. I have grown to accept it."

I sigh, he's right I know but I'm just scared. I'm scared to do the wrong thing.

"Can I spend more time with him?"

He nods immediately. "Yeah but he can't stay. Phindile is taking him tomorrow."

"He's leaving?" I sound horrified. I am.

"Why?"

"For her daughter's party then she will drop him at my mother's. He has to go to school."

I'm heartbroken. "Aw.."

"I have no one to look after him, to give him the needed care he needs."

I look at him and as much as it sounds stupid in my head, I don't stop it from leaving my mouth. "I can be his Nanny."

He stares at me for a while in silence with his lower lip between his teeth. What's he thinking?

"You can't leave you little sister."

"No.. I will be a live out Nanny. I will come in the morning and come back when you come from work. The nights I will spend them with Rhea. Please.. You don't have to pay me. I can do it for free." I become more and more hopeful as I speak. The point really does sound valid in my head.

"Are you sure?"

"More than sure. I know I have never raised kids before but I'm sure I will do it. Please.." I say taking his hands into mine. "I'm begging you. Don't have him taken away."

"This is a huge step. He has been staying with Mom for a while now."

"I know but you can always fire me if you don't think I'm doing well. I won't be upset. All I need is a chance."

He places his hands on my waist. "Can we discuss this tomorrow? I will think about it."

"Take all the time you need. It's ok." I'm a little disappointed but I do understand where she's coming from. Back at the center I left some lady who her son was killed by a nanny.

"I want you to kiss me." He says and every thought that was trying to reason in my head just disappears.

"Huh?"

"You heard me." Of cause I did but...

"Uhh.." I clear my throat. I don't even know what to say. He pulls me against him bringing his face to mine till I can easily breathe in his own breath.

"Kiss me," he commands. All my senses has switched off.

"Kiss me," he commands again and I find myself kissing him. All I'm thinking about is him. He kisses me back and before I know it, he's ravaging my lips rubbing our bodies against each other. I wrap my arms around his neck and my legs around his waist when he picks me up. He holds me against the wall and it feels so good. My heart is beating so fast and I'm burning. Burning with unexplainable desire.

He finally let's my lips go leaving me breathless. "I think having you as a nanny is a really good idea." He whispers against my lips. I can't talk, I'm just panting.

He kisses me again, this time briefly then puts me down. My knees are weak and I'm glad I have the wall to support me.

"I'm going downstairs," he says then immediately walks to the door. Walking out, Mom enters. She looks at me and I flush. I'm sure she knows.

"You look pale, are you ok?"

I feel so caught. She knows what just happened, and she damn well knows that I know that she knows so she's calling me out so I just die out of embarrassment.

I nod. "I'm fine." I say quickly. My voice a little high. Damn Khosi! Fucken relax.

"I see.." She says slowly. "Your lips are swollen."

Can I just die already? Now I know what Snegugu and Noma were talking about. Black parents are just extra.

"Uhh.. Yeah."

"Anyways... I'm really sorry about Anaya. She—"

"It's ok." I say, Pat said I should give her a chance because like me, she also suffered the last 15 years. "I know you are trying to be neutral."

"I love you... I—"

"It's ok. She needs help."

"I know, maybe I could send her to where you were."

I look at her recalling Mosa. If she kills herself there? Mom would never forgive herself.

"Yeah.."

"I'm so glad you are here..." She says walking towards me and hugging me. Her hug is warm, just the way I remember it.

"I want to be Alwande's nanny." I tell her when she let's go.

"Ohh?"

"Yeah. Alwande during the day and Rhea at night."

"I can't really stop you. You are a grown woman. You love them and I love it."

"Yeah just that you hate—"

"I just dislike him. I even wonder what you girls see in that boy."

The way she says 'boy' makes me laugh.

"Don't laugh. There's nothing about him interesting. I'm going to talk to him."

"Mo—"

"Ah-ah.. I'm trying to protect you. I'm not going to let anyone hurt you."

I sigh. "It's ok."

"Plus either way, I'm seeing a love triangle."

I look at her in confusion.

"Zanokuhle likes you. This boy does too. Reminds me of Lunzulu and Kenya. Just that at least my situation didn't get too intense because of everything that happened but for you, I see it all playing out."

I laugh. "Zano does—"

"Not like you? I used to say the same about Lunzulu. Just be careful. It can get really messy." She says then walks out. I laugh at her theory. Zanokuhle can't like me.

I walk out of the room after a while and the men are outside while the ladies are in the kitchen. Aunt Lerato is still holding the bottle of wine.

"Hey baby," she says smiling. "Come give Aunt some suger!"

I walk towards her then she hugs me.

"We are so happy to have you back." She says her tone slurred.

"You are turning into an alcoholic." Mom comments.

"Fuck off Nokukhanya!" She says then laughs.

"Hi Julie!" Aunt is now looking at Uncle Nkanyezi's girlfriend or friend as she says.

I look at mom as she cuts some tomatoes. She catches me staring then smiles. "Wanna help?"

"I don't know how..." I say making her laugh.

"Yeah but you know how to kiss in my house!"

Earth open up and swallow me right now. Aunt Lerato laughs.

"Baby don't let this woman do this to you." She says the gulps down some of her wine. "Your mother had her virginity broken in a public toilet, a dirty public toilet."

Mom gasps audibly then throws the tomato she's holding at Aunt Lerato who is laughing so hard. I catch Simthandile trying to stifle her laugh. Mom looks mad.

"Heeei Nokukhanya! Ahhh remember when Eric fainted because his mistress denied him." She laughs.

"That was fun."

"You are drunk. Go and lie down for a while." Mom says.

"Heei leave me!" She snaps. "Lindi sweetheart please let's go home. I love you. I can make you happy. I can give you all the money in the world." She says imitating someone. Mom joins her in laughter. I actually can't believe their friendship has lasted this long.

"When you realize you were playing yourself all along. I feel like Eric right now friend.. I have played myself. I'm losing a good man." And then she starts crying.

Mom walks towards Aunt then picks her up from the floor. They stumble together out of the kitchen as mom mumbles something to Aunt who's just crying.

"Wow!" Julie says. "I swear, she needs some Latoya in her life." She mumbles audibly. Just then there's a knock. I walk to the door leaving Julie who's talking to herself and curious looking Simthandile. Opening it, there's some overly thin lady wearing oversized clothes with three children around her. The older one looks somewhere between 16 or 17 and she's holding the one who's barely two years old and the lady herself is standing next to a child, 8 or 9 years old. She smells of sweat but I don't react. I give her a smile which she returns.

"Hi, how can I help you?" I ask her.

"Is Khanya here?" She asks licking her dry lips.

"Uhh who are you?"

"Erin.."

"Ohh.. Come in," I say opening the door wider. She looks surprised but the 8 year old rushes inside. He's so thin too, and dirty. All of them do look dirty and the young child has mucus around his face. As I lead them to the living room I bump into Mom.

"Ohh they are here to see you." I tell Mom. "I will go and bring them some juice." I say then leave her with her guest. Getting in the kitchen Zano is there collecting the meat. Julie is no longer in the kitchen. She's weird. Simthandile is on her phone.

"Hey.." I greet Zano opening the fridge and taking out a jug of juice. I also take out the cake I see. I'm sure mom's visitors would love some. They look hungry, like they haven't eaten for days.

"Hey, you look beautiful." He says as I place the jug on the kitchen counter.

"Thank you,"

"I can show you around sometime if you want," he says. "We can have lunch too." He continues.

I run out of words. "Uhh.. You.. I.."

"Ntwana you are taking long." She says entering the kitchen.

"Think about it." Zano says then walks out. She looks at me.

"Think about what?"

"Uhh... Well.."

"Well?"

THIRTY-SEVEN

“Huh?”

I clear my throat.

“Think about me being... Uhh..—”

“Hello..” A tiny voice says. I look behind Sthe and come face to face with the small boy. I move away from Sthe then crouch before the small boy.

“Hi,”

“Ngingcela amansi,” he says. I know that what he said has something to do with water.

“Water?” I ask and he nods.

“You want water?” He nods again.

“Ok,” I walk over to the fridge then take a bottle of water. I hand it to him, he’s cute though that’s covered by the dirtiness. I wish to just clean him up and give him some food.

“Ngiyabonga,”

I smile. “You are welcome.”

He walks out, turning Sthe is gone. I sigh out of relief. The last thing I want is to be cornered in uncomfortable situations. Simthandile is still standing and looking at me. She looks so young.

“How old are you?” I ask politely.

“27,” I knew it. I nod then slowly we fall in awkward silence but it soon dissolves when she goes back to smiling with her phone and giggling.

Mom enters the kitchen after a while and Simthandile immediately puts her phone away. Wow!

She’s scared if Mom. But why?

“Guests gone?”

“Yes,” she answers and she looks so disturbed.

“Who are they?”

“Unimportant people.”

“I think they are hungry.”

“That’s what happens when life humbles you.” She says starts cutting the tomatoes.

I just feel out of place and right that moment I wish Aunt Lerato was here, she always has a way of neutralizing the mood even when drunk.

“Uhh I’m going to check on the kids,” I say already walking out. Whoever those guest were, they really upset Mom though I’m wondering how. I thought she was going to give them something to eat.

I quickly escape and go back up to Rhea’s room. Entering the room I settle on the floor, they are still sleeping. Being almost alone feels better than being surrounded with people yet still feeling alone. I bring my knees up and bury my head between them. Closing my eyes I start humming the only song I know. The song which helped me sleep on my waste nights.

I miss Patricia, I never felt out of place with her or at the center. I think it’s because I knew I was surrounded with people who had similar problems as I or maybe theirs were worse. I didn’t have to feel as the odd one out, we were all just messed up and we all were seeking help.

I chuckle. No one was better than the other. I have seen the way Simthandile tends to look at me, she looks at me as if I’m about something scary. Back at the center no one even bothered staring. They’d rather stare at the wall.

My mind scurries off to Sthe. He’s... Different. The vibe around him is different. It burns, and exciting. The way he kisses me... It’s different from the way men used to kiss me. They used to kiss me like a prostitute that I was. No.. I shake my head. I shouldn’t be thinking about them. About him.

He’s dead. He’s never coming back.

The door opens startling me. I laugh standing up, my heart is beating so fast.

“You ok?” Uncle Sma asks.

“Yes,”

“Uhh come down. They are finishing the meat outside.” I nod then follow him out.

Getting outside indeed they are eating though I don’t spot Mom, only Aunt Lerato, Simthandile and Julie together with the men. Aunt is sitting on a lounge holding a glass of water. She’s probably trying to sober up, I remember how Sebastian used to drown me to sober me up.

“Come take a plate Khosi, I saved some for you.” Uncle Kenya says. I walk towards him wondering if I will ever be able to look at him as my father rather than my mother’s husband.

Sometimes I wonder if my father had changed to be a good man like Uncle Kenya.

“There you go,” Uncle Kenya says smiling handing me a plate full of meat. He’s nice and kind, easy to get along with and easy to like.

“Thank you,”

“You are welcome.” I walk over to the lounge next to Aunt’s feeling Sthe’s eyes on me. I avoid looking at him but time to time again I find our eyes locked. There’s just something about him, something so hypnotizing. Something that makes my blood rush when I look at him. Something that makes me want to just grab him and kiss him hard. Something that awakens the strange feelings.

"I hope you saved some for me." Mom says joining us minutes later. She doesn't look upset anymore, I wonder how she does it. To just switch moods so easily.

She kisses my cheek then sits with me on my lounge with her arm around me.

"So I was thinking that we go out to the beauty spa tomorrow." Mom says to me and Aunt Lerato.

"I need it. I need a break." Aunt responds, she doesn't sound drunk anymore.

"Yes, so what time should we go? I was thinking a whole day there."

"We should go in the morning." Simthandile says. "I want to start with my nails."

"Oh.." Aunt Lerato mumbles.

"Uhhh that will be great. Morning it is." Mom says.

"I'm kind of busy in the morning." We all look at Aunt Lerato, the hatred in her voice can't be missed.

"It's fine, we will go without you." Simthandile responds matching the game.

What's going on?

"You were not invited Somthandazo."

Simthandile laughs dramatically. "You are a pathetic drunkard. Get a sit Sisi or maybe go to rehab."

"Bitch please, you can't even afford a panty."

"You are bitter, maybe that's why your husband is divorcing you."

Everything moves in a slow motion and the next I know is that Aunt Lerato has pushed Simthandile in the pool.

"You fucken bitch troll!" I look at Aunt Lerato as she screams. Everyone just remains calm somehow.

Simthandile swims out of the pool then takes off her wig.

"I will not fight with you Granny! Pathetic ugly old hag! Makeup is not covering those wrinkles Gogo, maybe you might want to try doing it surgically. You are out of the game, hating on me for no reason."

Aunt Lerato laughs. "Ugly? Go look at yourself on the mirror. You look like a truck ran on you, you look like an overcooked dumpling. Busy bleaching your skin trying to be light in complexion. You look funny with different skin tones. Bet your momma don't even recognize you."

Simthandile clicks her tongue then walks back to the house dripping wet.

"That was a whole new level of childishness honestly. Overcooked dumpling?" Uncle Nkanyezi comments.

"Abuti don't try me, I will reel you under that fire with those deadlocks. You will get a chance with the devil after I place you down." She responds making everyone laugh— expect me.

"Don't mind her," Mom whispers still eating. She doesn't even look affected. Not even a tiny bit.

•

“Will you visit me?” He asks.

I nod. “I will visit you, I promise.”

“I’m going to miss you.” He says hugging me again.

“Me too, be a good boy ok?”

“Then you will be my Mommy?”

I smile. “Yes.”

I kiss his cheek then stand up. Sthe is standing a few feet from us, I guess he wants to give us some privacy.

“Ok bye Alwande,”

“Bye Aunt Khosi.” He walks to the car and his Father opens the door for him. Once he’s inside Sthe walks towards me. I hug myself and just look at him.

“So you are just going to look at me? I want a hug like the one you gave my son.”

I chuckle shaking my head. “No, you need to go.”

“It’s either you give it to me or I take it.”

“You sound like a possessive person.” I blurt.

“Only to what’s mine.” He says pulling on his chest.

I sigh. “But only I’m not yours.”

“I think the law says otherwise.”

I take in a deep breath and when he steps away I smile.

“A piece of paper printed in black doesn’t make me yours. Don’t get it twisted Sir, you might end up hurting yourself.” I say then walk away. He doesn’t stop me and I feel more confident as I walk. It’s just after eight and almost everyone has left only Aunt Leratoand Uncle Sma who are still around. Mom is somewhere in the house with Aunt, as the day went on I realized that maybe both ladies don’t like Simthandile but she doesn’t seem to care though. She’s not even bothered. And she’s not quiet like I thought she was, her mouth spits poison.

As I begin to take the steps to my room I meet Uncle Kenya by the stairs descending. He stops then smiles.

“Hey, off to bed?”

“Yah.. It’s been a long day.”

“Full of drama.”

I chuckle. "Tell me about it."

"I'm just happy you are adjusting. All that will make me happy is to see you happy. To see all my girls happy."

"We will get there."

"I like the sound of that. Well good night."

"Good night."

I continue with my journey to my room. I already laid Rhea to sleep 10 minutes ago.

I get in my room then just look at it. Nothing has changed. It's still big and beautiful. I walk to the walk in closet and opening it, as mom said, it's full of clothes, shoes, handbags. Looking around I finally grab a silk nightdress. It's short but pretty. Walking to the bathroom with it I wonder what I would have been doing if I was at the center. I had a group session every Friday. We would either talk or write in our journals new chapters.

I look at the bathtub and an image of Irin lying at the bottom of the water in the bathtub creeps in my head.

I quickly undress then step under the shower. I can't use the bathtub. I don't know how many dead people I have seen in a bathtub. Or inside the pool. They are just too many.

I open the tap and water hits my body. Pat said I have to let go of the past because if I don't it will always block my future.

She says I should forgive myself so to let myself move on, so to set myself free. I replay her words over and over in my head as the water warms. I take my time under the shower and when I finally walk out, I feel sleepy. I put the nightdress on then quickly walk out avoiding the mirror. I take the dress I was wearing then wrap it on my head, my hair won't stop dripping. Getting under the purple duvet I sigh. Everything is soft and comfortable. I close my eyes and force myself to sleep.

I'm feeling hot, matter of fact, I'm burning. I slowly open my eyes waking up. I sit up straight then look around. I know it's late but I can't sleep. My heart is beating so fast. I get off the bed slowly, I need water. I first walk to the window and moving the curtain a bit, I'm faced with nothing but darkness. I hate it when I can't sleep. I walk out and take down the stairs. The lights downstairs are off but that's not what holds me to the ground, it's the sounds I'm hearing. Moaning. Someone is moaning softly. In the kitchen. Curiosity pushes me to the kitchen and switching the light on I'm met by the the worst. They both look at me, Aunt is on the kitchen counter naked, totally naked while Uncle Small is between her legs, naked from the waist upwards while his pants are pulled down a bit.

"Shit!" He curses and I immediately turn but only to slip and fall on my ass.

"Ouch.." I whimper standing up and running away from the scene.

I fly up the stairs till I'm safe in my room. I can't get the image out of my head. Aunt is fucking her friend's brother who's married while she also is married. Is that why she was fighting with Simthandle? Because she's fucking her man?

I crawl on my bed then just lie down. Why on earth did I have to be curious?

I close my eyes attempting to sleep but who am I lying to? No sleep is going to come, not after what I just saw.

The door opens after a while forcing me up. Aunt walks in now dressed. She's not looking ashamed or faking to be. She's smiling rather.

"I won't tell." I say quickly making her laugh.

"That's not why I am here." She says closing the door. "Don't look at me like that, I'm sure you also have nipples." She says laughing then sits besides me on my bed.

"I'm sorry you saw that."

"You are cheating?" I whisper as if anyone beyond this walls will hear.

"Yep! Don't try this at home!"

She sounds so relaxed. I thought they were leading perfect happy lives.

"I thought.. Why?"

She looks at me then smiles. "I think it's because of settling. I settled because I thought it was the right thing to do. I settled with what was ok. With what was safe. With what everyone approved of." She takes my hand into hers. "Let me give you some advice, never settle with what's ok or what's safe, or because you feel the need to, settle because you want to. Don't let society influence your decision, you will end up unhappy with someone who doesn't give you give you good sex." The way she's whispering it makes me just laugh.

"But won't leave him because he's a good person. If you like them bad and dirty, go for it. Don't let the people around you determine whether he's ok or not. Go for what you want. I saw how that boy was looking at you, the bad boy one."

I look down on fingers making her laugh.

"Don't be shy. He's handsome. Go for it if you like him or if you want. The bad wild type gives you multiple orgasms."

"You cheat for sex?"

She shakes her head. "Sleeping with another married person while you are married is not cheating."

I laugh. She's crazy.

"We are so glad you are here, with us. I know it's kind of weird but we are all happy. It's going to be a bit too much the first days but... We are just too happy baby girl. We just want you to be free. It gets crazy around here but at the end of the day we are all family. We are not perfect, no one is. We are the real

shit so don't be surprised at some things or what you will witness tomorrow at the beauty spa. If that bitch tries me, I'm going to bang her head against the wall." The way she says it I know she's not joking. The door opens and mom peaks in.

"Lerato what are you telling my daughter at 2a.m?" She asks yawning.

"Khanya go give your man some pussy and stop walking around at night."

"Mxm.. Baby are you ok? Don't let this old hag corrupt you."

"Fuck your huge ass Khanya."

I laugh. They are crazy. Mom walks out leaving Aunt laughing.

"Your mom is so uptight. But anyways, she always means well. Look, have your beauty sleep and prepare for some pampering." She says then kisses my cheek before walking out.

Closing my eyes I see my Aunt naked with my uncle between her legs. I even dream them only to wake up screaming.

-

"I love this place, it's nice and their meals are the best." Simthandile says as we walk in a restaurant. She suggested we have breakfast first. To avoid a fight that was already brewing between Sim and Aunt, Mom just agreed.

As soon as we settle, a waiter comes to our table. She hands us the menus then leave us going through them.

I look at the menu then put it down almost immediately. I don't know anything so I'm just going to order what Mom orders. As I look around the restaurant, I spot her. I'd know her even after 100 years. I still remember her face, her voice. She said she would take me to my mother while she was going to sell me off. I would never forget the way she had hit me so hard when she found me talking to Aunt on the phone. I would never forget how she slammed my head several times against Eunice's head. She's sitted on another table alone drinking coffee. She finally stands up then walks somewhere but not out. I know it's the toilet. I stand up.

"Baby where are you going?" Mom asks. I look at her then smile.

"To the toilet."

"Oh ok.." I walk away, passing by her table and grabbing the fork in her empty plate discreetly. I walked till I open the same door she opened. Indeed it's the toilet. She's fixing her make-up looking at herself on the mirror. I stand behind her, catching myself on the mirror too. I look different.

I feel different.

I'm angry.

She turns then smiles.

“Oh, hello,” she says cheerfully.

“Remember me?” I say.

“Uhh I think you are mistaking me for someone else.” HHe voice sounds polite.

I chuckle. “You are the person I want. Remember how you sold me off? Remember when you told me you would take me to my mother only to have me sold? Remember that?” Her face changes slowly till she’s looking at me with horror.

“Who are you?”

“Remember now? You ruined my life. Do you know the pain I faced all these years! You killed me. Now I’m your ghost.”

“Look I don’t know who you are or what you want from me, but I’m about to call the police.”

I laugh walking towards her. I’m taller than her and I have a bigger body.

“How about you call the mortuary?”

“You are crazy, you know what..” She starts rampaging through her bag. I grab it from her then throw it on the floor.

“You killed me.” I whisper and now she looks beyond terrified.

“And I’m going to return the favour.” I whisper right on her face.

THIRTY-EIGHT

“Honey?” Mom says entering the toilet. She looks at me then at the lady.

“Everything ok Khosi?” She asks looking at the lady. I put the fork behind my back then smile.

“Yes, I just wanted to take in a good look at her hair color. I like it.”

She smiles. “Oh, let’s go.”

“Yeah..”

I wait as she walks out then look back at the lady. “Don’t think this is over. I’m everywhere. I’m a ghost. Expect me.”

Walking out I try by all means to deal with my anger. I shove it behind my head then settle back on my chair placing the fork on the table in a manner that don’t raise eyes.

“I ordered for you, I hope that’s ok.” Mom says.

“It’s fine, thank you.”

“I want to go to the salon after this.” Aunt Lerato says patting her short curled hair. “I want to tint it.”

“Don’t do that, you will wake up bald.” Mom responds laughing. They continue chatting totally ignoring Sim who’s also ignoring them. She’s busy on her phone not even looking up.

As soon as the waiter brings our order, they start eating. I just stare as they eat, how do they survive each day with such tension between them?

•

“Ohhh I’m going to love this.” Simthandile says as we walk out of the change room putting on the fluffy gowns.

“Only if were paying for it.” Aunt mutters. I have learnt to ignore the petty fights between her and Simthandile.

Mom takes me my hand then leads to the chairs then makes me sit besides hers.

“We are doing our manicure and pedi, do you want nails?” She asks.

I shake my head. I hate nails. I hate everything Sebastian used to make me do.

“No, but I want to tint my hair.”

She smiles. “What colour?”

“Blue. Navy blue.”

She looks at me then blinks a couple of times. “Blue?”

I nod. "Yes, blue. I like blue."

"Ummh ok. Whatever makes you happy."

Soon enough we are all sitting on chairs as people work on us. I love how the lady massaging my feet does it. She has nice soft hands.

"We will go after this," mom adds then there's silence. There are always awkward pauses between us, sometimes it goes down to one word answers and forced laughter. As much as it goes awkward she never stops trying. She's not afraid of the awkwardness.

"Ok,"

"What color would you like Mam!" The lady asks pointing at all her nail polishes.

"Blue please," I tell her. "I want blue."

"I just wanna sleep." Aunt mumbles closing her eyes then clears her throat.

"You have wine in here? She asks. "I need a drink."

•

By the time we finally walk out of the beauty spa my head is aching. Sim and Aunt are still at it. The lady from the restaurant is still in my head too. I wonder if she's still doing the same to other small girls. Or if she's going to report me to her boss so he takes care of me.

"Khosi are you ok?" Mom asks for the 100th time so far. I don't know what to say anymore.

"I'm fine."

"Should we head to the salon now?"

I shake. I don't want the red hair anymore but I just want to go home and sleep. Or just lock myself in that room.

"I want to go home, I'm tired."

"Ok," she says taking my hand. As we walk to the car I spot Sthe. He's not alone though. He's with some girl. I quickly look away but he has already seen mw and so has Mom.

"Your boyfriend is coming." She says making me look at her in shock.

"What? You kiss him in my house."

I don't respond to that. I don't even know what to say.

"Good afternoon Mam," he greets together with the girl. Looking at her carefully I see the tiny bit resemblance. She's the sister, probably the younger one.

"Hello," Mom greets back then looks at me. "I will be in the car."

As she walks away I look at him. He looks like the same Sthe I saw yesterday.

"Your sister is beautiful." I say.

"She's talkative."

Of course he would say that. I smile. "A is already gone?"

"Yeah, he left last night."

I nod. I want to ask if he has thought about it but at the same time I don't want to appear too forward.

"I think he will be back later today."

"You are bringing him back?"

"Yeah. I'm putting you on trial. One week."

I smile beaming with excitement. "Oh my God, thank you. I thought you were going to say no."

"It's hard to say no to you,"

The way he's looking at me makes me blush.

"Maybe you should come to the house." He suggests.

"Just to familiarize yourself. Tomorrow will be your first day." He suggests and I think he's right.

"Uhh Sthe... What about my nails?" The younger sister asks. I had completely forgotten about her. I feel my face heat up.

"We will get someone to come at home." Sthe responds dismissively looking at me.

"Uhh let me talk to her." I say then quickly walk to the car. Aunt and Sim are not yet out.

"Done?" Mom asks as I get in the car.

"Uhh.. Can I please go to Sthe's house with his sister. He has agreed that I take care of his son."

She smiles then takes my hand. "I'm happy you want to do something with your time and it makes me happy that it's with kids. You never know where this leads but... I'm not quite comfortable with the setup. I don't want you to jump into things without thinking clearly but.. They say we should leave you so that you make mistakes of your own, that way you will learn better so ok. But please can you be back by six?"

"I'm sure it won't take much time. Just familiarizing myself with everything then I will be back. They will probably drop me off."

"Ok, I love you." She says and I nod. I love her too. Pat said that it's natural. That we have a natural bond between us.

I scramble out of the car and walking to the car I notice Aunt coming out of the beauty spa still holding a glass of wine. Do they let clients take their belongings with?

I walk over to Sthe who's now standing by some jeep. His car I guess.

“And?”

“It’s ok. Let’s go.”

He opens the front seat door for me and I hesitantly get in. His sister is at the back.

“Hey,” she says. “I’m Phumlile. You are?”

“Khosi,”

“Ohhh you are Aunt Khosi?”

I nod as Sthe gets in the car.

“Wow! You know Alwande always talks about you. Yesterday he was crying for you. I thought you were uhh... Older.” My heart breaks at Alwande crying for me. He really doesn’t like being away from me. Today in the morning, Rhea wanted me to come with to her school. A lot of promises and lies had to be said to finally let her go alone. One of those promises includes her moving into my room and I know she’s not going to forget.

“And certainly I think you are white. Your parents definitely likes African languages. You have a weird accent. You are probably not from here, where do you come from?”

“I...”

“Mind your own business Phumlile!” Sthe chips in and I’m grateful because I don’t even know how to explain to her that beneath this white skin I’m a black person.

“I just—”

“Stop it.” He repeats and this time silencing his sister. The journey to his house is not so silent. His sister can really talk.

Walking inside his beautiful house, my breath still catches. Such a beautiful house.

“I’m coming,” Sthe says walking away leaving me with his sister.

“You are so beautiful. It’s like God took his time shaping everything. Come, let me give you something to drink.”

She says taking my hand and dragging me to the kitchen. She opens the fridge then takes out juice I guess. I look around, it’s beautiful too but I think my mother’s kitchen still takes it. I wonder why he likes staying in this huge house alone. It must get lonely sometimes.

Phumlile hands me a glass of juice.

“So... How old are you. You don’t look anything above 25.”

“I’m 21,”

“Wow!” She says then smiles. “Age is just a number. Let me show you around.” She says as we walk to the living room. There’s a painting on the wall. It’s a woman, a beautiful woman. She’s laughing at

something while her eyes are narrowed. I walk over to the painting and start trailing my finger on the glass covering it. She's beautiful and there's just an aura around it.

"Ah-ah if I were you I wouldn't—" she doesn't finish her sentence before the painting falls. I quickly step away. The glass it was covered in has broken leaving the painting bare.

"Oh shit! Sthe is going to be mad!" Phumlile says making me look at her. Of course he will be mad. Why was I touching it?

"Fuck...." She curses. I can see that she's panicking too. I quickly crouch to it but before I can start with it, I hear his voice. My insides knot.

"What happened here?!" I slowly stand up and look at him. My heart skips, he's mad. Hell mad. He's breathing fire. I have never seen him like this. I move back as he glares at me.

"I.."

"It fell on its own Sthe," Phumlile says probably trying to diffuse her brother's anger.

"A painting just falls? On its own?!" He shouts looking at me. My heart is beating so fast. This is the side of Sthe that I have never seen. It's scary.

"Sthe.." Phumlile starts.

"Phumlile I will slap you so hard your mother will feel it for you." He warns and she immediately closes her mouth leaving me to explain myself alone.

"I asked a question. Don't make me repeat myself." He says menacingly looking at me.

I open my mouth to speak but no word comes out. I'm shaking. My whole body is shaking.

"Are you going to talk or—"

"Haai Sthembiso it's enough! It fell! End of story. Stop.... Harassing the poor girl. Can't you see what you are doing?" A voice says. Following it, it's a lady. She looks like both Phumlile and Sthe.

"This.. This is what drove Anaya to be crazy. You drove her there. You say you want to move on but still stay in the house which Thuli decorated and lived in, you are still in a house where the walls are filled with her pictures. You fucken still have her ashes. You brought Anaya here so that you can torment her with constant comparisons to your late girlfriend. I wonder if you want to hit this poor girl." She says and she sounds so upset. He walks towards me making me step back. He glares at me for a while before picking the painting alone and walking away.

"Don't cry.." The woman says wiping away tears I hadn't felt. My heart is still beating fast.

"I was scared Phindi," Phumlile says. "Remember how he hit Anaya because of that painting in his office. Ngeke!"

Phindile looks at her sister and she immediately closes her mouth.

"I'm sorry we had to meet like this. I'm Phindile, you must be Khosi. Alwande's potential mother." She says smiling.

“Don’t be scared. I’m nice. I’m glad I have met you. You are a very beautiful girl. You don’t want to do this to yourself with Sthe. He can never move on. He loves his dead baby mama. Every painting in the house is her. Every picture. This house, it’s hers. They used to stay here together before she went missing. He won’t let her go but he will use you so bad. You will think it’s love, it’s not. It will be abuse in another form. Anaya, the girl he was using, she turned crazy. Don’t let him do this to you. You are too young for his shit. Anya’s adoptive mom knows what he does, she hates him. Don’t let him break you. He’s incapable of loving any other girl who’s not Thuli.”

“She knows her,” Phumlile says.

“You do?” Phindile asks.

I nod. “I should go.”

“Yeah, I will drop you off if you want.”

“Please.”

THIRTY-NINE

“Thank you,” I say to Phindile as she parks right besides mom’s car.

“It’s ok, you are welcome.”

I give her a polite smile then step out of her car. Walking inside the house Mom is in the kitchen making juice.

“That was quick.” She says walking towards me. She gives me a warm hug.

“Yeah... Uhh I’m going to lie down for a while.”

“It’s ok, want juice?”

I shake my head negatively, “no but later.”

“Ok,”

I start my journey to my room. I’m not hurt but just disappointed. Disappointed at the fact that I thought he was going to be different. But I’m not hurt nor am I angry with him, everyone has their own demons and do does he. I did suspect about him still hung up on his ex though I didn’t think it was that much.

I get in my room then lie on my bed. I still want to be Alwande’s nanny but that’s all I will be. I have my own issues to deal with, his demons will just have to excuse me.

I close my eyes and I see her, the lady at the restaurant. Sometimes I wonder why, why did she do it? Does she have kids?

I take a deep breath in. Day two and already the air is already thick and is threatening to submerge me. I sat upright then took my journal from my bedside.

I started writing. Chapter one of my new journey. So far it’s going well and I prefer the center than Mom’s house. I can’t give up yet though, surviving is an option and so is being happy.

Days pass and each day I spend it trying to structure my life. Of cause everyone is still extra careful with me but I manage through. Sthe didn’t come and I don’t expect him to. Honestly I don’t want him to even come though I want Alwande. I miss him so much. My boy. After one week of being back home I have a routine already. I have met Pat once and she says I am getting better. She says I am like a baby learning to walk, there is no way I can learn running yet. She says I have to take it one day at a time and accept the fact that it is actually happening, that my life is actually happening.

The second week I finally had made my decision. If Sthe wasn’t going to come, I was going to go to him. I needed Alwande so much that I could put aside the last experience I had shared with Sthe aside. As

much as it terrified me I was still going to face him. I had gotten over the fact that we can't possibly be anything. His demons needed attendance and definitely not from me.

So here I am, in his house. He probably can't believe it and neither can I. I'm actually here taking on my challenge.

"Khosi," he says.

"Hey. I came to talk about me being Alwande's nanny."

"It's ok, I understand."

"I don't know what you are talking about but please give me the job. We can do the trial."

He looks at me, his jaw right on the floor.

"What?"

"I want to take care of him. Please.."

"After..."

"What happened has nothing to do with him. I'm sorry I broke a delicate frame and also for the ashes. I promise to never touch any of your things."

"Look I.."

I smile raising my hand. "It's ok. Water under the bridge."

He smiles. "I know what Phindile told you."

"You don't have to explain yourself. You have no reason to."

"I just.." He sighs. "I took down all her pictures. Even the ashes. Everything."

"Why? They were valuable to you." I say concerned.

"They were but it's time to move on." He says taking a step towards me.

"You have your issues to deal with."

"Yeah and my issue was holding on to the dead. It really block my happiness. She's dead and she's not coming back. I have accepted that."

I smile. "Pat always said it takes accepting a situation to be able to deal with it."

"She's right. It actually gave me a piece of mind. I'm sorry about last time."

"It's ok Uncle Sthe, can I please get the job?"

"Don't call me your Uncle," he says making me laugh.

"Uncle Sthe,"

"I'm your husband. And trial first. Alwande will be here in two weeks."

I sigh with relief. "Thank you so much, you won't regret it."

"I don't think I will."

"Well I should get going."

"I can drop you off."

"No it's ok. A cab is waiting for me

Outside."

"You are my wife. It's my right to drop you off." He says taking my hand. The electric feeling waves me hard as our skin touch. I quickly snatch my hand from his.

"It's ok but thank you." I say then scurry off immediately, running away.

As the cab moves I pinch myself. I really thought I was over it. The feeling. His touch reminded me of his lips. His scent. How can I still be feeling like this? Especially after learning the horrifying truth about him?

Getting back home I find Aunt Lerato with Mom.

"Oh hey baby.." Mom says kissing my cheek. I'm still learning to accept the affection gestures she always show to me, they still scare me.

"Mom.. Aunt,"

"Hey.. Guess what I bought you?" Aunt says pointing at a box on the table beside her glass of wine. I take it curiously then open it. I smile.

"Thank you." I say taking out the phone.

"You are welcome baby," she says taking her glass. In the last two weeks I have learnt that she owns a magazine and someone runs it for her. And ohh, she really is getting the divorce and she's no longer crying about it anymore. She says it's life.

"How did it go?" Mom asks.

"I got it. I'm starting in two weeks."

"Starting what?" Aunt asks.

"Babysitting Alwande," I respond excitedly.

"Great! The bad boy." Aunt says.

"He..."

"Noku come on... He's human."

"What did I say Lerato?"

"You are too judgemental. This man saved your daughter. Can you just appreciate that for a sec?"

“I’m not—”

“You are! You are so judgmental over the boy. Let him be. We will throw him in the drench when he hurts her.”

Mom sighs. “I....”

“Drink wine. You need it.” Aunt says giving her a glass of wine. Mom takes it then looks at me.

“I don’t judge him but he’s... He’s just..”

“I know. It’s ok. I know you care Mom and I appreciate it.”

“I love you,”

“I love you too.” I say then kiss her cheek like she does to me.

As I begin going to my room, a scream fills the house.

I turn ready for it. She throws her bag down then jumps into my arms.

“Hey Rhea...” I say kissing her cheek.

“Teacher taught us a new song.”

I look at her then wait, I know it’s until we sleep. I walk with her to our room then listen to all the stories and songs.

•

“I missed you,” Noma says hugging me pushing Sne away.

“I missed you too,” I say.

We part then sit down. “You look good.”

“Week 3 and I’m still kicking.” I say smiling. They look just the same. Same as the last time I saw them.

“How are you?” I ask.

“I’m fine... Well we are fine. We miss you.” Sne says.

“I miss you too, it’s kind of different without you.”

“We know, obviously.” Sne says rolling her eyes. “So that guy?” She asks.

“I’m going to be his son’s nanny,”

“What about relationship wise?”

I shake my head. “He’s too much. He has his own issues to deal with.”

“Everyone does. I thought you guys had a connection,” Noma says.

"We do... I think but.."

"But what? You also have issues. So does he but he makes you happy."

"His sister says he still loves her. The late girlfriend. I broke her picture frame three weeks ago and you should have seen him."

"His sister? She wasn't there in the 8 months you were here. This man used to visit you here, spend every visiting hour with you. She wasn't there when he called everyday at 8 p.m and neither was she there when he comforted you. He will always love his late girlfriend. She will always have a place in his heart. It's normal. They had a son, you can't expect him to just forget."

"I don't Noma but.."

"And lastly, firstly you drop the ashes and now a picture frame. Come on, you are doing too much. Give him a chance. I think he really likes you and you guys may help each other."

Sne chips in. "Or break each other."

Noma eyes her. "What? Nomandla you know it's true. Look Khosi, let me give you my two cents, you like each other, we all agree and there's something special between you guys. But that special something won't always bring fruits which are sweet, some will be bitter or most of them. You may fix each other or destroy each other."

"Sne I'm not disagreeing but really this guy has issues and no offence but his issues are nothing compared to our girl's issues. He's been doing the chasing, how long do you think he will chase? And if he was too caught up on his late girlfriend then why chase after her for so long? Look, give him a chance. If it doesn't work out then opps, we will eat chocolate and watch Rose kill Jake in Titanic talking about how men are trash. It's life. Call him, say you miss him like he used to call you to only tell you he misses you."

I look at Noma shaking my head. "No. I have made peace with everything."

"Peace with what? What his sister told you? Give him a chance and try fixing each other. One day you will thank me for this."

"I think his friend likes me. We are going for lunch after this."

"Why? Noma asks.

"Because he's nice."

"So?"

"He insisted."

"Ok, that's messed up now. You can't be doing friends." Sne says shaking her head.

"I'm not! I just.. I feel sorry for Zano. I think he liked me first but I..."

Noma laughs. "Wonders shall never end. Love triangle?"

“No. There’s no love triangle because Khosi doesn’t like Zano, she’s into Sthe. I have to agree with Noma, call Sthe.”

“What?”

“Tell him you miss him. You can’t entertain two men unless you want a threesome which I doubt though I think it will be lit. Call Sthe, tell him you miss him. Go for lunch with Zano, tell him you like Sthe in a nice manner.”

“What?”

“I think she’s lost.” Noma says. “Let me explain in a simple way. Plan is....”

FORTY

I looked at both of them. They looked dead serious. More than serious.

“No. I’m not doing that.”

“You are.” Noma says.

“No! No I’m not. Look guys, I am not about to act like that. I’m not going back to what Sebastian used to make me do. I’m not going to throw myself at him.”

Sne chuckles shaking her head. “How is you making him dinner throwing yourself at him?”

“We just... I... No. I can’t. I don’t even know how to cook.”

“Who does?” Noma asks. “Look, time is almost up. I’m leaving next week, we will talk about how it went.”

I feel guilt seeth in me. An hour and half has all drained while we talked about me.

“I’m so happy for you. So where are you going to stay?”

“I don’t know. My other friend said she could accommodate me so I will stay with her.”

“You can come stay at my mom’s house. I’m sure she won’t mind.”

“She won’t but I don’t want to be a burden to anyone.”

“You won’t be.”

Noma laughs. “I definitely will be. I’m a 30 year old woman. I can’t be depending on another woman. So I will manage just well.”

“Ok, but if you change your mind,”

“I will call.” She smiles.

“We have to go. You guys will have to visit me next week.” Sne says hugging me.

“I have to hear how it went.”

“We will,” I say then stand up as she steps away. I hug Noma one last time.

“I will see you guys.”

“Don’t forget the plan. You don’t have to take your clothes off ok? You can wine and dine to have a good time.” Sne says.

“Ok, bye!”

Walking out I feel more confused than I was when I got in this building. My mind goes over the plan they told me and I feel something in my body just cringe. Maybe the reason I'm scared is because I'm scared of rejection. He might reject me. I don't want to be rejected.

I get in the cab then tell him the place where Zano said we should meet. I sit back and just think of the worst. If he approaches me, I already know what I will say. Aunt Lerato says it's putting someone in the friend zone. Simply rejecting someone in a nice way.

20 minutes later he's hugging me.

"Hey," he says.

The hug lasts more seconds than anticipated. When he finally lets go I give him an avuncular smile.

"Hey."

"Sit, let's have lunch." He says motioning to a table. We walk there then sit down. The restaurant looks so fancy.

A waiter comes over to our table. I'm surprised when I notice she has red hair though hers is shorter than mine.

"What shall you have?"

I look at Zano as he orders for himself. He looks at me together with the waiter, "whatever he's having." I say. She smiles then strolls off.

"So how are you?" Zano asks.

"I'm fine. Only the lady who sold me off." I mumble the last part. I can't forget her. No matter what, I just can't forget.

"What did you say?" Zano asks.

I shake my head. "Nothing." I mutter.

"I heard what you said Khosi, you saw her where?"

"At some restaurant."

"What's her name?" He sounds agitated.

"I don't know."

"Which restaurant?" I tell him the restaurant's name.

"I will find her."

"I just want to forget her."

He takes my hands into his. "You will. With time. Don't worry. I will deal with her."

"Thanks,"

“Anyways after this, we can drive around. Show you Jo’burg. The busy city.”

I smile. He’s nice. “That will be nice.”

Just then the waiter brings our food. I look at it, not bad. Taking in the first spoon it doesn’t taste bad either.

“So, you have plans tonight?” He asks. I shudder at the plans for tonight which I am yet to do. “Yeah, I’m meeting a friend for dinner.” I say. I don’t want to mention Sthe.

“Oh, you have a friend?” He’s shocked.

“Uhh yeah.. A long lost friend.”

“That’s nice. I was thinking if you want, we can have dinner tomorrow.” My insides turn.

“Uhh...” His phone interrupts me. It’s ringing. I continue eating as he answers relieved. The conversation is quick and he barely says anything other than ok.

When he puts his phone down he smiles, “sorry about that.”

I chuckle. “It’s ok. I do know and understand that everyone around me has a life. It feels weird when mom goes to work.”

“So you want a job?”

I smile. “Yeah, with the kids. I think I’m good at that.”

“You would possibly make a great mom.”

“I doubt and I’m glad that I can never be.”

“Why?”

“Sebastian sorted that out.”

His smile dissolves. “He destroyed your womb?”

“Took it out then gave it to me.” I remember the whole scene like yesterday. He gave it to me in a gift bag.

His jaw tightens and I can see he’s angry.

“It’s ok. I’m over it.”

“Anyways you can always get a surrogate.”

I nod. “Yeah but not in the following 10 years.”

He laughs. “You are still crazy. I can get you a job at a preschool if you want, I have someone who can help..”

“I don’t have any qualification.”

“I can get you one without them asking of your qualification.”

"I'm not sure..."

"It will be good and you will even get paid."

"I will talk with mom."

"Do so."

We stay a bit longer at the restaurant. When we finally leave for the tour I have loosened up. He hasn't made a move yet.

He drives me around showing every corner he thinks I should see. I like his convertible car. He has opened the roof and I like it.

"I like this car." I tell him as he starts driving me home. It's getting late and I should still go to Sthe's house.

"You do?"

"Yeah.. Its nice."

"I can borrow it to you."

I laugh. "No, it's ok. Mom already is buying me a car as soon as I get my licence."

"Great! No more taxicabs."

"Yah.."

He finally parks the car in front of mom's house.

"Zano thank you for the tour and lunch."

"It's ok. I hope we can do it more."

I smile. "Me too,"

He surprises me when he hugs me. I stand still, not moving then he let's go.

"See you," he says then walks to his car.

I feign a smile waving at him.

Talk about awkward things.

"And??" Aunt Lerato asks as soon as I get inside the house. Mom is still at work and Aunt just arrived from her house. They are going out with mom today, some women's event or something like that.

"Honestly lunch went well. He didn't try anything expect hugging me."

"Did you do what I told you to?"

I shrug. "I didn't want to hurt him."

“You are leading him on.”

I sigh. “I don’t want to hurt anyone.”

“You are going to hurt yourself.”

“Zano is nice.”

“Baby girl, don’t mix peri peri and milk together. You can’t swallow it.”

“I want to surprise Sthe with dinner.”

She pours herself wine smiling. “Tell me more,”

•

“You look beautiful.” She says looking at me.

“You look so beautiful, I wish you can just look at yourself on the mirror.”

I shake my head. I’m not ready yet.

“It’s ok. The cab is outside.”

“Do you think this is a good idea?”

“Well not exactly because you are not going to cook but you will order, that’s a good thing I guess. If you can do everything before he arrives from work the better. Not a very good idea again because he might be having plans and there might be no one at his house but at the same time it’s exciting. So you are going to go, don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

I smile then walk out. Mom hasn’t arrived from work yet. Aunt says she will cover for me.

I get in the cab then direct him to Sthe’s house. I’m fidgeting the whole journey.. I’m starting to regret my decision. Maybe I should....

“We have arrived Mam,” the driver says startling me.

“Oh, ok.”

I step out of the car, Aunt has already paid my fare. The gate is open surprisingly. I walk over to the door of his jungle house. Then knock softly. If he’s there then we will just order dinner. That’s what Aunt said.

The door opens after a while and some lady steps out. She’s wearing a tight dress and heels.

My heart leaps. Who’s she?

“Hi, how can I help you?”

“Is Sthe in?”

“Who are you?”

"Is he in?" I repeat making her roll her eyes.

"No he's not. Who are you?"

"I should be asking you."

"I'm his girlfriend."

I look at her, she's lying. He can't possibly have a girlfriend. I'm the only potential he has. He wouldn't have... Changed his mind or could he have?

"I'm his wife," I say pushing her out of my way and walking inside the house. I walk to the kitchen and she's behind me.

"Excuse me you can't just—"

"I can't just what? Look I suggest you leave my house before I call security to escort you out."

"Escort me out? You are the one trespassing!" She yells.

"Why are you yelling?"

"You are in my man's house." I walk to the living room. Sthe did show me where the emergency button is. I don't hesitate pressing it.

"We will see who's trespassing." I tell her then settle on the couch. I can't believe I'm actually doing this. It's not part of the plan.

I know I should leave but I can't bring myself to stand up.

10 minutes later the security steps inside the house.

"Sir please throw this woman out, she's trespassing." The lady says.

"Princess what are you doing here?" Sthe says arriving on the scene. He has his jacket in his hands and a briefcase. He's from work. Seeing him like this, wearing a suit, he doesn't look like the artwork thief he is.

"Hey babe I...—"

"Security, I want this woman gone from my property. Please show her out." I say politely looking at the security team. They look at Sthe before walking towards her.

"Sthe you can't kick me out." She yells. She's noisy.

"My wife has spoken." He says with a shrug.

"Your wife? I can't believe this." She says. "I can walk!"

I look at Sthe as she walks out with the security.

"She's a nobody." He says.

"I figured."

"You look beautiful."

"I thought we could..." I sigh. All the little confidence I had has evaporated.

"I haven't slept with Princess. Never have. She just likes me."

"I didn't say you did."

"Still... You thought we could what?"

"Have dinner."

"And what's stopping that now?" He puts his briefcase down together with the jacket then closes the gap between us.

"We can still have dinner." He says placing his hands on my waist.

"We can?" I breathe.

"Yes."

Before a second can pass our lips meet. His are cold, they cool mine. I wrap my arms around his neck and kiss him back relishing on the exciting feeling. His lips taste good and it feels right.

"Yoh Sthe!" A voice says pulling me from him. I step aside then look at where the voice is coming from.

It's some guy and beside him it's Zano. He looks hurt. Broken.

God!

FORTY-ONE

“Ehhh hello,” the guy says breaking the silence. Zano is just staring at me blankly. I feel so guilt or beyond. I should have listened to Aunt Lerato. My heart is beating so fast. I swear it’s about to just leap out to the ground.

“Hi,” I respond though I’m not sure if my voice is that audible. I’m shaking.

“Then wena? You didn’t tell us that you will be having company of a beautiful white girl.” The guy continues looking at Sthe.

“Maybe you should learn how to knock.” Zano responds and suddenly the hurt face is gone. He looks like the normal Zano. The smiling Zano.

“Had I known that he’s busy touching tonight we wouldn’t have came.”

“Babe this is my friend, Nathi and Nathi this is Khosi.”

Nathi walks toward me with a wide grin. “You I’m Nathi, it’s a pleasure meeting you beautiful.” He says giving me a handshake.

I force a smile pulling my hand from his sweaty hand. “Likewise,”

We all look at Sthe when his phone starts ringing from his pocket. He takes it out then looks at it for a while before walking away. I’m left with Nathi and Zano.

“Wow! No wonder you guys are...” Nathi’s sentence trails off as he eyes me. He puts the six pack of alcohol he has brought down then take one can out.

Zano walks toward me and suddenly I’m scared. I hope he’s not going to make a move or... Confront me or something like that.

“Hey,” he says smiling. “Seeing you twice a day huh? My ancestors are with me.”

“Hey,”

“So you and Sthe...?”

I blink. Friend zone him, Aunt’s words ring in my head.

I smile. “Yeah.. It’s complicated.”

He chuckles. “Sthe is a good guy,” he says shocking me.

“Uhhh... Yeah..” I can’t find the right words to say.

“I have known him for a long time and I’m partly, just a tiny bit glad you are the one to mother Alwande, not some whores out there.”

Looking into his burning eyes I feel there’s more to his words than he’s letting out.

I swallow hard. "I'm glad I have you as my brother who I never had." I repeat what Aunt said I should say. He chuckles shaking his head while moving back. "Really? I thought I was—"

"Zano!" Nathi calls out. It sounds like a warning.

"What?" Zano responds, his tone ice cold.

"Stop it."

"This is a free world." He says.

"Game over." Nathi says. "Move back. Uhh Khosi I hope we didn't disturb anything."

Nathi must be the peace maker but what does he mean, game over?

"No. Actually I —"

"Yes, you disturbed. We are going out." Sthe says walking back in. He now has his tie in his hands. He puts his arm on my waist pulling me unto him.

"Askies but had you told us you—"

"We are leaving." Zano says walking out. Nathi gives me a smile before rushing out following after Zano though not forgetting his beer.

I take in a deep breathe before turning to look at Sthe. He's just staring back. He has the mature look that he carries around, that look which says 'I don't play games'. It makes him look more attractive. He places his hands on my waist once again then pulls me against him.

"Where were we?" He asks, his voice low. So low almost coming off as a whisper.

"Do you see her in me?" I whisper. My throat clogging as I prepare myself for the answer.

He blinks couple of times at me. "No." He finally answers. "I don't see her in you."

"You love her..."

"Yes. And I will always love her."

I inhale sharply. "But she's dead." He continues.

"I don't want you to break what I have managed to build. The pieces that I have managed to put back together. I don't want you to destroy that."

"I won't. I'm moving out." He says and for a moment I'm relieved but that's short lived.

"I don't want to—"

"You are not doing anything. Alwande and I are ready to move on. Thuli will always have a place in our hearts but it's time."

I look at him. The sincereness in his eyes takes me by surprise. He's ready to let her go, finally. Same way I was ready to let go of Zhanna months ago.

I cup his face. I have known this man for almost 10 months now and I know what I feel for him. It may scare me— hell it scares me. It does. It's a foreign feeling. I'm not used to it. But... But it's there, so strong too.

"The divorce..." I whisper.

"What about it?"

I sigh. "We should have a divorce. What... We married under weird circumstances."

"So?"

"Whatever that's happening between us. I want it to have nothing influencing it. Something like marriage."

"We are married in community of property."

"I don't want anything." I smile.

"Ok." He agrees then chuckles. "I liked being married to you."

"What?"

"Yeah.."

I shake my head. "You need help. Medication."

He shrugs before grasping my chin and owning my lips. My body reacts to his touch and suddenly I feel desire grasping each part of my body. My muscles tightens as he glids his tongue in my mouth. He coaxes my tongue with his binding me in a certain rhythm. Then it's there. The spark. The electric wave. It's so intense, I can almost grasp it with my bare hands. It binds me unto him, into him taking me completely. The walls... They fall. All of them and I'm left exposed. I'm shaking, I have never felt like this. It's so intense.

A moan escapes my lips when he moves his hand down to my thigh, he caresses my thigh pulling my dress up. His lips leaves mine then I feel them on my neck. I shiver at the feeling. My body doesn't feel mine. He pulls my dress up over my head leaving me in only the lace set Mom bought for me.

He kisses me again and I fail matching his fervor, his lips ravages mine as his hands caresses everywhere. All the emotions have woken up and I feel subjected to him. He abruptly picks me up and I instinctively wrap my legs around his waist. I crush my lips against his as he walks us up the stairs. All that's in my head is him. Him only. He enters some room then sinks me on the bed with him coming down with me. He buries his head on my neck, kissing and sucking hard. My toes curl as I moan. My insides tightens deliciously as my panties dampen.

His lips move down to my chest, leaving a trail of wet kisses. He pushes my bra cups up freeing my breast. His mouth tightens on my nipple as he pulls the other nipple between his fingers. He sucks one nipple hard while pulling the other one. I moan loudly thrashing my body sideways. I can't think. I want him. I need him. I need him right now!

His lips move further down, down to my navel and further down. He pulls my panties down then open my legs wide.

He dips his head in between my thighs as his finger sink in me. I groan pushing my pelvis up. It comes so fast and hard and suddenly I'm screaming his name while pulling his head against me.

He brings his lips to my mouth again then kisses me making me taste myself on him. Salty and delicious. Pulling his lips from mine he gazes me then strokes my lips with his fingers.

"You can say no, I won't pressure you. You are free to say no. It won't change anything.. What I feel for you." He whispers.

"I want you.. I want you. Please.." I beseech.

He kisses me and the mood immediately gets set. My fingers fiddle with the buttons of his shirt. With shaking hands I unbutton them then pull down the shirt from his big body. He pushes himself from me then quickly takes off his pants. His erection stares right back at me and I push my legs further apart. Getting back on top of me he puts one hand under my waist then slightly lifts me from the bed while holding my hands hostage on top of my head with his free hand. Looking deep in my eyes, he slowly sinks in blocking my entrance. I suck in my breath as his length fills me completely. I feel so full. He groans, briefly closing his eyes. Opening them I see nothing but desire. He pulls back then pushes back in me slowly while swearing.

He continues with his slow controlled drives in and out of me till I'm begging him. It feels so good. It has never felt this good. My muscles starts tightening as his pace increases. He hits me deeper and harder. He let's my hands go then starts really moving. Harder and harder. His eyes don't leave mine though I can see he's fighting it with his all to just not close them. His lips find mine and I explode all around him with muffled scream. I tighten my legs around him as I come all around him. Seconds later he's whispering my name repeatedly as he releases his hot release deep in me.

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"We didn't use a condom." I mutter as my body relaxes after a while.

"I'm clean and so are you." He says as if my point is worthless.

"Sthe..." I start as I turn to look at him.

"Shhh..." He shushes then kisses me hard. "Don't over think it. What just happened was perfect. Let it stay like that." He says then pulls me unto him wrapping his arms around me like a vine. I feel safe in his arms. Safe and warm.

"Wasn't it too soon?" I ask as my eyelids starts getting heavy.

"No. Go to sleep Khosi." His answer pats me down to sleep and I don't object.

•

I slowly open my eyes and I'm met by bright light. I sigh then turn to my side. With panic I open my eyes wider. This is not my room. I quickly sit up straight then everything plays back slowly in my head. The sex. Everything. I look around, I'm alone. I get off the bed then pick up his shirt from the floor. I put it on and it barely covers my bum. I don't mind though because I find myself taking down the stairs.

Bacon. I can smell bacon. I slowly follow the smell to his kitchen and there he is, wearing some sweatpants only. He turns and looks at me.

"Morning sleeping beauty," he says with a smile. The tangling between my legs tells me it really happened.

"Hey.."

He walks toward me while holding the fork he's cooking with. He wraps his free hand around my waist then kisses me. Long and hard likes he's trying to establish something.

"I'm making us breakfast."

I smile brightly. I feel.... Different. Good different. I'm happy. I feel happy.

"I'm in trouble." I tell him.

"Your mom?" He asks walking back to the stove.

"Yeah," I sit on the kitchen stool as he turns to look at me.

"We will think of something." He says then smiles. I like him smiling. It makes him look more handsome.

"Coffee or tea?" He asks.

"Tea, please."

"Coming right up, how did you sleep?"

I smile. "Like a baby. Last night was amazing."

"It was." He responds with a wink. My insides tense at the gesture.

FORTY-TWO

"How was my son Khosi? I know you are good with kids but I know how he can be." Aunt says as I walk inside the house. I play along.

"He was ok. He's a nice child."

"He can be a lil monster. I know, you don't have to pretend."

"A lil?" Mom asks giving me a hug. "That child is a whole monster. How are you baby? You know you should have called me yesterday. You and your Aunt both. I was worried sick for a moment there."

I smile understanding where she's coming from. "I'm sorry,"

"It's ok. I have made breakfast. I will see you tonight when I come back from work. I love you," She says then grabs an apple and off she's gone. Aunt only speaks after we hear mom's car driving away.

"You were supposed to come back last night."

I grin. "I'm sorry."

She chuckles shaking her head. "I hope you used protection. Pregnancy is real and so is AIDS."

I sit on the kitchen stool. "I can't get pregnant."

"What?"

"I don't have a womb."

She's silent for a while and she seems to be connecting the dots. "I just want to find that man and kill him so slowly." She says menacingly. If Sebastian was still alive, he wouldn't hesitate killing her. She's a small fly.

"But still, there's AIDS, so you used protection?"

I frown shaking my head.

"You didn't?"

"It all happened too quick."

"So? Khosi condom is your middle name. When you are sexual active you need to always, always use protection. You never know what people carry. He might have syphilis or gonorrhea or any STD, worse AIDS. You need to be cautious."

I sigh, she is right. "I will remember that next time."

"We are going to see a doctor. You are going to test, a full check up. Go and dress."

I stand up then walk to my bedroom. Getting inside it is a mess, I know it is my roommate. She isn't really the neat type. I quickly put everything in order before I walk inside the closet. I look around then

grab a yellow dress. Quickly I put it on together with some black pumps before walking out. I find Aunt already outside. I join her in the car then she immediately starts the engine.

“So everything went well last night?” She finally asks.

“It did I guess.”

“How was he?”

I flush with embarrassment. She’s so inappropriate and she doesn’t care.

“Haibo girl I need to know if it was worth it. I mean, I lied to your mom, my son was with the nanny last night not you. How was it? Did you cum?”

I just nod, I can’t even bring myself to open my mouth.

“Good. You can’t waste your time with someone who performs badly.”

“We are getting a divorce. I don’t want to be married.”

She takes my hand into hers. “I support you, you guys got married because you had to and I still appreciate what he did for you but I don’t think you should be married right now. It’s too early. You guys need to know each other first and love each other. The rest will come later. I’m glad you went for someone mature.”

“Me too... Though he has a lot of drama surrounding him.”

“We all have drama following us around.” She says with a shrug. “You too. Just don’t censor yourself to make him comfortable. But again you need to open your heart to make space for love. Love is a beautiful thing. Open up, surrender where necessary and let love in. Give up your fear, take risks, that’s what comes with love.”

“I’m scared.”

“We are all scared but give it a chance. I really trust in divine timing. Be grateful. Everything will work out.”

20 minutes later we are walking inside the doctor’s office. It’s a man. Not that old, and not what I was expecting.

He welcomes us with a wide smile. “Mrs Jacob, good to see you.”

Aunt smiles. “You too Doc, I brought my niece. Can she get a full check up?”

“Of cause.”

•

We walk out together. “That went well,” she says with a smile.

“Yeah,”

“Let me drop you home. I’m meeting my lawyer.” She’s still getting the divorce, apparently her husband wants to fix things even after her cheating scandal.

“Ok,”

We get in her car and she drives me home. I don’t have AIDS or STD though the doctor did give me the talk of using condoms.

Aunt does drop me at home and since I’m alone, I write a chapter in my journal.

After I’m done I finally decide to call Noma. I have to tell her how it went. I have to wait for a while till I’m connected.

“Hello?”

“Hey, it’s me.” I say.

“Hey! How did it go? Did you do it? How was it? Did he like it?”

I laugh. “It went well.”

She laughed. “You fucked? How was it?”

“That question is inappropriate.”

“We need to know if he has the game or not.”

“I came if that’s the question.”

She laughs. “Girl don’t make me horny. I haven’t had dick in years. There’s a whole Amazon forest down there.”

We laugh. “We did it again in the morning.”

“As long as he’s good. I’m just happy the past didn’t hinder you from having a great time.”

I giggle. “Me too. I miss him already.”

“That’s what sex does. It makes you clingy. It’s normal. As long as you are happy.”

“Yeah..”

“Look we will talk properly when I leave this place. Next weekend.”

“Ok bye.”

I hang up with a retarded grin on my face.

I stand up when I hear the intercom ring. I quickly go to the living room then open the gate. As the gate open I walk outside. Mom has beefed the security.

A smile creeps on my face as his jeep drives in. My intestines knot as he steps out of the car. He’s wearing sweatpants and a hoodie. As he walks towards me the passenger door opens and Alwande climbs down. He overtakes his father along way then leaps in my arms. My heart swells with joy as I hold him. I missed him so much.

“Oh my God! Hey!”

“I got you something,” he says giving me a piece of paper. I open it then stare at a drawing. It’s weird but it’s a drawing.

Three people I think.

“This is beautiful, who are these?”

“Me, daddy and you.” He says beaming. I pat his head.

“It’s beautiful.”

“I was listening to Granny and also listening at school, are you now going to be my Mommy?”

My breath catches. “I’m going to be your Mommy now.” I say smiling. He is so innocent, so free.

“Ntwana what did we talk about?” Sthe asks looking at his son.

“Askies skhokho,” Alwande says then steps away from me. The kind of relationship they have is so heartwarming. They are like best friends.

Sthe takes me in his arms. My body vibrates as he wraps his arms around me. The exciting feeling looms between us as I hold him tighter. It feels so right being in his arms. I just want it to stay to like that till eternity.

“I missed you,” he whispers nibbling my ear.

“Me too..” Letting go of me he kisses me briefly though I wish it can last longer. My body is already excited.

“Thank you for bringing him by,” I say looking at Alwande who’s just staring at us. “I missed him so much.”

“He missed you too. You can start work tomorrow.”

I look at him with a wide bright smile. “He’s staying with you now?”

“Yeah..”

“Oh my.. Thank you.”

“Yeah but I will be hiring a full time nanny who takes over at night.”

“Anything is ok with me. Thank you.”

“It’s ok.”

I smile then hug him tightly.

“Thanks,”

“We can do dinner tonight. All of us.”

“Yeah though I’m not so sure. If I manage then I’m bringing my sister.”

“Anything is ok.”

“Daddy!” Alwande screams and Sthe moves back automatically. I look at them curiously then Alwande stands in front of me.

“So are you going to stay with us?”

I smile crouching before him.

“No but soon I will.”

“When daddy marries you?” I blink. God this child knows a lot.

“Uhh...”

“Teacher said daddy has to marry you first. Please marry daddy, I want to stay with you.” He begs.

My heart breaks slowly. His plea really cuts through my heart. “I will marry daddy. Don’t tell him. It’s our own little secret.” I whisper.

He squirms then close his mouth’s zip animatedly making me laugh.

“Good boy.”

I stand up finally then sigh. “Thank you for passing by.”

“It’s ok.” Sthe responds then motions his son to the car.

Alwande gestures that I bend and when I do so, he blesses me with a kiss then runs to the car.

Sthe grasps my waist then kisses me gliding his tounge in my mouth. The kiss is short yet it burns.

“See you,” he says then walks away leaving me craving him.

“Wait!” I call out remembering yesterday. He stops then walks back to me.

“Yesterday... —”

“I’m sorry about Princess. She’s Anaya’s friend trying to take advantage of the situation.”

“You have never slept with her?” I ask.

“I have.” His honesty takes me by surprise. “But I haven’t in a long time. And I’m not going to now.” His last sentence somehow comforts me.

“Ok, Nathi yesterday told Zano that game over. What did he mean? What’s going on?”

He sighs. “Zano and I both liked you. To avoid fights we just decided that if you want me, he backs off and if you want him, I back off.”

“He wanted me.”

“And you wanted me.”

“Won’t this affect your friendship?”

“No. Zano and I come a long way. This is how it has always been especially if we like the same girl at the same time.”

I’m relieved. “Ok.”

“Don’t stress about it. It’s life.”

I just nod. Before he can walk away the gate opens and Uncle Kenya’s car drives in.

“Your father already thinks I’m disrespectful. This is going to make it worse.” The way Sthe refers to Uncle Kenya as my father leaves me surprised most of the time. When Uncle Kenya steps out he walks towards us.

“Khosi,” he says then looks at Sthe who looks so relaxed.

“What do you want?”

“I just wanted to see your daughter.” Sthe says rubbing his hands together. “Khosi we will talk.” And off he’s gone. I watch him as gets in his car and drives off.

“How are you? I didn’t see you yesterday.”

I smile. “I’m fine... Dad.” I say and the word feels foreign yet so right on my tongue. He smiles and blinks a couple of times before enfolding me in his arms.

Pat was right, sometimes its just the little things we do that makes people happy.

You never really know the difference you can make by just one word.

FORTY-THREE

I walk inside the house. It's not that big, it's not like his jungle house. This one is a bit simple, I like it. It's comfortable and warm. I walk to the bedrooms, they are three and they are relatively big. The backyard has the pool, not a big pool. Just a normal sized pool. Walking back to the living room I look at both of them.

"This house is nice." I say making both of them smile.

"So we can stay here?" Alwande asks making me look at Sthe in shock. What's Alwande talking about?

He shrugs. "I'm moving out. I told you."

I start shaking my head. "You love your jungle house."

He closes the distance between us then hold my waist. "No. I don't. And I'm letting it go. For both my sake and my son's. It's time."

I look deep in his eyes. I can't escape the sincereness I'm staring at. He's so honest. It scares me sometimes, he never sugarcoats anything.

"I'm happy for you." I tell him and honestly I am.

"Alwande and I will be moving here tomorrow."

I smile, "I can help, if you want me to."

"We would love your presence right boy?"

I giggle looking at Alwande who's nodding. "Yes... Please come." He begs.

"I will."

Just then Sthe's phone starts ringing. For the tenth time since he picked me up. His phone is always ringing.

"Yes?" He snaps. His facial expression changes and he looks angry.

"Give me 10." He says then drops the call. He smiles when his eyes find mine and the whole angry facial expression changes.

"Uhh... I have to go. You guys will have to excuse me." He says apologetically.

"Uhh you can drop us—"

"I have to go. It's urgent. Take," he says handing me the keys of his car then kisses me briefly. "Drive home but there's no food that side so.." He takes out his bank card then places it in my hand. "Do some shopping. Pin is 21096." He doesn't give me a chance to react. He leaves both Alwande and I confused.

But soon Alwande smiles showing his gap on the front teeth, he lost his tooth two days ago and it is in a jar.

“I’m 6 years old,” he says. I look at him confused then finally get it. My face burns.

“I know, uhh we should leave probably.” I say walking outside. The estate agent is waiting by Sthe’s car and I start to wonder what he left with. She smiles when she sees us coming.

“Ms Khumalo,” she says. “Do you like it?”

“Yes!” Alwande answers before I can open my mouth. He’s forward. So forward. She smiles then looks at me.

“Yes. Mr Dlamini says he will move in tomorrow.”

“Is there anything in the house you want to change?”

I shake my head almost immediately. “I’m not going to be staying here, you will have to have that talk with Mr Dlamini himself.”

“He says I should talk to you.”

I swallow, of cause he did.

“Uhh everything is fine.”

“Ok,”

Alwande and I look at her as she walks away to her car. She’s... too professional— uptight actually.

“Well.. That’s a wrap!” I say then look at the car. A white jeep. He likes jeeps. I open the passenger door for Alwande and he immediately climbs in. Getting on the front sit I sigh, I got my license two weeks ago and mom already bought me a car, a golf. I like it.

I start the engine then reverse out of the yard. Soon enough I’m driving to the nearest mall. Only 4 months, two weeks from the center and I already know my way around. The whole journey there Alwande is busy playing games on my phone. He never stops.

But he’s better than Rhea, I get a headache when I think of what I have to endure every night.

Parking the car at the mall, Alwande and I step out and walk straight to the shops as if we know what we are doing. Getting in the shop we stand still.

“Wow! I have never shopped!” I say looking at people who are pushing their trolleys while picking the goods they want.

“Me too.” Alwande says. For the first time ever, he doesn’t have anything forward to say.

I look at him then walk to where I get an empty trolley.

“Mom what are you doing?” Alwande whispers. I have gotten used to being called mom. He even tells everyone we meet that I’m his mom. A week ago I had to take him with when I was meeting Noma, he freely introduced me as his mom to Noma. I even got a necklace written mom some time ago.

“We are shopping.”

I say pushing to the trolley to the shelves. We start picking food. Everything I see back at home I pick it up and throw it in the trolley. And a lot of junk and frozen food.

“Dad doesn’t eat that,” Alwande says as I pick some cereals. I look at them then at him.

“You do,”

“I hate them!”

“I’m sorry,” I say throwing it inside the full trolley. “Your dad can’t cook so I’m afraid cereals is staying.”

“Aunt Vimbai can cook.” He says. Of course she can cook, the full time Nanny. I hate the fact that she can cook while I don’t even know what to touch in the kitchen. Aunt Lerato said I cook pure poison.

I wish Vimbai was at least 40, I’m just so jealous. She’s 28, beautiful, she’s a black beauty and the dark skin tone makes her look like a Queen. Then the fact that she can cook, she’s only a nanny but she cooks everyday for my man and son! The fact that they love her food annoys me to the fullest but what just finishes me off is the fact that the food is good.

I look at Alwande rolling my eyes then take two more boxes of cereals. He clutches his head I’m frustration as I walk away.

We wonder around the shop for a while then finally walk to the till with our trolley flooding with grocery.

20 minutes later we closing the boot.

“Phew! I’m soooooo tired. Can we get ice cream?” Alwande says. I nod then walk with him to the ice cream shop. As we walk out after getting our corns Alwande starts calling out.

“Kay!” He calls out. Some girl who’s holding her mother’s hand turns. She immediately recognizes him I guess and both her and her mother walk towards us.

“That’s Kay,” Alwande whispers hurriedly. That’s Kay, I have heard about her. The girl at his new school, his friend.

I look at both of them as they talk animated by, it’s cute to watch.

“Hello,” Kay’s mother finally greets. I smile.

“Hello,”

“Kids! My daughter always talk about your uhh son?”

I chuckle. “So does he at home and yes, son.” I’m used to it. People always give me the skeptical look every time I tell them that he’s my son or when he does it.

“Wow! You are so young.” She says.

“Looks deceive,” I respond then look at Alwande. “He’s my son.”

“Well it was nice meeting you.”

“Likewise.”

We walk to the car and getting inside my phone starts ringing. I grab it from the backseat then answer starting the car.

“Mom,”

“Hey, what time will you be back today?”

“Same time.”

“Ok, we are going out tonight.”

“Ok,”

“I love you.”

“I love you too.”

And with that she hangs up. I start driving back to Sthe’s jungle house. It’s just after lunch.

Arriving, as usual Vimbai has cooked. The sweet aroma of her food has filled the house.

“Good afternoon Ma,” she greets bowing her head slightly. She won’t stop calling me Ma nor will she stop bowing her head. She’s so respectful even when serving her food. She always brings a dish with clean water and a dry dishtowel. At first it was rather shocking but I have grown used to it.

“Hi Vimbai,” I greet back with a smile as Alwande runs off somewhere.

“Please help me with the grocery.” I say walking back outside. She looks at the grocery in the boot for a while then at me. The look of confusion on her face tells me I did a shitty job.

We carry the grocery inside the house nonetheless and when we are done, I call down Alwande and we eat. It’s good, she should be a chef.

As soon as we are done eating I’m startled by a knock on the door.

“I will get it,” I say walking to the door barefooted. Opening it I’m shocked. My throat dries immediately.

“What... What are you doing here?” I ask unable to believe she’s actually here. The last time I saw her was when she was acting crazy holding a gun. Mom told me that she was getting help in passing.

“Khosi,” she says calmly. My eyes fall on a swollen belly.

“Anaya,” I say trying to sound unmoved but I fail dismally. She smiles then rubs her swollen belly.

“Khosi, let me in.”

I slowly move from the door and she walks in. I try picking up myself and pulling myself together but my heart is just racing. I have wild thoughts running in my head.

“Where’s Sthe?”

I look at her then at her belly. “He’s not here. You can wait if you wish though it’s useless.” I say finally getting hold of myself.

“Useless? Meeting my baby daddy to discuss our baby can never be useless Khosi.”

I laugh. “Who do you think you are lying to?”

“I don’t have to explain my point to you. I’m waiting for him.”

“Suit yourself!” I say then settle on the couch. I look at her bump again, Sthe said she was lying the last time. I know she is lying right now too, she’s just manipulative. Wherever she was definitely didn’t help her. She needs serious help.

Vimbai brings me juice after a while.

“Thank you Vimbai,”

“You are welcome Ma,” she says then walks away.

I sip on my juice switching on the TV. I scroll through the Channels till I’m watching a comedy show. Anaya just sits there and watch me. I ignore her plainly and laugh at the comedy.

Alwande doesn’t come down and I’m glad. He doesn’t like Anaya and from what I have gathered, they both don’t like each other.

“Babe!” Sthe’s voice finally calls out. I stand up as he walks inside the living room. Before he can hug me, his eyes find Anaya. Tension reaches the last point on the scale, it’s so suffocating.

“You can tell him the nonsense you were saying.” I say looking at Anaya who’s now up too. She looks so scared.

“Tell him.” I urge.

“Sthe..” She starts.

“What are you doing here?” His voice is so much clipped and cold. My intestines twist.

“Your child, our child needs you.” She says rubbing her bump while crying.

My heart starts pounding hard and fast. Why isn’t he telling her off?

“Sthe!” I call out then look at him. He can’t look at me. He’s avoiding eye contact.

“Is the baby yours?” I ask slowly and I stand there feeling the whole world on my shoulders.

“Is it?”

“I can explain..’

“Is it your baby?” I repeat.

My world just fall at my feet when he nods. The voice in my head starts screaming. I try moving back from him but I fail.

“Yeah..”

FORTY-FOUR

I can barely hear anything, there's just a lot of voices screaming in my head. Nothing makes sense. I'm hurt. My heart is bleeding.

"Babe.." I hear his voice which is accompanied by his arms around me. I want him to let me go but I can't bring myself to open my mouth. He lied, he lied to me. He said he didn't sleep with her yet here she is, pregnant, with his child. He's not even denying it.

I close my eyes tightly wishing to just go back to the fairytale life I have been living, the good happy life but it doesn't come. What comes is just pain and more pain. My heart is broken.

I want to go home.

I feel him picking me up after a while. I cling on him trying to stop myself from crying but I still feel tears on my cheeks. It's so painful. Seconds later I'm sinking on a bed. His bed. I can barely hear what he is saying. It's like something has just switched off.

Opening my eyes I'm in the dark and I'm cold. I slowly get off the bed then walk to the open window. I close my eyes tightly realizing I'm still in his house. Everything comes back to me. His lies. The pain. The heartache. Moving from the window I walk to the door and open it. Everywhere else the lights are on. I walk to the dining room where I'm hearing Alwande's voice. They all turn to look at me.

"Mom!" Alwande says jumping off the chair. He's always active. Always ready to do something.

He hugs me then pulls me to my chair. We both sit on either the sides of Sthe always across each other.

I clear my throat then smile. "Hey, you should have woken me up."

"Daddy said I shouldn't."

I nod then look at the food. My stomach is in knots. I don't think I will be able to eat but knowing Alwande, I have to eat.

I sigh. "I should have been home, mom..—"

"I called her." Sthe cuts me short. "I will drop you off after dinner."

I just nod, I can't look at him. I'm hurt, as much as I'm trying not to be, I'm hurt. He lied to me, he could at least told me the truth but he chose to lie.

We eat though there's silence between us. We are talking to Alwande but not to each other like we normally do. It feels weird that for the first time ever I don't even know what to say to him.

After dinner I take Alwande to bed. He forces me to read him a bedtime story. I have to make up one but as soon as he sleeps I walk out. Getting to the living room Sthe is standing with his phone in his hands.

"Done?"

I nod.

“Let’s go.” I follow him out to his car. Getting inside the air feels more thick. I hate the distance between us but I just want to be alone. He starts the car then drives me home. He’s quiet all the way till he parks the car by the gate at home. I don’t spot mom’s car. I’m relieved, it means she went out.

She’s probably with Aunt Lerato, they are inseparable. Dad... Uncle Kenya calls them Siamese twins.

“I can explain.” He finally says. I look at him intently.

“Why did you lie?” My voice comes off soft and even.

“Because you were going to hate me.”

“No. I was not going to hate because I had no reason to. You didn’t owe me anything. I could have went on with my life without complications.”

“I’m sorry babe..”

I shake my head. “You... You could have told me the truth. You had ample of chances to. You know everything about me, I told you because I had nothing to lose and I still don’t. Anaya is my... I’m stuck with her already. She’s... I can’t do this. She’s going to make my life a living hell and I’m trying to put it together. I’m not going to fight for you with Anaya or anyone else. I don’t have the energy to.”

“Babe listen... I won’t let Anaya anywhere near you. I promise. And you don’t have to fight for me... I love you.”

I look at him, shocked. This is the first time he says the words and they catch me off guard. I swallow hard as I look into his eyes.

“I was going to tell you, I was just scared. I’m sorry.”

I take in a deep breath. I don’t know what to say.

“Why do you love me? There’s nothing... I..”

“I love you because you make me happy. You make me very happy. You make my son happy. I don’t want to lose you. I know what this is doing to our trust but please, let me make this right. I’m choosing you.”

I blink away my tears. “There’s just too much drama Sthe..”

“I know.” He says taking my hands into his. “I know and I’m really sorry. But from today you and Alwande are going to be my priority.”

I sigh. “I just need... I.. Some time.. I..”

He pulls me unto his lap making me straddle him then cups my face.

“Please don’t leave me. I know it’s too much right now, the drama but please... Don’t leave me.”

“I’m not but I just want some space to process everything. It’s too much Sthe. The lies. The drama.”

He pulls me closer then kisses me. It's that kiss that carries a lot of emotions and I'm slowly drawn into him. The moment he releases my lips I know what he's trying to communicate.

"I love you." He says for the second time freezing me. "I love you. Alwande loves you. Please don't run from me." He begs in desperation. "Please.."

"I'm not running nor am I leaving anyone. I just want some space. That's all. Give me time to process all this."

He nods. "Ok." He sounds defeated and hurt but had he not lied then we wouldn't be here. I don't even want to think about where we would be. I kiss his cheek then open his door. Climbing out of his car I walk to the gate and I don't turn to look at him. I know what will happen if I do so I keep walking. The gate opens and I push myself to the house.

Getting inside, Dad and Uncle Small are playing games, video games actually. I'm.. Shocked?

"Oh hey Khosi.." Uncle Small says not even turning to look at me. He looks so consumed on whatever game they are playing.

"Hey princess, food in the microwave." Dad says.

I don't say anything, grown men are playing games. The day gets better and better.

•

"So he lied?" Noma asks. I nod.

"Yes."

"I'm shocked, I really am. I thought he was the one."

"He could have told me truth."

"I don't know why but I get where he's coming from. Like, chances are that you would have decided to not see him ever again after he told you." Sne says putting her juice down. "I mean, how was he supposed to say it? Niggas get scared too."

"He should have to her the truth. Khosi never hid anything from him."

"He never promised her heaven on earth." Sne says with a shrug.

Noma looks at me. "Look, the choice is yours. You might choose to stay and deal with a crazy lunatic baby mama who will always be part of your life together with a dishonest man or just chose yourself and save yourself from unnecessary drama. If he can't be honest with such who knows what he might lie about. He made you fall inlove with him on lies."

Sne laughs clapping her hands. "Nomandla! Ngeke girl! So much negativity, your advice is useless."

"I'm being honest. That girl will make Khosi's life a living hell."

“Khosi, everyone makes mistakes. I’m not perfect, you are not neither is Mrs Thing here perfect.” Sne says. “He lied, I acknowledge that and he shouldn’t have done that. You have every right to be upset but tell me, are you just going to drop everything because of this? That crazy girl is probably waiting for this to happen. I swear she is! I know how us ladies can be.”

“Snegugu don’t emotionally blackmail her into staying with a man who can’t be honest.”

“I’m not emotionally blackmailing her. I’m just trying to show her that she can’t just leave because of one mistake because then she will never build anything. This Sthe guy is human, you can’t crucify him as if he said he was perfect. He lied. Yes. He lied. He was wrong but do you think he wanted to lie? He was scared because he’s human too. If you want a perfect man Khosi then rather get clay soil and make one. Make one for me too while at it.”

“I don’t know what to do.”

“Do what you think is right.” Sne says taking a fruit from the picnic basket. The idea to come to the center was Noma’s. She got released a month and a few weeks ago. We are still waiting for the center to release Sne.

“Yeah.. Do what you think is right.” Noma says.

“But let me whisper something to you,” Sne says coming closer to me. “You may choose to raise this baby with Sthe.”

I laugh. “She would never allow it. Anaya hates me. She loathes me.”

“She doesn’t have a say. I mean.. Sthe is the father.”

I shake my head taking my juice. “Still. She would fight.”

Noma looks at Sne then at me. “Sne is crazy. Don’t listen to her.”

“Mina I’m just saying... This child can be equally hers. She has the man. Sthe can get the school days while Anaya gets the holidays. You can stand a chance of raising this baby.”

I look at Sne. “But...”

“Listen.. You tell Sthe to fight for the baby’s custody. This girl seems crazy to me. I mean, she’s still manipulative. He can prove to the court that she’s an unstable mother. She even held you guys at gunpoint some time and you have witnesses. The court will grant Sthe full custody of the child and you get to be the mother to the baby. The baby will be yours.”

I feel tears warm my cheeks. “I can’t have kids.”

“The baby will be your child.” Sne whispers.

“You think?”

“I know so.”

“Don’t listen to this crazy girl Khosi, there’s a reason why she’s still stuck in here.” Noma says.

“I’m trying to help her.”

“Your idea sucks. I think she should leave and find herself instead of looking for drama. This whole thing you are saying is unnecessary.”

“I think she stands a chance of being a mother.” Sne says defensively.

“Then she will always have that crazy girl in her life.”

“Khosi is sitting on the high chair. Anaya will only make Khosi’s life a living hell because Khosi would have let it. Look Khosi, you need to own your ground. Sthe is your man. You own the game.”

“Sne you deserve to be in this center I sweae. I hope they lock you up forever and throw away the key. You are crazy. Something is not right in your head.”

Their voices begin to trail off as I think about Sne’s opinion.

FORTY-SIX

I carefully walk inside the kitchen, they are cooking or rather mom is cooking and Rhea is making a mess. It's cute to watch but yet I feel tears stinging my eyes. Their bond is so strong, any person can feel it. I rub my eyes, I'm not going to cry. No.

"Khosi!" Rhea calls me. I look at her as she licks the wooden spoon with flour remains I guess. Mom turns and regards me with a wide smile.

"Hey baby, how did you sleep?"

"Well," I lie. I didn't sleep at all. Every time I closed my eyes I would see Anaya and her swollen belly.

"Good. We are making cupcakes, wanna help?"

I smile shaking my head. "I will pass." I say then settle on the kitchen stool. Mom just nods then goes back to what she was doing. She chats with Rhea throughout, laughing and giggling. I feel my throat tighten as I just stare at the mother-daughter moment.

"Baby girl!" Aunt says startling me. I jump off the stool then look at her. She laughs shaking her head.

"Where were you?" She asks. "Pluto?"

I shake my head smiling, even if forced it does look real to her. "Nowhere."

"You were supposed to be here 10 minutes ago Lerato."

Aunt rolls her eyes opening the fridge. She takes out cheese. She looks at it for a while then laughs.

"Vegan cheese? Really now?" She asks in shock. Mom says she's turning into a supporter of veganism. Well she has started already though she still cheats on herself most of the time.

"I told you I'm serious."

"Nokukhanya stop lying to yourself." Aunt says putting back the cheese. "Let's go and talk sweetheart," she says then takes my hand. I gladly walk out of the kitchen with her. We walk outside to the loungers near the pool then settle down.

"This week has really been messed up but good thing about it is that I managed to get a V. I. P ticket to the jazz concert." She says as soon as we sit. "How are you?"

"I'm fine."

"Lier! I saw what was happening in the kitchen." She says softly. "Wanna talk about it?"

I sigh. "There's nothing to talk about. I have accepted that I will never have such a bond with my mother."

She smiles taking my hand into hers. "There's nothing stopping you from having the kind of bond you want with your mother Khosi. It's only your fear."

I shake my head. It's not my fear, it's the truth. Mom and I will never have the bond she has with Rhea.

“I..—”

“Aunt!” Her high pitched voice says making me turn. She smiles brightly rubbing her belly.

“Hey girl! Wow! Is that pregnancy or there’s something inside that dress?” Aunt asks sounding fairly shocked.

Anaya laughs. “I’m pregnant.”

“Damn child are you just stupid or foolish foolish? Foolish to the power of two perhaps.”

Anaya laughs. I just want to push her inside the pool. The thought brings a smile to my lips.

“Aunt really now? I heard the family is planning on going on a vacation. Thought I would join with the preparations. I could really use a break.”

I laugh. I laugh really loud. She’s really working overtime.

“You want to travel with your pregnancy?” Aunt questions.

“Yeah, I spoke to my doctor and she gave me the go ahead.” She says rubbing her stomach. She’s wearing a tight dress which hugs her belly. She still has her slim figure together with her flawless skin.

“Your doctor needs to be fired. You can’t be travelling —” she’s cut short by her phone ringing. She stands up almost immediately then looks at us.

“Behave!” And with that, she walks away.

Anaya looks at me for a while before sitting on the lounge Aunt was sitting on.

“Hi Khosi, how are you?”

I stare at her for a while before smiling. “I’m well yourself?”

“The baby and I are ok. We went to the scan today with Sthe. You should have seen his face.” She says. “He’s so excited.”

My heart breaks at the thought of both of them together. “What gender is your baby?” I ask.

“It’s a girl.”

I stand up. “Well Sthe and I better start looking for baby names. Maybe we can call her..uhhh April. I like the name maybe.... Ava.”

“Honey, go get pregnant and name your own child. But oppsie! You can’t have kids. They had you eating your own womb. What a shame.”

“Chill... My man got you pregnant, I’m planning for his child who will also be mine. I’m about to step momma your daughter.”

She laughs. “Let me tell you one thing about Sthe, he...—”

“Don’t tell me anything about my man. I know everything. And I know that you are not pregnant.”

She raises her eyebrow. “Says who?”

“Says me. You are lying and you will be caught. You are a damn liar and I won’t let you break what I have with Sthe. That fake pregnancy of yours will be caught! “

“Sisi I’m pregnant. I’m going to give birth to a girl child.” She yells.

“Why are you getting worked up?”

“You are pathetic.”

“You need help. You need to deal with losing your father properly and whatever Sthe put you through. You. Need. Help.”

She stands up then slaps me across my face. I don’t flinch. “Never in your pathetic miserable life talk about my father!”

I rub my cheek. “You are depressed. You need help Anaya. Faking pregnancy will come back to haunt you. Sthe will find out and honestly I don’t think both you and I will like what will happen next.”

“Everything ok?” Aunt asks joining us. I step back from Anaya who’s breathing fire then settle on my lounge. “I’m fine.”

“Sthe was mine. And he’s mine. We are going to raise this baby together Khosi. Don’t be too angry. I know how this hurts but you will be fine.” Anaya says softly. I laugh. She really is demented. Aunt looks at me. I just shake my head chuckling. What a morning!

Anaya leaves after talking to mom in private. I don’t know if she’s still coming with but I’m hoping not. After the little talk we had in the morning, I’m no longer that much worried about her. The way she reacted to the confrontation tells me I’m on to something. Aunt escorts us to the mall. She keeps on making jokes till we bump into Simthandile in some shop.

“Khanya,” Sim says hugging mom.

“Hey, long time.” Mom says hugging her back making Aunt roll her eyes. I don’t get why Aunt really hates Sim, I mean.. She’s the one sleeping with her husband.

“It has. My husband and I have been trying for a baby.” Aunt’s chuckles rolling her eyes.

“You have? Congratulations.” Mom says making Sim smile. She looks happy.

“Thank you. It’s nice to see you Lerato, please tell my husband that he shouldn’t forget our dinner tonight. Don’t make him late. He’s a family man.”

“And who—” Simthandile raises her hand.

“No, you are the small house in my marriage Lerato, I’m the wife. Respect me. And one more thing, my husband is not going to leave me for you. He loves me, it’s a shame you let him use your body for sex. I hope you use protection, I don’t want diseases in my home.” Simthandile says then walks away.

“I told you!” Mom says as we walk further into the shop.

Aunt laughs. "Nokukhanya, at this stage, I'm not concerned. I don't care if your brother divorces that girl or not, as long as I'm getting good dick I'm good. She should thank me, if it wasn't for me he would have long left her and you know this."

Mom just shakes her head. One thing I know is that, when Aunt says she doesn't care, then she really doesn't. She's a straight shooter and she has no filters. Whatever that goes in her head comes out through her mouth and she's unapologetic about it. I'm glad we left Rhea at home with dad. He is supposed to drop her at one of her friend's party.

After shopping we finally go back home though Aunt doesn't come with us because she has a dick appointment she has to honour. Arriving home I'm shocked to find Zano with my dad laughing.

"Ohh, you guys are back. Guess who came to see you Khosi!" Dad says pointing at Zano. I smile when he smiles. I can't resist his friendly smile.

"Hello," mom greets with a smile. "How are you?"

"I'm fine mam and you?"

"I'm fine my boy, I'm going to put this aside." She says raising our shopping bags then walks away.

Zano stands up then walks towards me. I lead him outside. "Hey,"

"Hey, it's been time."

I chuckle. That it has. "Yeah.."

"You look beautiful, how are you?"

"I'm fine. I'm taking it one day at a time."

"I can see. Anyways there's something I wanted to talk to you about."

"Aww? Everything ok?"

"Yeah, everything is ok. Will be ok. I found the lady."

I'm confused. "Which lady?"

"The lady who had you sold." My heart leaps as I stare at him.

"What?" My voice is barely audible.

"I found her."

"She... You... What?"

"It wasn't easy because she was hiding but I got her. Don't worry about her. I will sort her out."

I nod feeling numb. "Ok."

"Yah, that's all. See you around." With that he walks away to his car I hadn't noticed. I suddenly feel hot and my palms starts to sweat.

Walking back inside the house I walk to my room then lock myself inside. Memories start playing in my head. Mom's voice which kept screaming in head. I clutch my forehead trying to silence them but the voices keep getting louder and louder. I close my eyes tightly and I see her. The way she had pretended to want to help me. I see the man who had promised me to take me to my mother. I see Eunice, her dead body. Memories of Sebastian reel me, his hands. The insults. His voice. The way he used to make men have fun with me. The beatings. The humiliation. I slowly make my way to the bathroom. Without taking my clothes off I stand under the shower then open the hot water. It almost scalds my skin but I stand still. I want scrub myself. Scrub away the pain. No matter what, it still haunts me. His voice still haunts me. His touch. His breath. I feel myself falling and there's just an inner voice trying to keep me holding on. I walk out of the bathroom dripping wet. I don't care. I take my phone from the bed. My fingers press his number and I place the phone on my ear and listen. The phone rings and the moment he answers, I break down. Words fail me. I barely hear what he's saying, the only thing I can hear is my cries. I drop the phone then curl my body into a ball.

KHANYA

"Babe you can't control everything." Kenya says as I pack our bags.

"I know I just... I wish Lerato can just stop. She's going to regret this."

"Lerato is a grown woman."

I sigh then sit on the bed beside him. "She's my sister. At the end I will be required to clean up the mess."

"You can't control a grown woman."

"Kenya?"

"Mhmm.."

I take his hand into mine. "Do you think Khosi is happy?"

"Well I think she's trying to adapt to everything and everyone. It will take time but she's a strong girl."

"I just want her to be happy."

"And she will be. Be patient."

"She's sneaking."

He laughs. "Don't tell you never sneaked. It's that age."

"I never sneaked. I was too poor to sneak. Too hungry. Most of the nights I stayed up in hunger. The nights were mom wouldn't have been paid for the work she would have done. Or those nights were Sma would have not managed stealing anything." I smile. "Mom always shouted at him for stealing but... She'd take whatever he would have stolen then feed us. I was sick most of the time so she'd give me the biggest portion and they both would watch me eat. My father had married again and was living the life. I

remember the time he let his dogs bite me. Sma and I had went to beg. To beg for food." I wipe away my tears. "It still hurts."

Kenya hugs me tightly. "I'm sorry baby."

We hug for a while before I stand up.

"I'm going to see what Khosi is packing. I think she needs help though she never asks."

"Do you ever ask?"

I laugh walking out. I walk to her room then try opening the door. It's locked.

"Khosi!" I call out knocking. For some reason I start panicking.

"Khosi!" I call out again knocking a bit more harshly. I'm getting worried now. She never locks the door even when sneaking.

"Baby open up, it's mommy.." My hands are shaking. I run back to my bedroom. Kenya is on the phone but he puts the phone away as soon as I walk in.

"Kenya.. Khosi.. The door."

"Look let me call you back later," he says then hangs up.

"What's wrong baby?"

"Khosi has locked herself in her room.. I'm scared."

"Fuck!"

We walk out but as soon as we step out, we are met by Sthembiso.

"Where's she?" He asks and the urgency in his voice twists my intestines.

"Room.." I manage. Kenya grabs a fire extinguisher from the bedroom then follows after Sthe. I'm vibrating with fear as they try to break open the door. The door don't budge and the next thing I know, Sthe has a gun in his hands. He shoots the door handle then kick the door open. I push him then thrust myself in the room. The image that stares back at me holds me to the ground in shock.

FORTY-SEVEN

I rush to her forcing my legs to move. She's so wet and she's shaking. Her body is rolled up in a ball. I swallow as I wrap my arms around her.

She's quiet and she's cold.

"Give us a moment," I say. Kenya and Sthembiso just stand staring at me.

"I can handle this, please give us some space." I repeat trying so hard to keep my tears at bay. They both retreat slowly. I stand up then pull her to the bed, it takes me a while. She's heavy. Her eyes are closed and her teeth keep rattling.

I slowly undress her. She still has some faint lines of her scars all over her body. I try ignoring them then get her warm clothes from the closet. I take some trackpants and a hoodie. Getting her dressed is a struggle but I manage.

"I'm sorry.." I apologize. She's now sleeping. I rack my mind for what I'm doing wrong. I'm trying not being too much, trying to give her space to breathe. They said if I come unto her too strong, I will scare her. I'm trying to take it one day at a time but it seems like that too is not working. I wipe away my tears with the back of my hand then lie besides her. I am up seconds later and walk to the bathroom then close the shower taps. My body flinches at the hot water. Walking back in her room I just stand there and stare. She looks peaceful in her sleep. A soft knock on the door pushes me forward and opening it, it's Kenya. He looks really worried.

"Hey.. How's she?"

"She's sleeping."

"Don't blame yourself for this.."

I shake my head. "I keep failing her. I'm really trying, I'm trying so hard. I stay up at night thinking of ways to just make her happy and I'm failing."

"This things take time babe, it's a journey to recovery."

"But I should have known she wasn't happy."

"She is happy. Something just triggered it. Her doctor did say we should expect this. A memory might have visited her."

"I should have looked harder." I say as I silently cry. "I should have looked harder Kenya."

"And you did. You went overboard. And she's finally here. Don't let this break what you have managed to build so far."

"She clicks so well with Lerato. Why can't we have that?"

“She may click so well with Lerato but she loves you. You know she does. Baby you need to learn how to walk first before you can run. Keep taking the baby steps. Be there for her.”

He hugs me tightly for a while.

“I think the young man wants to see her.” He says kissing my forehead.

“Go and confirm our flight as I call him up.”

“Kenya I don’t —”

“We all deserve and need this vacation. Especially Khosi. This will help her. She needs some fresh air. Go and confirm our flight.”

I nod then walk to our bedroom. I take my phone from my bed and go straight to her number. She doesn’t take long answering.

“Mrs Zulu, how are you?” She’s always nice.

“Khosi... She.. I think she had a relapse.”

“Is she ok?”

“She didn’t hurt herself. She was just.. She just fell in a dark trench.”

She’s quiet for a while. “She will be fine. Khosi is strong. She has come a long way.”

“I’m scared Patricia.”

“And it’s ok to be scared but this is normal. She will get there, she just needs your support and love.”

“What if... —”

“You need to start being positive. Radiate positive energy Mrs Zulu. Don’t leave room for sadness. When someone is recovering, they will pass all stages till they can be better again. We can’t just expect Khosi to be fine. Take what happened as motivation. Radiate love and happiness. Don’t leave room for sadness.”

“You think she will be fine.”

“No. I don’t think so, I know so. I will call her later, you don’t worry too much.”

“Ok,”

“Good. I should get going.”

“Ok bye,”

I drop the call then quickly confirm our flight. We are still leaving tomorrow at 9. Walking out of the bedroom I go downstairs. Kenya is in the kitchen finishing up preparing lunch.

“I’m going to collect Rhea.” I announce.

“Ok, babe how’s Khosi’s Aunt doing?”

I take a deep breath to keep calm myself down. "That woman is not Khosi's Aunt. And she's fine, she's a cleaner and she has a monthly salary."

"Don't you think Khosi needs to meet her Father's family?"

"No. I don't think so Kenya. And don't get it twisted, I'm over what that family did to me but I'd rather keep such out of my life for good. Khosi doesn't need them. She's fine without them." I say in a calm manner then kiss his cheek. "I will be back just now."

Walking out I decide to drive to the mall first. Her journal is almost finished and no, I didn't read it. Maybe I did, just a few sentences but I did read the part where she wished I got along with Sthembiso. Getting at the mall I browse around till I finally find a journal I think she would like. I just have to make it look good. I get some ice cream and a few snacks before finally driving over to Mrs Maurice's house. Her daughter, Veronica, is Rhea's best friend at school.

Getting her I drive straight home.

"I'm going to give this to Khosi." She says looking at her half eaten piece of cake which is on a serviette.

I smile. "She would love that baby."

Arriving at home, Sthembiso is gone and Khosi is awake. She doesn't look like the girl I found rolled up in her bedroom. Matter of fact, she's laughing with Kenya.

"Khosi!" Rhea screams running to her sister but before she can reach, she trips then falls and the cake lands on the floor.

"Hey..." Khosi says helping her up. "You need to be careful."

"I brought that for you." Rhea says picking the cake up. She's close to crying but she bites her lower lip. Khosi used to do the same. She never liked crying even though most of the time she would cry at the end.

"Ohh thank you," she says taking it then hugs her tightly. "I can't eat it now but thank you for bringing it for me. I love you so much."

Rhea smiles. "I love you too."

"There's a cake in the fridge, we will eat it. Now go and change."

Rhea runs to the stairs.

"No running!" I scream but she's already gone.

Kenya kisses my cheek then walks out of the dining room leaving me with Khosi.

"I'm sorry," she says.

This child!

I draw near her then hug her. "Don't be sorry. It's ok."

"I know I keep..—"

"It's fine. It will take time till you are better." I say looking in her eyes. "And I'm always going to be on your side the whole journey. We will reach the final stage together."

"Memories just..."

"I know. It's ok. I bought you something." I say giving her the gift bag.

She curiously takes it then opens it. She laughs. "I knew you read!"

I feign an innocent look. "What are you talking about?"

"Mom you are a helpless liar no offense!"

I sit down. "I don't know what you talking about. I bought some ice cream. It's in the kitchen. Maybe we can have a girl's night."

She chuckles nodding. "Thank you." She says holding the journal up.

"You are most welcome." I respond then she walks away with her smile intact. As soon as she is out of sight I take my phone and call Josh. Lunzulu's lawyer.

"Mrs Zulu."

"Josh, it's Anaya. She came by earlier on. She says she wants her money."

"Lunzulu said it should only be given to her when she has matured. Has she?" He asks.

"I have been trying to help her for years now. She doesn't want my help nor does she listen to me. I forced her to some center and she's out now pregnant. I don't know but she's disturbing my daughter's recovery."

"Do you think we should give her the money?"

"Yes. If she blows it all, she will learn. She will see the need to put her life to order. She's a grown woman and I can't keep forcing myself. I have washed my hands off her. Give her the money."

"I will send the documents tonight so you sign them."

"Good."

KHOSI

Lunch passes over dad's jokes and laughter. I feel much better. I spoke to Pat and she just drew me back into my road. She's awesome. I told her about about the lady and for the millionth time she explained why letting go and forgiving was important than being angry and holding grudges. Forgiving that woman is going to take time but if that is what I need for my own peace then I am willing to do it.

After lunch Mom forces Rhea and I to start packing. I'm glad my little stunt didn't jeopardize anything.

My phone rings as soon as I get in my room and I answer it walking to the bathroom. The last time I spoke to him in front of Rhea, she snitched.

"Hey.. I'm fine." I say quickly before he can ask.

"Is your mother back?"

"Yes and we are still going."

"Ok. You will find me waiting for you when you come back. I'm sure you would have had enough of a break."

I chuckle. "Yeah.. Hey, did you take Anaya to the doctor?"

He's silent for a while. "Yeah."

"Did you see the baby?"

"Yeah."

She's really smart. I'm going to let her play her game but I will catch her.

"I'm glad you are not abandoning your child." I say though I know there's no child.

"Thanks, I'm really sorry baby.."

"It's ok. We will talk when I come back."

"I still love you."

"Good for you." I say with a smile then hang up. Walking out of the bathroom I find Rhea with almost all her clothes on the floor.

Lord help me!

•

We all walk to our gate. Our bags have already been taken and Rhea keeps jumping up and down in excitement.

"We are going to the beach!" She screams to anyone who's willing to hear. Last night we had spent it watching movies while eating ice cream. Dad had to make himself scarce mom emphasized the fact that it was a girl's night.

Getting to our terminal gate, our flight is being announced. Mom and Rhea lead the way to the plane, I'm so glad Anaya is not here. As I begin to follow Dad pats my back.

"I think he's here for you." He whispers making me look back in confusion. All blood drains from my face as I look at Sthe. What is he doing here?

"Be quick. You don't want to be left." Dad says then walks away. I quickly walk towards him.

"What are you doing here?" I ask.

“You look beautiful.” He says looking at my floral dress, I blush for a second there.

“What are you doing here?”

He grabs my waist then kisses me, hard. I kiss him back almost immediately. I missed him.. So much.

“I missed you..” He whispers.

“I missed you too..” He let’s me go then start walking following the crowd that is walking to the plane.

“Where are you going?”

“I’m catching my flight.” My mouth drops open. I rush towards him.

“You are coming with?”

“Yes..”

“Why?”

“Because I love you and I’m not about to lose you to some Tanzanian man.” He says with no shame.

“You are not even ashamed.”

“Nope!” He says then takes my hand still walking. “I told Alwande and myself that one day I’m going to marry you and I’m going to. Doesn’t matter how long it takes.”

I huff, why does he have to be so crazy?

“I love you Khosi.”

I look at him. “I love you too.”

He smiles then kisses my hand.

2 MONTHS LATER

FORTY-EIGHT

He hands me my cocktail with a wide smile. "I call this the Thabang rush!" I giggle.

"It looks good." I say then take a sip. It tastes so good, like the way it looks. I like it.

"I like it."

He chuckles. "I told you there's a reason they call me Thabang, I make nothing but the best."

And he does. Ever since we came here, capetown, two days ago, he has been my favorite bartender. His little bar is located near the beach. I'm always here tasting each and every cocktail he makes.

I'm here on vacation and Sthe, my sponsor for the trip, is here on business.

"You are definitely the best. You should—"

"You should be in the water, not here." Sthe says hugging me from behind. My body instinctively reacts at his hard body. I turn around and look at him. I wrap one arm around his waist then kiss his naked broad chest.

"Hey.."

"Let's go." He says already leading me away.

"Cocktail?" Thabang asks, smugness lacing his voice. Sthe just clicks his tongue as we keep walking. He hates Thabang. I think the reason he always comes back early from his meetings is to make sure that no one talks to me, no one meaning male company. We walk to the beach in silence. Mom, Dad and Rhea went to Swaziland, they are attending a wedding, someone from Dad's side of the family is getting married. I chose to follow my man and let the family go for the wedding. Of course with Aunt Lerato on my side, mom said yes. Either way she was just too excited to go.

"You should really try his cocktails." I say knowing just how he's going to react. He looks cute when jealous. "They are the best."

"I don't need to try any of his cocktails. He does what any other bartender does. There's no secret ingredient. Just lies." I laugh.

"So much salt!"

"Mxm... Why are you even entertaining him?"

I try so hard to keep a straight face. "Sthe I'm just trying to be nice."

"Yeah I'm sure if I be nice to that lady you will be much pleased." He says looking ahead at the white lady wearing white bikini's.

I hug him with one hand pressing my body on his. "You came back early. We have a lot of time I'm our hands." I tell him. "Maybe we can get a little naughty." I whisper the last part feeling so confident. I think it's the cocktails. I have had a number of those in the last 30minutes — courtesy of having the best luring bartender.

He looks at me for a while. We haven't had sex in a long time and I want him. If I could, I would let him have me right here in front of everyone.

"I don't—"

"We will be quick." I say already pulling him back to the beach house, his beach house. Just one of the properties he owns. It's a 5 minutes distance from the beach. I have to abandon my cocktail as soon as we get at the house. He's a little skeptical but I don't give him a chance to think everything through. I kiss him, taking him by surprise. He recovers quickly overtaking me and taking control. He likes being in control, in most things. I can't say he's a control freak as such but he's just stubborn. He would argue with you till you just let him win.

But on bed, he likes being on full control, always. He's dominating in the bedroom and I don't even ask questions because I love it.

"This is so hot for me." He whispers against my lips. I chuckle then step back from him and remove the short floral dress I'm putting on. I pull it over my head so that I'm left only in my panties and bra.

"Hot is good." I say slowly pulling my panties down. He just stares with nothing reflecting in his eyes than lust. I know I've got him right in the middle of my hand.

"There's something exciting being so hot for each other." I say then remove my bra. I may still hate the reflection I see on the mirror, I may still loathe it but he loves my naked body. I think if I put much thought into it, I might get him to do anything for me under the influence. I look down on his pants, he's hard already. His erection is stained on his shorts. I catwalk towards him then pull him to the bed, I feel slightly guilty. I had to diss my family for dick. Aunt said if it's good I should stick it in, that woman's craziness is on steroids.

I walk back to the door then lock it. I'm not sure if the helper is still here not I'm not about to take the risk.

He's just staring. His expression, his lust expression makes him look so sexy. I walk towards the bed then push him down so that he's lying down. I pull his shorts down a bit together with his briefs then grasp him in my hand. I don't wait for him to react but immediately pull him in my mouth. I take almost all of him and he hits the back of my throat. I suck him hard making him curse pulling my hair.

"Fuck babe.."

He grips my head then starts fucking my mouth from beneath. I have to breathe through my nostrils as I swirl my tongue around him playing with his balls. He soon loses control and moves deeper and deeper in my mouth. I try keeping a little control as he totally takes over the situation. Soon his groaning loudly as he comes in my mouth. I swallow every drop moving from him.

He opens his eyes slowly then looks at me with a smirk.

"Do you want an award?" He asks, his voice so deep and husky. His sexiness has me moving my hand south. He just stares at me as I put one leg on his thigh and continue moving my hand further south. I start rubbing myself while staring at him.

Seconds don't even pass, next thing I know is, he's up from the bed and I have my back against the wall while he pounds me hard against the wall. He's hitting me hard and good and every thrust pushes over the edge. Over and over again he moves till I start vibrating. The feeling is so intense and he's relentless.

"Sthe!" I call out so loud as my orgasm hits me hard. He keeps on going prolonging it till he releases deep in me with a strained groan.

"Fuck I love you!" He whispers as I try getting my breath to normal.

"I love you too." Slowly he pulls out then leads me to the bed.

We lie there, our bodies tangled with each other.

"Sthe.." I start.

"Hmm?"

"Do you think Anaya is pregnant?"

He's quiet for a while. "What do you mean?"

"Do you think she's pregnant?"

He makes me look at him. "As much as I wish she wasn't, she is and I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. She... I have no excuse. I'm really sorry."

I kiss his chest. "It's ok. Are you happy?"

I can see he's debating on what to say to me. "You are happy aren't you? Don't lie.."

"Babe.."

I sigh then rest my head on his chest. "You said you saw the baby on the last checkup... You were there during the scan?"

"Yeah.. I want to be part of this pregnancy, I don't want to neglect my child." He says softly.

I take in a deep breath then get off him and sit up straight.

"What if... What if she's not pregnant?" I finally ask.

"What are you trying to say?"

"What if she's faking this whole pregnancy?"

He laughs. "I thought about that, I saw her belly and the scans always prove that she is."

"Yeah I know but... But what if she's paying the doctors to lie to you? What if she—"

"I slept with her without protection. I may have been drunk but I remember there was no protection. I did a count, she's pregnant and it's my baby." He says, his voice has slightly changed.

"I'm not trying to anger you but I think she's playing you for a fool. I don't think she's pregnant. I think she's lying to you so that she can just come between us."

"Is my child going to come between us?" His tone is full of accusation.

"No. You don't understand.. Sthe I think Anaya is lying. I think she's going to steal or buy a baby." Sthe chuckles getting up from the bed. He quickly starts dressing.

"Where are you gong?"

"Your chef is probably done with the food. I have to collect it." He says pulling on his T-shirt. I get off bed then face him.

"I'm not being jealous or trying to be. I'm just trying to look after you. I am happy when you are."

"Then why are you...—"

"I know that you may think I'm being negative but I'm only trying to help."

"I will see you." He says already walking to the door. I grab his hand.

"Sthe I'm looking out for you. Anaya is lying to you. She's lying. She's not pregnant."

He kisses me briefly and he walks out. I don't even know what to say to make him see but I knew he would react like this. Of cause I look like a jealous girlfriend but I can't let her play with his feelings like this anymore. I have been trying to come eith wayd to expose her, I ecdn visted her doctor. Whatever amount she's giving him must be a lot because he refused to talk. Surprisingly she won't visit any other doctor who's not her doctor. She's now 8 months and she's still faking. I don't even know what to do to expose her anymore. I can't come at her physically, Sthe won't like it. He's so protective because he believes she's carrying his child. As I sit on the bed, his phone starts ringing. It on his bedside. I quickly take it and her name flash. She always calls, even at night. She never stops. I know she does it to annoy me but if it has nothing to do with the baby, he always hangs up. I like the fact that he always tries to make me feel part of his fake journey. The time he wanted to take me with to the scan, Anaya refused. She even cried but sadly no one comforted her. We just watched till she kept quiet.

I answer. "Anaya,"

"Give my daughter's father his phone."

"What do you want?"

"It has nothing to do with you. Give it to him."

"He's my man, it has everything to do with me. If you want—"

"You are so scared aren't you?"

I laugh then quickly press record call. "Scared of what? You should be the one scared. I'm sure you are trying to figure out how you are going to steal a baby."

"I'm going to give birth to—"

"Oh cut the crap Anaya! You are the last person God would bless with a baby. You are too rotten to carry an innocent soul."

“Rotten? You are the rotten one. You are so cheap. So damaged. That’s why they used to fuck you like a dog. You are so loose.”

“He loves me still.”

“It’s only a matter of time. Once my little Gail arrives, he will leave you.”

“You mean the child you are going to steal? You should be ashamed of yourself. Faking pregnancy to get a man. He doesn’t love you Anaya. Not even that fake pregnancy will.”

“He does!” She screams. “He will. Who will believe you? He’s going to love the stolen baby like his and he will leave you. He won’t believe the crap that you will say. I have everything covered and when I’m done with you, you will feel it in your blood veins.”

I smile. “He’s going to find out that you are not pregnant.”

“He already believes I am. And ohh get ready. Next week I’m giving birth.” She says then drops the call. Just then Sthe walks right back in holding a box of pizza. He looks at me then his phone in my hands. He carefully places the box on the bed.

“What are you doing with my phone?” He finally asks, his voice even.

I hold of out to him then press play. “Listen. I have proof.” He just looks at me as the call starts playing.

FORTY-NINE

His eyes darkens as the call plays, his whole face changes. Anger, pain then more anger takes over his face. He rolls his fingers into a fist and I can see all the veins in his arms pop. The call stops playing after a while and there is silence. His nose flares.

I clear my throat. "This is what I have been trying to say. She's lying to you babe. She's not pregnant. She just wants.. She wants you. She's obsessed."

He stands still in silence. I can't read his expression anymore, it has totally turned bleak.

Finally he opens his mouth. "Pack your things. We are going home." He says. His voice firm leaving no space for debate. I automatically find myself walking over to my clothes. I don't bother folding them, I throw them inside the bag. Together with his too. I'm dying to reach out to him but I'm scared. Seconds ago he looked beyond angry and now I can't even read him. His expression is beyond blank. I quickly put on some jeans and T-shirt as he dresses in black sweatpants and a hoodie. Closing the bag he takes it from me then walks out leaving me putting on my flip flops. I run after him to the car. He drives like maniac to the airport. I grip the seat tightly as the car flies, I'm surprised we reach the airport safely. I'm beginning to wonder perhaps I shouldn't have broken the news the way I did. But then, she has gone too far. He doesn't say anything as we get in his private jet. He's loaded, or beyond. But I really don't care.

"Sthe.. Are you ok?" I finally ask as the steward announces that we are about to depart, Moagi.

Sthe looks at me then smiles. His smile unsettles me. The way he's smiling makes my intestines knot.

"Why won't I be?"

"Anaya.. She.. She needs help."

"And she will receive the help she needs." Something tells me what I'm hearing is not what he means. I'm beginning to get scared. I don't want him to hurt her. I just want her out of lives now that Sthe knows the truth. I just want her far from us.

"Are you going to hurt her?" I blurt, my voice comes off as a whisper.

He stares at me for a while then he narrows his eyes. "Why would you ask me that?"

"You are angry."

"Says who?"

"Sthe..." I take his hand. "I know you. I might not really know everything but I think I know most of it. You are angry. Please don't hurt her. She just needs professional help."

"Professional help?!" He screams. I don't flinch at his outburst. Not that I'm not scared but I refuse to fear my own man.

"Yes. She needs help. She never dealt with the loss of her father. She never dealt with whatever that you put her through because you hadn't gotten over Thuli. She's been dealing with a lot and instead of taking it head on, she's been sweeping it under the mat. She just needs a chance to get help."

“She fucken lied to me! She’s been playing me for a fucken damn fool! All this while! All this fucken while taking me for a fool! She’s going to pay.”

I look at him as he yells. He is just too angry.

“I love you. I love you but I won’t let you hurt her.”

He looks at me with a menacing look, my throat clogs but I keep an impassive expression. I am not going to let him see just how much he is scaring me.

“I’m not going to watch you ruin Alwande’s future. He still needs his father. The last thing I want for him is to see his father through prison walls. I won’t let you traumatize my son like that Sthembiso Dlamini. I’m too young to be dealing with such nonsense.”

He frustrately rubs his face. His jaw has tightened.

“She lied to me dammit Khosi!”

He’s hurt, I know but I’m not going to let him hurt her. As soon as the private jet lands he unbuckles himself and leaves me struggling with my own belt. I have to run after him. He doesn’t wait for our bag and neither do I. I run after him till we are by a car. His car possibly. He has a lot of those. He unlocks it then climbs inside. I too don’t waste time. He starts the car and instead of driving home, he takes a different direction.

“Where are we going Sthe?” I ask, my head pondering on whatever he’s thinking.

He doesn’t reply, he just ignores me. After 15 minutes of him putting me near death experience because of his maniac driving, he finally parks the car in front of some house. As he steps out, the door opens and Nathi steps out. Sthe doesn’t come to my door, he just walks towards Nathi. Whatever he’s telling him, Nathi looks angry. Or beyond. I don’t know, I can’t tell and I think he keeps saying “fuck” though I’m not sure. My lip reading skills are not that good.

5 minutes later Sthe is back at the car, by my door. He opens the door and a cold breeze greets me.

“I’m leaving you here, I will come back for you. Nathi’s wife is here. She will keep you company.”

I look at him grasping every word he says.

I start shaking my head. “You are not leaving me here Sthe! We are going home!”

“Do you want to step out of the car willingly or you want to do it the hard way?”

“I can’t believe you! You are not leaving me here Sthe! Take me back to my house. Right now!” I demand.

“Khosi either you walk or I pick you. You choose. I’m not in the mood for games.”

I huff then fold my arms on my chest daring him.

I yelp as he pulls me out of the car then throws me over his shoulder easily.

“Put me down!” I scream but I’m talking to myself. Nathi emerges through the door again but this time wearing some dungaree and some boots with a bucket hat. She steps inside the house with me then places me down.

“I will be back.” He says turning.

“If you leave me here, we are done!” I threaten but he doesn’t stop or even turn. He just walks out closing the door behind him. Seconds later I hear the car driving off. I’m shaking, legit vibrating. I’m scared about what he’s going to do. God knows I don’t want anything happening to her. Yes she lied but.. She needs help. Professional help.

“Hello..” A melodic voice says pulling me from my trail of thoughts. I turn almost immediately and there’s a lady looking at me with a wide smile. She’s beautiful. Too beautiful and tall. She looks so reserved as she regards me with a very polite and kind smile.

“Hi, I’m Sarafina, Sara, you are?” Her melodic voices drums in my head and somehow I’m calm.

“Khosi,” I manage.

“Oh.. Finally meeting the one and only Khosi, Sthe’s Khosi.” She walks towards me then enfold me in her arms much to my surprise. I’m dazed but soon I recover. She steps away from me then takes my hand. She leads me to the kitchen and I finally take in a moment to drink in her house. Its beautiful and there’s a lot of space. There’s a wide range of warm colors.

“How are you?” She asks.

“Where are they going?” I ask.

She shrugs. “I don’t know but they will be back. Don’t worry.”

“He’s going to hurt her.”

Her eyes swip towards mine. “Who?”

There’s no curiosity in her voice.

“Anaya..”

“Ah..”

The way she says ‘ah’ makes me more worried.

“You know her?”

She smiles. “Yes.”

“You are Nathi’s wife?”

She smiles again. “Yes. Want something to drink? You need to calm down.” She says opening her double door fridge. She takes out wine then goes to her kitchen unit and takes out two glasses. She pours the wine into two glasses then hands me one.

“You need to relax. They will be back.”

"I don't want her hurt." I mutter. I know Sara is not much help. Matter of fact, I just don't even understand her. She starts drinking her wine.

"I like your hair." She comments. It's still red. I badly want to change the color but I really don't have the guts.

"Thank you. You have a beautiful home."

She smiles. "Thank you. I'm so glad I have met you. Sthe has been keeping you from everyone." I feel guilty, slightly. He wanted to introduce me but I refused. Looking at Sara I'm actually glad I did. I don't fit in. She looks like one of those fancy women. Not the type of crowd I go for.

"You are so beautiful, where are you guys coming from?"

"Capetown."

She nods then sips on her wine. "Alwande is really fond of you."

I look at her wondering just how much Alwande has told her. His mouth can be really runny. Sometimes he ends up disclosing things he shouldn't be disclosing.

"I love him." I respond making her smile. "Thuli is happy wherever she was."

"You knew her?"

"Yeah. She was a wonderful person. I swear in her eyes, everyone was an Angel. She was so carefree and loving. She loved everyone and brought out the best out of everyone."

I nod sipping the wine. "Everyone knew her?" I ask curiously.

"Everyone having to be me, Nathi, Zano, Khuli, Siphoh, Felicia and Lloyd. Yeah.. We knew her."

I look at her, I only know Nathi, Zano and now her. She's smiling. I put the glass down.

"But don't worry. Sthe loves you. You are not a replacement or rebound. He even moved out of his old house. All thanks to you."

I nod. A lot of things swim in my head but mostly Thuli. My imagination runs wild as I try to imagine her.

"And all thanks to you, Alwande has a new mom. He loves you."

"I know."

She nods then finishes her wine. "I was watching TV, you can join me." I follow her to her huge living room. I sit down looking at the TV. Seconds pass and I'm already locked up in my own thoughts. A lot is going on in my head. Almost two hours of the movie I just sit there and watch the TV color change from dull to very colorful.

As the movies credits springs to the screen, I hear their voices. They are back. I remain sitted as they appear. They look normal. I badly want to question Sthe but I don't have the energy.

He looks at me. "Let's go." He says pulling me up. "Let's go home. Good night Sara."

Sara smiles as Nathi hugs her. "Night to you too Sthe. You too Khosi." I just nod then let him lead me back to the car. He opens the door and I get inside his car. As soon as the car starts moving I finally ask just one question.

"Did you kill her?"

He's quiet for a while. "No."

I look out through the window as he drives to his house. The whole journey is filled with silence. It's not comfortable silence but tolerable. I don't even know what to say.

Arriving to his house I immediately walk to his bedroom. I take off the flips flops and crawl on the bed closing my eyes.

After a while I feel his weight on the bed and seconds later he's kissing my cheek.

"Did you kill her Sthe?" I ask again.

"She fell. I didn't touch her. She was running." He says.

"She fell?"

"Yeah.. Down the stairs. She was running.. From me. She was running after I told her I would catch her even if she ran."

"She's dead?" I can barely hear my own voice.

"No. She's in hospital. I think. I'm not sure but for her sake she better be dead. It's better to die by mistake not the way I'm going to kill her if she's alive,"

FIFTY

Mom is the first one to walk in, she's all smiles and she looks beautiful. Swaziland really has done her good.

"Hey baby... Wow! You look beautiful."

I smile, of course she would say that. Even if I am wearing a sack, she will always say I'm beautiful.

"You too, you are glowing." She hugs me giggling.

"I was inhaling fresh air. How are you?"

I smile, "I'm fine. Where's —" I'm cut short by a loud screech. I laugh as Rhea throws herself at me. This day she has gained weight, she's a bit chubby. I can't pick her up, Alwande too.

"I missed you. I bought you this," she said handing me a bracelet. I take it and it has letters spelling my name.

"Aw.. Thank you."

She smiles, she's beautiful. "Did you miss me?"

I chuckle. It's a trick question. "Yes. I missed you so so so so much."

Her bright smile warms my heart. I did miss them.

"Khosi," Dad says entering the living room. I smile at him, they all look good.

"Dad,"

"How are you?"

"I'm fine. Uhh there's food." I say pointing to the dining room. Mom smiles with shock.

"I ordered it." I say already walking to the dining room, I can't cook, she knows this better than anyone. They all follow me. I had to order this through Aunt Lerato.

"It's the thought that counts," she says squeezing my hand.

We all settle and they begin telling me about the wedding. I sit, eating and listening. Rhea can't stop talking about the friend she made at the restaurant. The fact that she's white and has red hair like me made Rhea like her more because according to her, she's my smaller twin. I don't know how her brain works but it does make sense to her.

"So what did you do?" Mom asks as we clear the table. Dad and Khosi have disappeared to the garage. They are setting up Rhea's bicycle.

"Nothing.."

She eyes me then smiles. "Really?"

“Yeah..” I lie. I’m too shy to tell her what happened. That I went off with my boyfriend an hour after they left.

She laughs. “Liar! You can tell me.”

“Mom!”

“You can tell me. Feel free.. You guys are serious.”

I look at her then smile. “Yeah..”

“I mean serious serious. You look so in love. At first and still now, I don’t really like him but he makes you happy. That’s all that matters to me. Your happiness.”

“I love you.”

“I love you more baby. I love you so much.”

I take in a deep breath. “I want to meet my family.” I finally say. She stops what she’s doing then looks at me.

“What?”

“My father’s family.”

“You don’t have to—”

I take her hand into mine. Aunt Lerato did tell me what they put both her and me through.

“I just want to see them. To show them that we made it.” She smiles tearfully then hugs me tightly. I wrap my arms around her. We stay like that for a while and when she finally steps back she smiles.

“We will go together. I love you.”

“I love you more.”

We continue with the dishes. When we finish she excuses herself to make phonecalls. She doesn’t take 5 minutes and she’s back. She looks so confused and scared.

“Everything ok?”

“Anaya..” She says. My heart momentarily stops beating. Last night I didn’t sleep, even after Sthe told me what happened. I look at mom scared of what’s about to come out of her mouth.

“What happened?”

“She.. She fell.”

I blink swallowing hard. “She’s.. Is she ok?”

“No.. She passed.”

All blood from my face drains as I look at mom. I’m not comprehending.

“No.. She..”

“She was not pregnant. She suffered too many head injuries.. She.. I can’t believe this. I’m going to the hospital.”

She says already rushing to the door.

“I’m coming with..”

“No. Stay!” And she’s out. I’m left hyperventilating. I force my legs to move till I get to my room. Getting my phone I dial his number. I’m shaking.

He doesn’t take long to answer.

“Mr Dlamini’s phone hello?”

I do the breathing exercises. “Hello?” The female voice says sounding impatient.

“This is Khosi, can I speak to Mr Dlamini.”

“He’s...” There’s silence then I hear her speaking to someone though I don’t catch what she’s saying.

Seconds later I hear his voice. “Babe,”

“Sthe..”

“Is everything ok?”

“Anaya is dead.” I say and it still sounds unreal.

“I heard.”

I choke. “You heard?”

“Yeah..”

“You said you didn’t kill her.”

“And I didn’t.”

“Sthe..”

“I did not kill her. She fell on her own.” His voice sounds clipped.

“How am I supposed to live with myself Sthe?”

“Perfectly. Khosi I did not kill her, you need to believe me. Come on, this is starting to annoy me. Is this where we are now?”

I sigh. “Sthe what happened?”

“You know what happened.”

There’s silence and I can’t control my mouth anymore. “I will still love you.”

He chuckles. “It’s good to know. I didn’t kill her. She fell.”

“You didn’t kill her?”

“No.”

“Ok.”

“Can I see you?”

“My mom.. I think she needs me.”

“I will collect you during lunch. I will bring you back.”

“Ok.”

“I love you..”

“I love you, too.”

He drops the call. It’s just hard to believe she just fell on her own.

Mom is back two hours later and Anaya is really dead. The same story Sthe is telling, Mom recite it. She fell and broke her neck and she has a lot of head injuries. She suffered from internal bleeding and she died in hospital last night and she wasn’t pregnant. Mom is hurt, she blames herself. I wish I can just make her pain go away but Dad says she needs time.

An hour late, Aunt Lerato has arrived and after her, Uncle Sma and Sim also arrive.

“Hey, are you OK?” Aunt asks.

“I just can’t believe it.”

She shrugs then sits back on the outdoor chairs with me.

“I expected it.”

I look at in shock. “You did?”

“Yeah. She was... She was too broken. It was either she was going to commit suicide or someone was going to do it for her. She has hurt a lot of people in the midst of her own hurt.”

“She has?”

“She has. She has always... had always been a little off. Even with her father alive. After he died she just did a lot. She almost killed your mother sometime. She almost did because Khanya did go to the hospital — thank heavens we found her early. Anaya poisoned her. Besides that, she mistreated Rhea and even that kid you love like your own. The boy you love, the reason why he emotionally abused her was because she kept abusing his son emotionally too so either way, she was bound to die.”

I’m shocked. I can’t believe I’m hearing this.

“No matter how much we tried to help her, she just never took the help. Yes it is sad that we lost her but honestly a part of me is relieved.”

“She lied about the pregnancy.”

“It’s not the first time.”

"It's not?"

"The first time she lost the baby, she didn't tell him and just pretended to still be pregnant. She managed to get away with that, and I think that's why he has always had a soft spot on her, Sthe I mean.. She made Sthe believe it was his fault. That's the reason your mom didn't want him for you, he had a lot to deal with."

"Do you think her father is angry at mom?"

Aunt smiles shaking her head. "No. He's proud of her. She did her best. She put her all. He's proud of her. Even her Anaya's mother."

"I have to go... Well Sthe is coming." I look at my watch. "In 3 minutes."

"He's taking you out?" I nod.

"It's OK. You can go, but be careful."

I smile then kiss her cheek. "You are the best."

I walk to the gate and no one asks me anything. Stepping out I go down the street as I pass the third yard, I spot his car coming my way. Getting inside he kisses me hard, taking me by surprise but yet I get so lost in the kiss.

"Hey."

I blush, his voice sounds so seductive. He knows which buttons to press. He caresses his lips against mine then kisses me one last time before setting me free.

He starts driving. "How's your mom?"

I look at him then think for a while.

"She will be fine."

"Good. Still questioning my innocence?" The way he asks makes me feel guilty for even asking him such questions.

"I'm sorry. I just.."

He takes my hand into his. "It's OK. You are human. I didn't kill her, I wanted to and I was going to but she fell. On her own."

I nod. Of course I don't fully believe that but I don't question him. I'm starting to feel slightly relieved, no more drama hopefully.

"It's ok."

He takes my hand and kisses it. I love the way it feels when he shows such affection to me. He doesn't hold back and God, he's not embarrassed. He's not embarrassed that he's with me. He's not embarrassed of me. He loves me. He's not perfect, he's not even close to being perfect. But perfect or not, he's my black knight and I love him.

He drives to his house, Alwande is visiting his Granny. He's coming back in two weeks.

Arriving, before I can even ask what we are doing in his house, he kisses me pouring all his heart into the kiss. I wrap my arms around his neck and kiss him back.

"I love you," he whispers against my lips.

"I love you too."

"I know." He takes my hand then leads me to his bedroom. A lot is going on in my head and curiosity is first on the list. We get in his bedroom and I'm welcomed by flowers. On the floor and the bed.

"Wow!" I exclaim looking around. This is not close to what I was suspecting, it sweeps my heart away. I look at him.

"Sthe this is beautiful. I love it. What's the occasion?" The way he's looking at me is unexplainable, his expression.. I can't explain.

I smile warily. "Everything ok?"

He nods. "Yeah." He takes my hands into his. "I love you. I'm not perfect, I'm not a perfect man and I won't even try to be but I can try really being a better man for you. I know I have a lot of shit following me and thank God you are still here with me. For the longest time I thought Thuli was going to be the only one even in her grave but God just showed me otherwise. She was a season, a season to teach me how to love and prepare me to love the one who's meant for me. When I first met you, I didn't think it was you. But now that I know, I'm willing to do anything to have you by my side, to love you. I'm willing to kill for you, I'm willing to fight for our love no matter the odds. You are my life, you and my son and I wouldn't trade you for anything."

I feel tears sting my eyes and I blink them away. "I love you." I say. He kisses me producing something from his pocket. A tiny little box. Gracefully, in a suit looking formal as ever, he sinks to the floor on one knee and opens the tiny box. I feel the air around me thicken as I look at the sparkling ring. This is not happening. My head is racing and I can't get hold of my emotions.

"Khosi Khumalo, I love you with my all and I want to love you forever. I want to make you happy for as long as I live, I want to be the one you rejoice your happiness with, the one to wipe away your tears when sad. I'm bad at this so to cut the whole story short, marry me baby."

I feel tears wet my cheeks, I have never imagined this moment in my life because after Sebastian kidnapped me, I never could think of anyone loving me the way Sthe does. I never imagined being able to open up my heart for someone else. I look at him and I find myself nodding. He smiles childishly and damn he looks exactly like Alwande. Slowly he takes off the sparkling ring from the box then slides it on my finger. It fits perfectly and I love it.

"I love you Sthe," I say as he stands up. Wrapping his arms around me he kisses me emotionally and passionately.

"That's why we are getting married."

FIFTY-ONE

We walk inside the small house together. I hold my breath trying to fight with the smell in the house — room to be exact. It's too small, too stuffed, too dirty and too smelly but I don't react visibly. Mom is right by my side and she's not pretending. She has a disgusted facial expression. Her eyes scan the place, there's a tiny bed at the corner of the room and some blankets. My father's sister is sitting on that bed nursing the child she had the last time. He looks so ill.

"Nokukhanya," my father's sister says standing up. I can't see the other older girl though the small boy is sitted at the far corner of the room. His eyes are reddish and God he looks so dirty.

"Erin.."

"Hello... Khosi," she says looking at me. She's wearing an very oversized T-shirt and trouser. I doubt she's this dark in complexion just poverty having her hard.

I feel sorry for her.

"Aunty,"

She smiles and I can see she doesn't know what to do. The way mom is standing I can easily tell she's ready to attack so to protect me.

"How are you?"

"I'm fine," I look at the child as he starts crying. Mom doesn't even look affected, not even a tad bit.

"He's just having a fever." She says trying to smile.

"Maybe we should take him to the hospital." I offer and mom doesn't move nor say anything.

"Uhh no.. Don't mind it, he will be fine."

"No. He looks sick. We should take him to the hospital." I say walking towards him. Picking him up he is not heavy. My heart breaks looking at his cracked lips.

"Mom please.." I beg and she just nods.

"Let's go." I tell my father's sister who's crying silently.

"My daughter.. She will be—"

"Don't worry. You can stay behind. We will come back with him." Mom says already walking out. My father's sister looks at me before going down on her knees.

"I'm sorry. Please forgive."

I smile. "I'm not angry, I long forgave you."

"I deserve everything happening to me but my kids....."

"I will talk to mom. She will help you."

She shakes her head wiping her tears. "Not after what I did to her."

"She forgave you. She will help you. My mom is not a bad person."

"I know.."

"Uhh we will be back." I say then look at the boy sitting at the corner. He looks so weak.

"He can come with." I say not caring about his dirtiness. Alwande comes back dirty like him everyday from school. His uniform is always dirty, always!

"Oh no.. He's dirty."

"No it's ok. Hi, let's go." I say to him. Erin looks at him then nods.

Soon enough we are all in the car and mom is driving. She drives us to Woolworths first then picks juice for both the kids before we go to the hospital. We don't get questioned because the doctor is Mom's friend. He checks her then gives us some pills. The child is no longer crying. After that I force my mom into doing some grocery for them. We get a lot of things, well I take almost everything I see. Everything I feel they may need. I decide maybe we can grab lunch so we take the two kids to KFC. I have to fight away my tears as the older boy eats. He gobbles his good quickly. It reminds me of the time when I was his age and Sebastian would starve me for a week. The memory crosses in my head and I flinch not wanting to remember. If I could, I would just forget.

"Maybe we should get them some clothes."

"Khosi we buried Anaya yesterday. There are a lot of things I need to be doing, dealing with her long lost family who never claimed her when her father passed."

"Please.."

"No."

I sigh, she's not changing her mind. We drive back to Erin's house and getting there, the big girl is back and she's busy starting a fire.

"Hello," she greets as soon as we step out. She cautiously eyes her brother who's now sleeping in my arms and the little boy who's still eating the remains of his KFC.

"Ntehle look!" The small boy yells running at his sister. I step back as Erin makes her way to us. She's now bathed and wearing a clean red dress.

"We took him to the hospital. They gave him some pills." I tell her handing her the child.

"Thank you. Thank you so much."

"There's food in the car. You can take it." I say to the older girl and she doesn't waste time. She starts offloading.

"You can come to my office tomorrow. We can work out something for you. I'm not doing this for you but for my daughter." Mom says then walks to her car. I look at Erin then take out the money I have in my pocket.

“You can get something tonight.” I say handing it to her. “It’s all I have right now.”

She nods tearfully accepting it.

“Thank you. Thank you for taking my son to the hospital and for the food.” She says looking at everything we bought being offloaded.

“It’s OK take care and don’t forget to go to mom’s office. She will help you.” I say then rush to the car and as soon as I get inside, mom drives off. She doesn’t say anything the whole journey home. Arriving she just steps out, I know probably even if she forgave my father’s family, it still hurts her.

As I start climbing off the car my phone starts ringing. I take it out then answer.

“Hello?”

“Khosi?”

“Yes, who am I speaking to?”

“I think it’s about how I can help you. The man you are with is not who you think he is.” The female voice says. I don’t respond but my heart is beating so fast and hard against my chest.

“I think it’s only fair to know what he does, what he’s capable of before you get married to him or what?”

I sigh taking a deep breath. “Thank you so much for your concern but I don’t think there’s anything you can tell. Who am I speaking to again?”

She laughs. “Do you really know what happened to Alwande’s mother? Thuli? What did he tell you happened to her?”

“Mam I —”

“He’s a monster. Go to the mall near your house. In mug and bean, you will find an envelope in the dustbin. Thank me later.” She drops the call immediately. My heart is racing. I know what happened to Thuli, she was kidnapped and killed. Zano told me this. Sthe told me, he has no reason to lie to me.

“Hey.. Are you ok?” I jump in panic. Sim laughs.

“Chill... It’s only me.”

“I’m sorry. I’m just.. —”

“Are you ok? You are shaking.”

I start fanning myself stepping out of the car. “Yeah.. I’m fine. I’m just.. Tired.”

She nods quickly. “I know. This pregnancy does that to me.”

She’s pregnant and no second pass without her telling us. I don’t think she’s actually excited like other woman would be but she’s just happy that Uncle Sma won’t leave her and that he’s no longer sleeping with Aunt Lerato.

"I'm sure," I mumble leaving her rubbing her invisible belly. Walking inside the house mom is in the kitchen with Aunt.

"Hey sweetie," Aunt says hugging me.

"Aunty.. I'm coming."

Walking to my room I'm thinking of what to do. I can call Sthe and tell him about the call. Or not. But that will only show how much I trust him and I trust him fully. I quickly change into jeans and a T-shirt then call him. His phone just rings and with each second, I grow impatient. I throw my phone on the bed then grab my car keys and walk out.

"I'm going to get some lady things, I'm coming." I tell mom and Aunt as I walk out. Getting in my car my hands are sweaty. Curiosity keeps bobbing in my head. Doubt also finds a place. Driving out of the yard I drive straight to the mall. I don't waste time getting out of the car but as I reach the mug and bean door, I bump into someone. A lady. Her scent is the first thing that gets to me. She smells really nice and sweet. I step back in embarrassment then look at her. I like to consider everyone beautiful but this lady I'm looking at takes the trophy. She's so beautiful. She chuckles before I can open my mouth.

"Don't sweat it. It's ok. I was also not looking."

"I'm really sorry."

"It's ok. Really." She takes off her sunglasses and there's just something warm yet dark and mysterious about her eyes. Something hypnotising. I do notice the wedding band on her finger then finally her sense of fashion. She looks like those magazines women, so flawless.

"I'm Latoya, you are?"

I smile nervously. "Khosi."

She nods slowly looking thoughtful. "Nice name. You should —"

"How long does it take to grab a muffin? A simple muffin." A male voice says from behind me. I almost laugh. Why do they both look like magazine personalities? This man is the kind Sne always drools on. The kind which are buffed, handsome and sexy with mustache. Unintentionally my eyes drop to his zip and I quickly look away. I feel slightly guilty for even having dirty thoughts about him. But then....

"I don't know, it depends." She says then gives me a polite smile. "Bye Khosi."

She starts walking and I think I hear the handsome gorgeous man ask who she was talking to. I shake my head then head straight inside the shop. I don't waste time but go straight to bin. Looking inside the envelope is on top. I take it with shaky hands then walk out ignoring some looks I'm getting.

Before I can get in my car I spot Princess. And she's pregnant. I continue to stare at her till some man comes from behind her then kisses her cheek. I don't know why but I'm relieved. Getting in the car I look at the envelope. I know there's no need for me to look into it but I'm so curious. I'm overly curious. I put it on the passenger seat then start the engine and drive home weighing the reasons of not opening it vs the reasons for opening it.

The reasons for opening the envelope are more and my hands are even getting itchy. Getting home I don't waste time in the car. As I start walking towards the door, he's coming out and our eyes meet. What is he doing here?

"Hey, where are you coming from?" He asks kissing my lips.

"Uhh.. I went to the mall."

"What's that?" He says grabbing the envelope from me. I try snatching it but I miss.

"What's inside?"

"It's mine!"

He looks at me for a while with a naughty kind of smile. "What's inside?"

"Sthe!"

He opens the envelope and my heart starts beating fast. This was not the way I had envisioned this, I was going to just go to my room, lock myself inside then open it but now I'm just staring at him as he opens it. He takes out some pictures and I'm just looking at him. His face changes immediately.

"Let me see." I say as he curses out loud.

"Zano is going to pay for this!" He mutters to himself.

Getting very impatient I snatch the pictures from him then look at them. Everything stops moving. Shock and confusion looms as I stare at the pictures. I feel tears wetting my cheeks. Looking at him I step back instinctively.

"It's not what you think. I can explain babe.."

FIFTY-TWO

“You killed her?” I ask trying to keep my voice clear. I’m trying by all means to keep calm but I’m failing. Everything is so confusing. Why on earth would Zano lie? He said they were sisters. He couldn’t have possibly lied about that or could he have? But why lie to me? He doesn’t owe me anything.

“No. It’s not what you think.” He looks calm yet still frustrated. “This was before she went missing.”

I look at the pictures. There are a lot of pictures of her, I can tell she’s the one and she’s lying in her own pool of blood. In some deserted room. She looks so battered and she’s naked. The marks on her body reminds me of myself. Forcefully the memories play back in my head but I don’t let them drag me down the dark path. She looks dead.

“You beat her?” The question leaves my mouth.

“Yes. And I’m ashamed of it.”

“I thought you loved her.” I whisper.

“I did, still do but I lost it.”

I chuckle. “You lost it that you beat her like this? Like this?” I ask raising the pictures. The one where she’s in the bathtub in her blood makes me cringe. She looks like a dead animal and suddenly I’m disgusted by the man before my eyes.

“I’m wrong. I admit it and regret it.”

“Is this how you treat the people you love? Like animals?”

“That’s below the belt.”

“Below the belt? I can’t believe this. You are nothing but a disgusting excuse of a man! I can’t believe you.”

He sighs. “You can’t judge me without knowing the full story.”

“That doesn’t give you the right to do such an inhuman thing! Such....” I take in a deep breath then hand him the pictures.

“I can’t do this anymore. I can’t... You... I’m sorry.” I say trying to walk away but he blocks my way.

“Can you at least hear my side of the story? You can’t just walk away like this. At least hear me out.”

I shake my head. “I have to go.”

I say then walk inside the house leaving him standing there. I walk in on mom and Aunt laughing drinking wine.

“Hey, back already?” Mom asks putting her glass down. “Your fiancé was here. Your dad already got the letter.” She sounds happy. She does look happy and so does Aunt.

“I can’t wait for your wedding. I’m so excited.”

Feeling tears stinging my eyes I force out a laugh. "Me too."

I say though I'm not sure if I'm telling the truth. How can I marry someone who's capable of doing such? How can I be with him?

"So what were you thinking?" Mom asks motioning that I join them.

The way they are looking at me forces me to join them.

"What were you thinking? Your dad and I had a small kind of wedding..."

Aunt laughs. "It was not even a wedding. Your mother just wore a plain dress then hired a pastor. Please let me plan your wedding." She begs.

"Uhh... Yeah."

They continue talking though I have long stopped listening. All I'm thinking about is those pictures. I can see her in my head and I start to wonder if she was begging him to stop and he just continued bashing her like Sebastian would do. He must have beat her really hard till she got unconscious. My body cringe. No one deserves such. No woman deserves such treatment no matter what. No woman deserves to be treated like an animal no matter what the issue may be.

"I want to start a campaign against woman abuse and trafficking." I blurt. They all stop talking almost immediately and look at me.

"I know I'm not the only woman who got trafficked and definitely not the last. I think maybe my story may reach and teach a lot of woman. We don't deserve such cruelty. We don't deserve to be treated as if we are not human. We also deserve the feeling of peace as we walk. I want to reach out and tell my story. Some women didn't live up to tell their stories. I want to share my story."

Mom smiles wiping her tears away.

"We are behind you 100%." Aunt says then hugs me. "I'm willing to support anything. I'm feminist."

"I have been waiting for this day ever since we got you back." Mom whispers.

"It's time. We can't keep quiet anymore."

"Viva to women!" Aunt says raising her glass.

My heart feels at place and I feel slightly excited. Mom and Aunt completely desert the wedding talk and I'm relieved. I don't know if there's going to be wedding, not after what I have seen.

I stand up after a while with a lame excuse then go upstairs. I find my phone ringing. Taking it I switch it off after seeing his name. I grab my new journal then start a new chapter. I don't write a lot, I just have a lot of things going on in my head.

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She's quiet for a while then I hear her sigh.

"Maybe everything is just happening too fast." She says.

"I don't think I still want to get married."

"I don't think so too. Maybe you guys should wait a bit."

"He's too much I can't do this anymore."

"You are leaving him?"

"I can't keep up with the lies and secrets."

"Are you sure or those are just emotions talking? You love him, you know this."

"I do.. I love him so much but he... I know I wasn't there when.. Sne.."

"I'm just saying, and honestly take it or leave it, whatever you decide I will support you but... Hasn't he changed? I'm just asking. You can't crucify him without hearing the whole story. Khosi my parents have been married for 30 years, known each other for 35 and I'm sure they didn't just get there. Leave if you want to leave and stay because you want to. Don't do things because of pressure but just consider this, will you always leave?"

I don't know what to say and she continues. "Thuli happened way before you. Yes, he may have abused her but didn't you say he was seeing someone, someone professional since he left his old house?"

"Am I being a bitch?"

She chuckles. "No. You are being a human being. There's nothing wrong in being human and obviously you can't stay somewhere you don't want to be so feel free to leave. Feel free to walk but will you always leave? You didn't even give him a chance to explain and don't take it the wrong way, I do agree and I'm with you, no woman deserves to be treated like a dog but don't you think you had to stay to hear his side of the story? Whoever sent those pictures to you had a motive. A goal. You and Sthe have been together for a while now, don't you think that at least, just at least he deserved a chance to explain?"

I sigh. She's right.

"I'm not saying all this to guilt trap you. I'm just trying to make you see as a friend. Nothing else. If you don't think you can stay anymore then it's OK. That's still ok."

"I love him."

"Loving someone doesn't mean you are trapped or you can't leave. You can love someone and still leave." She says with a chuckle. "I was left too before I was taken to the center. My boyfriend left because he couldn't do it anymore but he loved me. So did my parents, I'm staying with my mother's sister and not because my parents hate me, they love me so much but..."

"How are you?"

"I'm fine. I got a job at Nandos. The waitressing money is good. I'm surviving."

"I'm starting a campaign against woman abuse and trafficking. Maybe hit mental issues too."

"I'm behind you."

"I have to go."

"OK but.. In case you decide to stay, I think you should pause the wedding. It's too soon. Maybe wait a bit."

"You are right."

"Of course I am and I'm glad you chose to call me. You need to come to the church I'm going to. It's so nice. You should join me."

"I have issues with G. O. D."

She laughs. "Why do you always spell it out? Anyways.. Not that I'm a preacher but somehow I'm beginning to believe that everything happens for a reason. I pray one day you see it too."

I laugh. "And you say you are not a preacher!"

"I'm just saying. I'm about to watch a movie, we will talk, call when you need me."

"Yeah bye."

She hangs up and I just bury my head on the pillow. It's late and I can't sleep. I look besides me and just stare at Rhea sleeping. She's snoring quietly sucking her thumb. She only does when sleeping funny enough.

Minutes and hours pass before I get engulfed by sleep. Waking up the following morning I feel worse. My head is heavy.

I grab my phone then switch it on. There are a lot of message notifications. He's left a couple of voicemails which I don't listen to.

Sne's words sting so badly; "will you always leave?"

I stare at his number for a while and before I can press it, mom walks in my room. Ladies and Gentleman, I'm pleased to announce that this woman doesn't knock nor does she enter my room with steadiness. She always walks in as if there's war.

I just stare at her. She's dressed formally.

"Hey, I'm going to work."

"You look beautiful." She rolls her eyes.

"There's food in the refrigerator."

"Don't forget Erin is coming to see you. You can try being nice. She's in need of friends."

"Forgiving her doesn't mean I have to be friends with her. You need to learn the difference. Being friendly with someone and tolerating them also doesn't mean friendship. She's in need of friends and unfortunately I will not be that friend. I'm helping because of you. Nothing else. Take care, love you."

I don't say anything but just smile as she walks out. I take my phone and go straight to his number. I don't hesitate pressing it and as it rings, I start thinking of ways to talk to him about this. Maybe I should have thought about that before actually calling but it's too late.

"Khosi," he answers.

"Hey, can we talk?"

"Yeah sure, want me to come over?"

"Oh no. It's OK. I just want to talk about your help. I know I never thanked you for finding that woman and somehow I'm glad you found her. Who knows how many girls she has sold off and how many more she was going to ruin."

"It's ok. After what happened to Thuli, I'm more than willing to deal with those kind of people."

"And that's the main reason I called— Thuli." I finally say.

"Anything wrong?"

"No Zano but... I do understand that your sister was with Sthe and I respect her, even in her grave. I'm sorry she didn't make it. I'm sorry for your grief. But you can't keep doing this. Sthe is your friend, you can't keep blocking him from moving on like this."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm not stupid." I say softly. I'm surprised I sound so calm. "I know you are partly the reason why Sthe was hung up on your sister like that. I don't know how you do it but I know you can't treat friends like that. He too lost someone dearly to him. He loved her but you can't use his love against him. Together with your whole squad. I'm sure this is not what Thuli would have wanted."

"You don't know my sister." His voice is so cold.

"I think I know enough. I thought you guys were tight but seems like all you do is block him. A few days ago it was Sarafina, mentioning Thuli and indirectly making me feel as if I won't fit in her shoes. That won't make me leave nor the envelope you had sent to me. I love Sthe and he loves me too. I love your niece. You should be happy that your niece is happy at least but no, you are busy plotting against your own friend. You need to do some self reflecting, you need it." I say then hang up.

I feel like a whole load has been taken off my shoulders. I feel free.

Minutes later I'm up and I'm in the bathroom. I know everyone is gone and I'm alone. I quickly take a shower then change into my gym suit. Walking out of the house I quickly get in my car. The journey to Sthe's house is long, morning traffic. I'm hoping to find him at home. Arriving the maid let's me in. Vimbai is off till Alwande reopens school. I still don't like her and don't look at me like that, this girl be cooking for my man and going down on her knees when washing his hands. The other time she washed his clothes, with hands and mind you, the washing machine was working perfectly fine. I get annoyed when I think of how Sthe compliments her. She said I should fire her but who am I to fire her if I'm not the one who hired her or even paying her?

"Khosi," she greets. I like this one, Ma'Setse. She's older and very wise.

"Ma, good morning."

"Morning my daughter. He's upstairs. He hasn't left the room ever since I came."

"Ok, let me go and see him."

"He hasn't eaten. I cooked breakfast. It's in the microwave."

"Ok."

I walk to the kitchen then take out his plate from the microwave. I pour him a glass of juice then go to his bedroom. I walk in and he's busy on his laptop sitting on the bed. I was expecting to find him all depressed but... He looks ok. He looks up then places his laptop aside. I wish I could read people's minds so I can know what he's thinking. I place the breakfast on his bedside then sit beside him.

"I'm sorry I acted immature yesterday by not giving you a chance to explain." I say slowly. "Or for the things I said."

"So you are back?"

"Yes. I'm sorry. I just.. Those pictures. I couldn't help it."

"Do you still want to hear my side of the story?"

"It doesn't matter anymore, I love you. And I know you have changed. I should be standing by you not acting like a bitch."

He takes my hand into his. "Do you think this will work?"

My heart leaps.

"Yes. People just don't wake up with perfect relationships. We will work through it. You just have to give me a chance. I lived my life in hell, I'm still trying to get used to everything. I'm just.. I can't stand it when I see another woman go through what I went through."

"I know."

"Good. I have decided to start a campaign. For women who went through or go through what I went through."

He smiles. "Ready to tell the world?"

"The sooner the better. And one more thing, maybe... We should pause the wedding and just love each other. I love you but I feel maybe this step.. Is a bit too much for us at the moment."

I hold my breath as I say this. Looking into his eyes, he smiles.

"I'm down for it. But we are still engaged."

"Yeah.."

He pulls me unto him then make sit on him.

“I have a meeting in an hour and I think I have 20 minutes to spare.” He says seductively while kissing my neck.

I giggle then move slightly from him. “Yeah, after we talk about Vimbai.”

FIFTY-THREE

I'm hyperventilating. I'm even sweating. It doesn't matter if the aircon is on, I'm still sweating.

"You look like you about to die." Sne says walking inside the room.

I chuckle nervously. "Yeah.. Shit I'm scared."

"You ought to be honestly. I'm scared too, I'm starting to regret agreeing to this."

"I'm proud to be part of this." Noma chips in walking in. She's looking glamorous as ever in her red dress with an above the knee vent.

"We all are but I'm just scared. Have you seen the crowd?"

"I'm ready to tackle this on head on."

Sne rolls her eyes. "You really on some shit I swear."

"Says the repented soul, anyways are you ready Khosi?" Noma asks giving me brief hug.

"I will be fine. Just nervous."

She smiles. "Don't be. You look so beautiful.."

She says looking at my pinkish dress. I didn't chose it, mom did. She actually had a designer make it. I like it, it feels soft and warm against my skin though it does expose my hips. It super long and it has tail.

"Thanks, you too."

She giggles twirling so I can gap at her slender body. I catch Sne rolling her eyes though she doesn't say anything.

"We are ready! I saw your boyfriend in the crowd."

"Her fiancé!" Sne corrects making me laugh.

"Whatever, I don't like him. He's too shady. Have a load of shit with him."

"Keep not liking him and see who cares. How long has it been?" Sne asks though I know she's just doing it to annoy Noma. They have all met, they had to.

"I don't know.. A year and six months.. Or more, I'm not really sure when we started dating but I count from the time I felt the chemistry, when he started calling frequently."

Sne laughs. "Be serious, what am I going to say in my best lady speech?"

"Let's cut it out. Today is about Khosi's campaign. Group hug?"

We all hug but the tension between Sne and Noma is suffocating. Whatever that is going on with them is intense and I won't ask.

As we separate Aunt walks in. She looks beautiful one would swear she's not in her late forties.

"Ladies!" She says walking towards us smiling. She and Noma walks out and somehow I worry about the tension between them.

"Hey..."

"Aunt.."

"I'm so proud of you and so happy for you. A lot of girls should hear this. A lot of women. They should know that healing is there. Look at you right now," she blinks away her tears then hugs me tightly. "I'm so proud of you."

Letting me go I feel tears wet my cheeks. She chuckles shaking her head.

"Don't cry, you deserve to be happy."

She clasps my hands with hers then looks at me. "Ready?"

I nod steadily. "Yes. Now or never."

She leads me out and each step I take, my heart drums louder and louder against my chest.

She hugs me tightly one last time before letting me go. I walk in through the stage and looking at the audience I feel sick. It's filled. Mom really went all out in preparing this. Everything, she did it. I walk till I'm standing in front of the mic then look at the crowd. Most eyes I meet are of women. There are man but they are not a lot. I scan through till my eyes are on her, she looks beautiful with the short hair. She's sitting in the crowd and smiling at me. I squash the feeling of just wanting to run towards her and hide behind her. I can do this, I chanter to myself. I can do this.

Besides her it's Dad and his eyes are glistening. He waves at me and I feel my emotions scatter and they overwhelm me. Rhea is beside dad and she's just staring with a smile. Grammy is sitting with them too in her traditional attire that she insisted putting on. She does look beautiful. My eyes scan through again till I'm staring at him. My heart spins, he's holding a plaque written 'Go Mom' and he keeps waving it at me. God knows I never knew I could love someone so hard, someone I wasn't related to. Someone I didn't even know. The bond we share is unbreakable and the love is too deep. Sthe is always sulking but there's nothing he can do.

My eyes finally land on him and I feel goosebumps erupting in my stomach. The excitement I always feel when I look at him then the love. I love this man full of drama. He attracts trouble or maybe he's trouble himself though I knew this the first time I saw him. He's not wearing formal but he does look hot. He winks at me making me blush but I immediately straighten my face. Everyone is looking at me.

"Honestly I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for my support system. My parent's, my sister, Granny, Aunt and uncle.." I chortle looking at Uncle Sma who's sitting with Sim who's heavily pregnant. She's already due, the baby might pop any time. She waves with a smile, pregnancy doesn't look good on her. She has turned into a whale. "I wouldn't have done it without my friends, my son... And fiancé." Alwande beams. He's happy, he can't wait for the wedding. The traditional wedding of cause which is happening in a month's time.

"I am blessed. But above all, I actually don't think I would be here if it wasn't for my friend, who's also my mother, my sister and guardian angel. Thank you Pat, thank you for teaching me that happiness is a choice. Thank you for teaching me that I actually can win. For loving me." I look at her, she's sitting right in front of me beside the doctor. They are together and are married. She didn't feel as if she hurried anything, "it was love, true love. There was no need to wait" she said when I asked her. She was happy that I could tell. And she was pregnant. Now that was more exciting more than anything. "This world is blessed to have you. You have changed a lot of lives and I hope you change a lot more. You are an Angel,"

I smile wiping away the tears that have fallen. "What I'm about to tell you is a pretty long story.. It's so long. But.. As long as it is, it's going to help a lot. I hope it will make a difference." I look at Sne who's standing by the entrance looking at me. "I finally get it. Everything happens for a reason. I think God made me go through the worst so today I can stand and let the world know that challenges and twists are not the end of it, we can still make it. I think God let what happened to me happen because he wanted me to change the lives of many. The journey to being better is long and painful. It's so painful and believe me, I'm still healing but as much as it's painful, it teaches a lot. When I leave this place I pray that over hundreds of you would have something to think about and something to live for."

My heart has calmed down. I take in a deep breath then look at the crowd. Heroes don't rest, they go through the most. Most of the things are left unsaid, unspoken, they are not mapped out because of fear but today I am going to reveal it all. It's time to heal and the world deserves it.

KHANYA

There was a time I felt so lost. I felt so alone and it felt as if I was fighting a lost battle. Waking up and realizing your daughter is gone... That memory always breaks me. The emotions that had attacked the moment I realized she was gone forever. I had cried, my daughter was too young and too vulnerable. She was too tiny to survive in the cruel world alone. For a moment there I just wanted to die. She was my life and suddenly she was gone. Looking for her and not finding her broke my heart over and over again. People don't understand, losing a child is not only painful, it breaks you. Tears you apart. Nothing can make the pain go away, it will always be there. The void will always remain. That's how I felt, I felt so empty. So dark and empty. I felt so tiny and the world was just a big place. I couldn't eat, how could I eat without knowing if my baby had eaten or not. Hopes were sometimes lifted but most of the time it was pain. Pain and agony. No matter what the pain remained and this makes me wonder how the mothers of the still not found girls feel. Even after 15 years I never stopped crying. Or worrying. Each day I hoped to see my baby girl step in.

My life took a complete downfall from then, it had already taken a downfall with Eric and the divorce but not that kind of downfall. The downfall it took when Khosi went missing is an explainable downfall. It felt like a dream. A dream I was desperately yearning to wake up from.

I look at her as she speaks to the over 300 people gathered. She looks stunning, beautiful. She is my daughter and she's back. I have God to thank and Sthembiso.

“At some point I became numb. Numb to the pain. I forgot how to care. Men taking turns on you is just not painful, it kills. Rape kills. Rape destroys. It broke me, it killed me till all that was left was a mere shadow. I was already dead but while walking. A walking dead. The beatings at some point were not painful anymore. I got to a point of loving them.” She says and there’s no trace of tears in her eyes or pain in her voice. She’s looking at everyone as she says this, her voice not wavering. I feel Kenya’s hand on mine.

I squeeze his hand. I know we still haven’t reached but as long as we stand as a family nothing will stop us. The uncharted will be spoken and reviewed and that’s where the journey will begin. A journey for everyone, a journey for every soul. I sighed, I wasn’t angry anymore. I was healing.

KHOSI

“I believe we all can heal, just like my guardian angel always says, being happy is an option. Not seeking necessary help or drowning in misery and depression is a choice too because you can always fight. You can always fight to get to that place in life where you will look back and say, geez I really am here today. We don’t wake up already happy, you put an effort to be. You deal with issues to be happy and that’s why I’m proud to announce the release of my book, Khosi’s Journey.” They all clap as I step back a little. As planned Sne and Noma walks in. Noma waves to the crowd while Sne swallows me in her warm arms. When she step back, she wipes her own tears.

“You did it.”

I laugh blinking away my tears. “We did it.”

Noma finally joins us and we have a group hug. The event drags on for a while, after Noma and Sne shares their stories, some lady called Tumisang shares her own. She has her own organization. Her story is all about how she was abused by her husband who she left.

“This was a success!” Mom says hugging me as people dine. We are done done with the talking now time to have some fun.

I hug her back. “All because of your support. Thank you.”

“No, you thank you. I’m healing too.”

I chuckle. “It’s my pleasure M’lady!”

“Your book will be in bookstores tomorrow. I can’t wait for the book launch.”

“Me too.”

More people come to hug me and just show how much they are touched. The publicity is not what warms my heart, no but it’s the fact that even if I die today, I was here and I have done my part and I have left a mark. I have made a difference.

“Finally got you alone.” Sthe says as some lady walks away from me. I smile looking at my love. The man who makes me feel foreign things. My taker. I wrap my arms around his neck as he brings me closer to him by my waist.

“Well done MaDlamini.”

I blush then kiss him. “Thank you for loving and supporting me.”

“I love you. I can’t wait till we are alone. I miss you.”

I giggle then kiss his cheek. “Later.”

“Later sounds too far.” He says seductively.

Just the way he’s looking at me extracts a reaction from my body.

“You..—”

“Mom!” Alwande screams. I step away from his father then look at him.

“I bought you something.” He says giving me a tiny box.

I chuckle. “Oh...”

Opening it it’s a necklace written best mom. My heart melts.

“Thank you my love. I love you.” I say leaning over to hug him.

“I love you too. Please don’t leave me.” He whispers.

“I’m here to stay forever.” I whisper back.

“Promise?”

“I promise.”

I kiss his cheek then put on my necklace. Looking back at Sthe he’s smiling.

I smile back then kiss him. “Thank you for blessing with a son. God knows just how much I love him.”

Before he can respond, a photographer interrupts us.

“A picture Miss Khumalo?”

“I—”

“Without us?” Dad says joining us. Rhea comes right to my side then smiles at me. I smile back at my lil munchkin. Deep down I know I’m going to be forced to play house later but what can I do? She’s my sister and I love her.

Mom just smiles together with Grammy and as we prepare to pose Aunt rushes to us.

“Don’t wanna be left behind.”

“Us too..” Sim says joining with Uncle Sma.

"I guess it's a family thing." Phindile says joining us with Phumlile. Behind them it's Sne and Noma.

"Ready the photographer asks."

I smile. "As ever."

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THE END

